

2nd TRANSNATIONAL WORKSHOP PRESENTATION

Hijab – uses and misuses

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The issue of "Hijab", its various implications and the politics surrounding it, has become a globally polarizing issue. Whether in France, Turkey, Germany, Bosnia, or in Greece, Italy and Bulgaria; between Muslims and others, or between liberal Muslims and traditional Muslims, the hijab has become a site for the cultural struggle between Islam and modernity; or between contemporary and traditional interpretations of Islam.

To some the hijab is a symbol of Islam's ascendance in the world, while for others it is a reminder of the intransigent Muslim resistance to things that first emerge in the West - modernity, secularism, feminism, liberalism and globalism. For some Muslims it is a symbol of their resistance to europocentric or americanocentric cultural occupation or modernization. For Islamists in Turkey, it is an important means to resist secularism. For non-Muslim observers, it is often regarded, that Islam has misogynistic aspects, for some - even worse, after 11.09 – it symbolizes terrorism and extremism. Hijab has become more and more a political symbol, a borderline between hostile sides -- those who wear it are associated with political Islam (correctly or incorrectly) and as being apologists for some of the most anti-women aspects of Muslim society (the lack of leadership roles within the society or mosque, gender-defined social roles, or a defense of polygamy as a man's right, etc).

The hijab marks the Muslim woman for separation and for "different" treatment in all aspects of life. Muslims who claim that hijab is an instrument that compels society to treat women in a special, even exalted way (in terms of security and respect) do not work to ensure that through special social laws society guarantees equal outcomes for women, since the hijab ultimately undermines equal gender opportunity.

In the modern competitive world the vulnerabilities of the Muslim man who tries to cope with his own insecurities in a highly technological and hysterically globalizing world, make them not sovereign beings. Men of the modernized world –socially, technologically or psychologically - dominate their world. The only area where they exercise absolute sovereignty is over the tiny domain called Islamic law (its masculine interpretation). Here they realize their manhood. They glorify themselves, grant themselves exotic privileges and assure themselves of their power by

exercising it on their women. This exercise of power is realized as complete exclusion of women from participating in the process of interpreting Islamic sources, this way religiously legalizing men's power to exclude women from all social, cultural and economic life.

The veil is considered a symbol designating otherness and inaccessibility – in religious, cultural, psychological and epistemological sense, that becomes further problematized when viewed outside the culture in which it is signified.

The veil designates both dividing and touching aspects of different entities, fear and desire, a symptom of both the danger and the mystery of sexuality or knowledge, of the One and the Other. The veil is a main mythological, religious or initiation symbol all around the world from prehistoric times (the veil of Isis or the veil of Maia).

Paradoxically, however, at the margin of differences that the veil represents, insights may emerge - as bridges. This may be the place of liberating oneself from dogmatic, preconceived ideas and prejudices; place and time, where values are challenging, cognitive capacities can diminish in proportion to the increased affective intensity, such that reflective distance becomes increasingly difficult to attain.

In our attempts to understand the Other, there is always a danger in applying preconceived theories or prejudices. Women have been thus misperceived for centuries in the Christian world.

It is said, that the ancient Oracle of Delphi, who verbalizes the inarticulate speech of the woman-prophet-medium neither reveals nor conceals the truth. Truth is implied to be something-between, the thin space of the veils, covering past, present and future, fate and character, here and there, Gods and men, death and life. Veil, the skin, the hymen – this is the touch-place that connects and divides the one and the other. It is a border, a margin – a dividing and connecting place.

So if we look at hijab from both sides, divergence of truths appear, different from the preconceived, divided and rationalized one. And this uncertainty, this bottomless space is very much feminine affair. When politicized, it becomes distorted, one-sided, forced truth. For example - one side sees the ways in which the veil might objectify and enslave the woman, whereas from the other side it is the woman who, in prohibiting the gaze of the other, defies objectification and thus creates a space for her own subjectivity and autonomy, the only way a woman can be a social person. For the Muslim woman, the veil may become a protective barrier demarcating a space within which to define herself in a complex world in which Islamic patriarchal structures and Western canons each misrecognize her in their own ways. In her study of immigrant Muslim women in Canada, Ruby (2006) found a large gap between the Western view of the veil as a symbol of oppression and the Muslim view of the veil as a positive symbol of self-expression.

If we think of the veil through the lens of the feminine rooted grounds (Kristeva's notion of "chora", rooted in pre-ancient time-space, for example), veil, skin, hymen, garment in general, that both announce and conceal, the woman aspects become lost in irrationality and intuitivism, representing the gap, the void, from where things and then words for them come. (Klein, 1935; Kristeva, 1982).

In parallel to Freud's unconsciousness, Levi-Strauss (1984) notes the importance of attending to that which hides behind what is seen. He anchors cultural understanding in the ability to be both inside and outside of culture, such that one might integrate meanings rather than rest on initial presumptions and foreclose prematurely without greater reflection. This need for different perspective comes into the more recent psychoanalytic literature through attention to the "Third", that which pulls us out of the narrowness of idiosyncratic and dyadic meanings and insists on a confrontation with a wider universe of meaning. Inevitably, we strain towards and against the complexity that invites our interest but also eludes our comprehension. Levi-Strauss (1984) suggests that to be able to truly appreciate a culture, one must be able to look from multiple vantage points, in order to see "what is peculiar to each culture in the form of myth, ritual and language – that is, in domains where the oppositions are both identifiable and unconscious" (p 22).

Taking note of our reactivity to the designation of otherness signified by "the veil" provides an opportunity to wonder what this reactivity signals. Objectifying and limiting the Other reflects the fear of reciprocal projective framing, that leads to mutual demonization (the paranoid-schizoid realities articulated so evocatively by Klein (1935, 1946).

In our struggles to locate ourselves in a complex and changing world, symbols help us to mark meaning. A dividing symbol serves plain rationality, that cannot cope with multiple reality.

In line with our more recent understanding of the crucial organizing functions of affect in human memory, Cassirer anchors meaning in affect, suggesting that it is in the embodiment of affect that meanings can be perceived. In his words, "the expressive meaning attaches to the perception itself, in which it is apprehended and immediately experienced" (Cassirer, 1957, p 68). For Cassirer, condensed representations of spiritually and affectively loaded images – such as we can find in the veil – persist because of their connection to these deep underlying "truths". The veil may invite reactivity to the Western sensibility precisely because of the barrier thus imposed. We are exiled from an encounter with a "truth" reserved for an other.

With increasing globalization, emigration, and mixing of cultures, however, the individual can feel torn between the pulls of cultural heritage and whatever can not be easily assimilated within those traditions. To the extent that diversity can be tolerated between communities, we can keep our bearings without too much disequilibrium. When tensions become strained, however, the maintenance of in-group values can be achieved by demonizing the other. In these misunderstandings, dilemmas of difference are highlighted, and yet there can be a hazard in presuming sameness or difference in ways that obscure the particularities of an individual life. These types of misunderstandings are rampant throughout history and are currently highlighted in tensions between Western and Islamic or Eastern cultures (Edward Said "Orientalism", 1978). In this aspect an inspiring impulse on understanding cultures in confluence is the book of the historian Maria Todorova on the Balkans "Balkans – Balkanism" (2004)

Reflecting on a cultural symbol that has different meanings from inside or outside helps us to note the tensions themselves and the meanings marked by them. For Westerners, the veil poses a dilemma - as we are denied access to that which lies behind a veil, the meanings that it signifies.

In our ability to move from inside to outside and back again, we can perhaps begin to grasp aspects of the larger whole that had previously been occluded from view. The Veil is a useful symbol for our purposes in that it not only signifies a barrier, but also becomes a conceptual barrier that eludes understanding between those inside and those outside a given culture. It is in the nature of barriers to obstruct and to protect – to put up a wall or film, a separation between elements that might be combustible or dangerous were they to combine without such protection. Barriers that define otherness as alien – as “abject” (in Julia Kristeva’s terms – appealing and disgusting in one and the same time) – are inherently problematic, inviting further disequilibrium and uneasy relationships. If I am other, am I elevated or debased in that relationship? Exclusion invites a confrontation with the Other, who can usurp the privileges in such a way as to frustrate one’s own attempts at self-definition. Faced with such a blockade, one can strengthen the barrier or attack the values of what lies beyond.

Western presumptions about the veil may invite just this type of counterattack, not that these presumptions are not also inspired by opposite attacks. You can see, for example, a paid announcement in a local Bulgarian newspaper of a male who proposes an apartment as a present and a high for Bulgaria income for a woman, who will give birth if a muslim child (“Родопски вестник”, 22-23.05,2008). It is not also a secret that girls are paid a good income, that amounts a salary in Bulgaria, to wear hijab in school.

On the other side, muslims associated with increasing globalization face destabilization and fear to lose identity. The emigrants, for example, become uprooted from the shared cultural identity that previously defined meanings. The more remote the current community is from the original culture, the greater the tension seems to be either to locate one’s self in the adopted culture or, alternatively, to more fully embed one’s identity within the culture of origin. Excessive destabilization invites a regressive pull toward old ways of coping, which, for Muslims, exacerbates reactivity against the “progress” extolled by the Western world and pulls toward a reestablishment of shared images grounded in notions of an idealized past (Go’le, 2003).

Paradoxically, however, in fighting against this Western pretense of absolute truth, the Islamic view counters with its own absolutism, resulting in increased tension rather than arriving at the type of equilibrium that might be achieved if opposing culturally defined differences could be recognized more respectfully or dialogically. Utopia and antiutopia are both sides of one and the same coin.

Western culture adheres to notions of progress grounded in technology, self-emancipation, rationalism, and received knowledge comes to supersede more primary, experiential ways of knowing. The emancipation of man from nature, marks the emergence of science and epistemological objectivity, the secularization of state from church - the European democracies, the dividing of individual from the others – the citizen of the nowadays democracies. Despite the negative issues, coming from these emancipations from nature, God and the others – ecological crises, the self-estranged western citizen or the spiritual meaning ness of the mass culture, there is still something very precious in the character of our culture.

The most creative energy in the European culture, that Kant points on, is the ability to be critical to one’s foundations – cultural, religious, social, epistemological. The survival of the European culture resides in the ability to resurrect from the ashes of totalized, preconceived knowledge of

positivism, that marked Modernity, on one side, and from the postmodern all-including, arbitrary self negativity from the other.

Life cuts all excesses on various levels. Tradition and modernity, ours and other, orthodox and innovative – are imbedded in all us. We are only to be open to cope with realities, that are common grounds. Being able to see the sense in apparent non-sense helps us be more respectful of – and so perhaps learn from – a perspective different from our own.

The importance of being able to see beyond the appearance, so as to view a process or a person from a different perspective increases flexibility of mind and helps us note different frames of reality or meaning.

We know that fear obscures both vision and the ability to learn. Yet it is easy to justify our fear by what it evokes in the other, rather than take responsibility for our own reactivity. Our inquiries into the knowledge and practice of other cultures offer the opportunity of not only perhaps understanding the other but also understanding ourselves better – if we can attain sufficient distance from what is “known” and develop senses to learn in a process without judgments and precognitions. In this space of openness and sincerity, our emotional reactivity will continue the game of hiding and revealing, as the benevolent attempt to see behind the veil of the other, will also need to be able to inquire into that which lies behind our own. Perhaps in looking behind our own “veil” and recognizing the complexity of our own motives and desires, we can find – not only that which remains hidden and barred – but also that which remains human and common to us all.

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