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**BEYOND THE VEIL. SOME SOCIOLOGICAL REMARKS  
ON MUSLIM FEMINISM AND THE HIJAB**

The movement for women's emancipation, fighting against their discrimination emerged in the Middle East at the turn of the 19th century on the wave of social transformations and Western inspirations. From its very beginning, the movement has been connected with the nationalistic current and called for the fulfilment of women's demands within the systems of independent countries. The demand for education was the most clearly expressed and frequent postulate, but not less important were calls for upgrading the status of the woman within the family, and the right to employment. Nationalism was the key to the legitimacy of women's movement in the public eye as for political elites<sup>1</sup>.

The establishment of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) by Huda Shaarawi in 1923 was the turning point for the women's movement in the region. Although male politicians praised the women for their dedication to struggle for national independence it quickly became apparent that there was no place for issues directly connected with women's interest in the new political agenda. The founder of EFU described in her memoirs the context in which that largest and most effective group emerged.

Exceptional women turn up in certain moments in history and are moved by special forces. Men view them as supernatural beings, and their deeds as miracles. Indeed, women are bright stars whose light penetrates dark clouds. They rise in time of trouble when the wills of men are tried. In moments of danger, women emerge by their

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most surprising and spectacular aspects of women's engagement in this struggle, not only for the outside world but also for the national audience, was their participation in mass street demonstrations, characteristic for the time. They not only took active part in the making of speeches and parading with banners, but also organised boycotts of colonial consumer goods, founded schools and clinics, and were involved to a certain extent in politics.

side and men utter no objection. Yet women's great acts and endless sacrifices do not change the men's view of women. Through their arrogance, men refuse to see the capabilities of women. Faced with contradiction, they prefer to move the women out of the ordinary human plane instead of placing them at par with themselves. Men have singled out women of outstanding merit and put them on the pedestal to avoid recognising the capabilities of all women. Women felt this in their souls. Their dignity and self-esteem were deeply touched. Women reflected on how they might elevate their status and become worthy in the eyes of men. They decided that the path lay in participating in public affairs together with men. When they saw obstacles in the way, women rose up to demand their liberation, claiming their social, economic and political rights. Their leap forward was ridiculed and censured, but that did not weaken their will. Their resolve led to a struggle that would have ended in war if men had not come to acknowledge the rights of women. (Graham-Brown 1988: 227)

From the early beginning it is possible to identify two currents in Muslim feminism. The first, far from being homogenous, promoted feminism that assumed the desirable progress toward societies of the Western type. It was discreetly affiliated with westernisation and secularisation, and typical for upper strata of the society: a good example in the first feminist generation is Shaarawi herself. The other movement sought a way to articulate the female subjectivity and affirmation within the notions of their native culture<sup>2</sup>. One of the most outstanding representatives of the latter approach in the first decades of Middle East's women movements was Malak Hifni Nassef. She was careful in making judgments on the removal of veils, yet she proved herself to be aware of the misogyny of her contemporary male politicians, even among the ranks of the reformists.

Which path should we take, which group follow? The majority of women continue to be oppressed by the injustice of man, who in his despotism commands and forbids us so that now we have no opinion even about ourselves [...]. If he orders us to veil, we veil, and if he now demands that we unveil, we unveil, and if he wishes us to be educated, we are educated. Is he well intentioned in all he asks us and on our behalf, or does he wish us ill? There is no doubt that he erred grievously against us [...] in decreeing our rights in the past and no doubt that he erred grievously [...] in decreeing our rights. We cannot assume that all men who write about women are wise reformers. Their words must be carefully scrutinized, and we must be wary of man "being as despotic about liberating us as he has been about our enslavement. We are weary of his despotism". (Ahmed 1992: 181-182)

Arab and Muslim women should reject the androcentrism and misogyny of their culture and tradition, but this is not tantamount to claiming that they must adopt Western tradition or reject indigenous heritage and Islam altogether. This alternative trend was based on feminist criticism of the Koran and *sunna* as well as on the critical study of history and law. Leila Ahmed, an eminent Egyptian scholar working at the University of Massachusetts writes:

<sup>2</sup> The different intellectual traditions as well as the different methods of argumentation were the main reasons that for a long time prevented dialogue between the representatives of these two trends. The last decade, however, showed a process of rapprochement and mutual inspiration. (cf. Mir-Hosseini 1999)

There appear, therefore, to be two distinct voices within Islam, and two competing understandings of gender, one expressed in the pragmatic regulations for society, the other in the articulation of an ethical vision. Even as Islam constitutes marriage as a sexual hierarchy in its ethical voice – a voice virtually unheard by rules and law makers – it insistently stressed the importance of the spiritual and ethical dimensions of being and the equality of all individuals. (1992 65–66)

Contemporary transformations of female life and thinking, and a new vision of social life transformed by them are among the most important processes taking place at our time. Relations between genders are not given, unchanging, and absolute. The process of their negotiation in the social milieu and pressures exerted by groups of citizens – both men and women – are fascinating subjects of sociological inquiry.

Undoubtedly the processes of religious revival which started in the 1970s posed a serious problem: how to combine deep religious devotion with the new gender awareness. We should remember that, not unlike among other religious groups, there is a variety of interpretations of Muslim doctrines and their implications for Muslim social life. There are many Muslims who treat the hierarchical and patriarchal character of relations between men and women as an integral part of their cultural heritage. However, for others, the idea of egalitarianism permeating the Koran means rejecting all kinds of theories and practices discriminating against women. Growing aspirations of women, their desire for full participation in social and political life, the increasing number of well-educated female believers who find justification for their rights in religious texts: all these demonstrate that religion and emancipation processes must not stand in each other's way.

What should be remembered is that spontaneous processes of Muslim religious revival in Islam were growing stronger. Their purpose was to rediscover cultural identity and oppose the cultural infiltration from the West. In this context, women's aspirations for equality were very often interpreted by Muslim ideologists as symbolic of the victory of a foreign culture. Defending the traditional status of a woman has become an element of ideological discourse of the new epoch and has been perceived as a form of defence against acculturation. These processes were accompanied by limitation of women's engagement in public life. The thoughtless opposition to the West – as Akbar Ahmed, a leading expert on Islam, pointed out – can bring a "danger of rejection of the essential features of Islam such as love of knowledge, egalitarianism and tolerance because these are visibly associated with the West" (Shaikh 2005: 149).

The relationship between the Muslim movement for women's emancipation and the international feminist movement was probably even more difficult and complicated and generated countless stereotypes and misunderstandings. Serious ideological tensions concerning the attitude of the West to colonialism, democracy and feminist ideas built up in the late 1930s. Then, the international feminist organisation, the International Alliance of Women, appealed for the release of its Jewish members from the Czech Republic, where they were imprisoned by the Nazis. However, the Alliance refused to organise an analogous intervention in the case of a Palestinian arrested by the British.

Accusations of the instrumental exploitation of the women's issue by Western governments were revived. Freeing the poor, victimised women was presented as

a part of the civilisation's mission. Islam was described as a religion of violence, and incompatible with human rights in general and women's rights in particular. These stereotypes, often reinforced in popular literature, not only form the Western icon of a Muslim woman but also provide an evidence of the Islamic culture being inferior to open-minded and emancipated Europe. The European attitude towards Muslim culture has always been marked by ambivalent emotions: fear and contempt. The East evoked fascination as it remained wild, mysterious, and irrational. It was associated inseparably with unrestricted sexual fantasy, which seemed to be a mirror-like reflection of the (Philistine bourgeois, narrow-minded) morality of Europe, where sex was institutionally hampered by a cobweb of moral, political and economic responsibilities. It is not hard to imagine therefore that such a vision of the East was an expression of fascinations, dreams and desires; a product of earlier representations of the Orient rather than of regular research or at least well-ordered investigation into the reality which was being discovered. Until today, this inconsistent western attitude towards the East has been reflected, most clearly, in the picture of an Oriental woman created by a multitude of European travellers, missionaries, and men of letters who ventured to conquer the Orient to satisfy their desires for exoticism<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, there is the Arabic woman: the unapproachable (and therefore tempting) and completely veiled slave of man. It is only the man who can see her, and may abandon her at any moment. While justifying our right to dominate, we often forget how short-lived has so far been this emancipation, and rarely mention the actual instances of enlightened colonisation in the Middle East. In Egypt, for instance, 99.5% of women were illiterate at the end of the 19th century (and 94% at the end of 1930s), while the respective numbers in other countries were even higher, which did not upset the open-minded and liberal sons of the Old World. (Ahmed 1992: 141)

A sad example of Western hypocrisy was the activity of Lord Cromer, the Consul General to Egypt, who fought for women's rights and their unveiling in the Middle East. At the same time, however, he was the President of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage in his own country. His raising of school fees held back the development of girls' education. The School of Medicine in Cairo offered the same duration of tuition to women and men alike, but the Consul General discouraged it, saying: "I am aware that in exceptional cases women like to be attended by female doctors but I conceived that throughout the civilised world, attendance by medical men is still the rule". (Ahmed 1993: 153) The Victorian theories of womanhood were re-

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<sup>3</sup> Gustav Flaubert, one of the most eminent representatives of the group, is known to have written the following remarks after one of his journeys: "An Oriental woman is merely a machine, she cannot distinguish one man from another". A question arises here, namely, how that French man of letters managed to acquire such a deep knowledge of 'an Oriental woman' that would let him form such highly generalised opinions? Not only had those opinions found their place into his writings but they did shape the stereotype of an allegedly exuberant Oriental sensuality. The Orient has always been associated with sexuality, not only by Flaubert. In Egypt, there was a group of women known as *almeh*, literally meaning 'an educated woman' – one who could recite poems to perfection. The term has been used since the 19th century, to denote dancers who were also prostitutes. Kuchuk Hannem, a well-known dancer and a courtesan from Cairo, a companion in Flaubert's explorations of the secret places of the Orient was such an *alemah*. The fact that she did her best... should not surprise anyone, after all, the gap between her situation and a position of a white man was huge, and there was a lot for her to fight for! (cf. Said 1978)

garded the model and measure of civilisation. It is worth mentioning that colonial discourse stole the language of feminism and perverted it; Leila Ahmed summarises:

The Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of Other men, and in particular on Islam, in order to give an aura of moral justification to that assault at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own societies." (Ahmed 1992: 152)

On the other hand, as the author of *Women and Gender in Islam* remarks that:

the discourse of colonial 'feminism' that the notion that an intrinsic connection existed between the issues of culture and the status of women could be achieved only through abandoning the native culture. The idea was the product of a particular political historical moment and was constructed by the discourse of patriarchal colonialism in the service of particular political ends. A history of Western women makes clear; there is no validity to the notion that progress for women can be achieved only by abandoning the ways of a native andocentric culture in favor of those of another culture. (Ahmed 1992: 244)

In such a context, it is not surprising that with the passage of time – until the second wave of feminism which questioned the dominating discourse of white women – feminism had been perceived as an element of colonialism and a sign of Western cultural hegemony. Xenophobia aimed at Muslims seemed to just a component here. In her essay *Transforming Feminism*, Sa'diya Shakh (2005: 152) remarked that:

Western discourses on Muslim women and Islam are predicated on unquestioned cultural and social assumptions that do not allow for the engagement of specific Muslim society on their own terms. Within many Western discourses about Third World women, the standards of the First World have often been used as the superior norms against which Third World and non-Western women are measured. Often, Western cultural ideals are imposed on women coming from very different religious and cultural traditions. (cf. Arat 1998)

The Western discussion about the *hijab* (headscarf, turban, etc.) is a fitting illustration of such an approach. No single item of clothing has more influence on Western images of Middle Eastern woman. The veil became a symbol of Islamic subordination of woman. It is difficult to question the fact that the debate on veiling has been a political issue connected to the discourse of the ruling group in Iran after the revolution, and in Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban. The force covering was a crucial element of brutal daily life of women there. Under those circumstances, the conclusion that the "veil" is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression seems a logical one. However, limiting the issue of wearing the veil to the problem of the compulsion and subordination of women is a far-reaching simplification. The *hijab* has been considered by many women as an element of emancipation. This outfit makes it easy for women to escape isolation and enter the areas of life that used to be reserved for men. This process means accepting the authority of religion. The woman wearing a *hijab* is secure. "The *hijab* is a symbol of socially accepted morality", says a 30 year-old Algerian with a university degree. "Wearing it, I may do whatever I want."

In many states, also outside the Middle East, contemporary women's re-veiling movements challenge the reductive notion that 'the veil' is a symbol of women's op-

pression. Many Muslims, submitting to the dress code, treat it as an element of the religious code setting social principles of modesty. The costume is a symbol of devotion to religion. For others, the *hijab* is an element of political opposition. For example, in pre-revolution Iran or in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, but also in the Algerian struggle for independence.

The veil came to symbolize in resistance narrative, not inferiority of the culture and the need to cast aside its customs in favor of those of the West, but on the contrary, the dignity and validity of all native customs, and particular those customs coming under fiercest colonial attack – the customs relating to women – and the need to tenaciously affirm them as a means of resistance to Western domination" (Ahmed 1992: 164).

Franz Fanon in his criticism of French colonial policy defined unveiling as a "tool in the hands of colonial power", where "the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria". (Graham-Brown 1988: 165)

The occupying forces, in applying their maximum psychological attention to the veil worn by Algerian women, were obviously bound to achieve some results. Here and there it happened so that a woman was 'saved' and symbolically unveiled. From that moment, these test-women circulated to the like of a solid currency in the European society of Algeria with their bare faces and free bodies. They were surrounded by an atmosphere of newness. Europeans, over-excited and wholly given to their victory, carried away in almost a trance, would speak of the psychological phenomenon of conversion. Truly, the agents of this conversion were held in high esteem in the European society. They were envied. The benevolent were drawn to them. With each success, the authority was strengthened in the conviction that the Algerian women would support Western penetration of their native society. Every discarded veil disclosed to the eyes of the colonialists horizons that had until then been forbidden, and revealed to them, piece by piece, the flesh of Algeria laid bare. (Graham-Brown 1988: 139)

Later, the veil became a weapon of the oppressed – "hiding a face is also disguising a secret" – in the years of struggle for their liberation women used their traditional attire to conceal dangerous messages or guns.

Furthermore, for some contemporary women, the veil is an expression of contesting the culture which treats the woman according to her physical and sexual attraction, where plenty of energy and means are exhausted by facing up to the requirements of changing fashion and the market.

Moreover, it is essential to remember that dress codes are socially and culturally specific, and there is no reason that Muslim women's clothing be measured against specific Western dress norms. (Shaikh 2005: 153)

To sum up, the veil carries multiple meanings, serves diverse purposes, and is used in different ways. Four main types of reasons for 'modern covering' may be distinguished: religious, political, access to public sphere, and statement of personal identity. I wish to emphasise only selected sociological remarks of the social phenomenon, which can be called the 'new veiling', referring to the cases of Turkey and Egypt. It does not fit into the previously defined 'modern' or 'traditional' types, nor does it alter the social implications of the scarf associated with low status and rural origin. The 'headscarf dispute' was started by female university

students. They are not passive, submissive girls who cover their heads as the tradition tells them. On the contrary, they actively and assertively reappropriate the scarf, gain access to secular education and social recognition, and empower themselves through their claims based on Islamic knowledge and politics. Enough to mention the programme of training 3,000 state-employed female preachers and Koran instructors to promote women education; and also publicising recent changes in the penal code. Coming in attractive designs and colours, the headscarf is treated as the main component of elegance. Some young women, especially university students, wear trousers, often simply jeans. The rules based on religious code related to modesty as well as a new fashion code are redefined in a new Muslim way. Is the scarf a symbol against women's rights? Feyza Cicek<sup>4</sup> believes it is just the opposite. "The legions of young women who have taken to Istanbul's streets in recent weeks have two battles ahead of them: to make room in modern Turkey for Islam and to make room in modern Islam for feminism".

It is the challenge for the widespread conviction that civilisation means westernisation. They try to establish new Muslim identity in the modern environment. According to the paradigm of modernisation, the changes in public spheres are expected to reconstruct the private domain. A certain 'automatic' transformation is assumed. In his *Defenders of God*, Bruce Lawrence defines modernism as a quest for individual autonomy based on a value system that, both in the public and private spheres, prefers change to continuity, quantity to quality, efficient productivity, power and profits to attachment to a tradition or a profession. Lawrence claims that modernism, in its utopian extremism, has enthroned one economic strategy, as a reliable means of technological progress that will eliminate all social unrest and material hardship. Modernism does not limit its influence merely to one sphere of social reality. Gradually, formal rationality embraces other spheres of social activity (cf. Lawrence 1992: 63). Indeed, it does penetrate all the spheres of social life, but it does so unevenly. For while the social readiness to assimilate – shall we say – external or material changes in technology, organisation, economics or politics is greater, the realm of culture is much more resistant to transformation. The process of modernisation penetrates the private sphere very slowly, and the change it brings in its wake results rather from the transformation in other sections of social life.

When Muslim women wearing the scarf cross the borders of the public domain, they bring the new definition of mediation between the two spheres, by diffusing the values of the private, opposed to the idea of modernisation that values of the public sphere modernise the structure of the private.

Zeinab Radwan queried both veiled and unveiled university students on a range of problems relating to female roles in the society. His research reveals similarities between the two groups as far as support for women's rights to education and work is concerned: majority support equality in public life and politics as well as in marriage.

<sup>4</sup> Feyza Cicek has not been able to attend her medical classes at Istanbul University. There is only one reason: she wears a scarf over her hair. When she tries to enter a lecture, she is turned away. If she refuses to leave, her professors scurry away, wary of losing their jobs for failing to enforce the national dress code.



Veiled students do not follow conventional assumption that the women's place is at home or that women are the lower class of citizens.

The increased number of women wearing the veil is often interpreted as an evidence for global threat of fundamentalist movement. Majority of research does not prove this assumption. "They are making an active politicised response," Helen Watson concludes in her article *Women and the Veil* "to force of change, modernity, and cross-cultural communication". It is "an Islamic example of global reaction against change experienced as chaotic or challenging". Gender constitutes, first of all, a social and cultural category, not only a biological one. As the methodological consequence, there is a demand to analyse the position of a woman in the perspective of the actual culture, since women make an effort to find a way to make their plans and dreams come true; to research how they find harmony between their womanhood and faith, and their personal quest for fulfilment and empowerment on the one hand, and their profound sense of belonging to the community on the other. Western 'universal' recipe for happiness has been challenged.

Numerous Muslim activists and scientists attempt to portray the egalitarian potential of their native culture. But they also consistently stigmatise every manifestation of the discrimination in their own societies, and criticise neo-colonial discourse on the Islam. Experience of various women's movements in the Middle East shows that, for many women, feminism is organically bound with their faith. It is an integral part of the message about the equality, and embodiment of principles of justice and egalitarianism.

Islamic belief is also claimed to be the foundation of most behaviours I perceived as feminist. In Egypt, Kuwait, Turkey, and the USA, Islamic women begin with the assumption that the potential for equality exists in the Koran itself. The problem as they see it is malpractice, or misunderstanding of the sacred text. For these Muslim women, the first goal of the feminist movement is to re-understand and evaluate the sacred text and have women involved in the process, which historically has been reserved for men, Elizabeth Fernea stated (1998: 416).

Women's activism flourishes in all parts of the Muslim world. I agree with Sa'diya Shaikh's view that Islamic feminism is "one of the most engaged contemporary responses to the core the Koranic injunction for social justice of our time". (2005: 159)

Last, but not least. The discourse of patriarchal colonialism adopted the feminist language and used the women's issues to legitimise Western domination and policy of subduing colonised cultures. Western feminism must extent a discourse of authority in relation to other societies. Closing, I would like to reiterate a comment made by Leila Ahmed, an eminent Egyptian scholar:

In the context of the contemporary structure of global power, then, we need a feminism that is vigilantly self-critical and aware of its historical and political stiltedness if we are to avoid becoming unwitting collaborators in racist ideologies whose costs to humanity have been no less brutal than those of sexism. (1992: 247)



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