

2nd TRANSNATIONAL WORKSHOP PRESENTATION

The Hijab across the centuries by Stela Bratoeva

The importance and meaning of hijab is different and depend mostly on sociocultural environment and historical times. Although its use is based on the Islam, it's not something specifically Islamic: in many parts of the world women cover almost completely their bodies, including their heads, for reasons similar to the Muslim's. It is necessary to say that within the Arab culture hijab already existed in preIslamic Arabia as a sign of respect, because among other things it distinguished the free women from the enslaved ones.

The situation of women in Arabia underwent an important change at a time prior to the sprouting of Islam. From old times, apparently, the Arab women enjoyed a fortified position globally: they could repudiate their husbands and have sexual relations freely without the same being valid for men. Nevertheless, the situation was reverted gradually so that, at the time of Mahammed, the Arab society was converted to an absolute patriarchy where women had few rights: men could marry to every woman they wanted and could repudiate her without any compensation. The repudiated woman was totally dependent of her husband to survive and therefore she often finished in misery and became a prostitute or was reduced to beggary.

Islam puts boundary to such situations establishing certain privileges for women without resigning from the global patriarchal frame that a single man can marry four women as long as he demonstrates that he has means to nourish them and as long as their previous spouses agree; he must compensate his former wives in case he remarries; a woman can have her own resources and make her own business without martial intervention and so on.

In these conditions hijab becomes significant for the followers of the new religion as sign of dignity: showing your body displays obedience towards a man even regarding sexual relations. On the other hand, when hijab becomes a religious rule its new purpose is to reveal a total dedication to God. In short, not wearing hijab means that a woman belongs to a man, while wearing one reveals religious devotion. This seems to be the origin of the use of hijab, although afterwards when it becomes traditional, it loses to a large extent this original sense and becomes symbol of the exclusion of women from the public life.

The reasons to wear hijab are understandable – on one hand the hijab serves basically as veil protecting people from the blustering sand and the sun; on the other hand are the social differences: it distinguishes free women from slaves and prostitutes. A woman who covers her head is a woman who belongs to God and not to man. But nowadays it is very difficult to comprehend the meaning of hijab when reading the two most important sources of Islamic law - the Qur'an and the hadiths - because they are written in ancient Arabic and could be

interpreted in many different ways. Here are excerpts from some sourats of the Qur'an and their interpretations:

John Esposito, professor of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University, writes that the customs of veiling and seclusion of women in early Islam were assimilated from the conquered Persian and Byzantine societies and later on they were viewed as appropriate expressions of Quranic norms and values. The Qur'an does not stipulate veiling or seclusion; on the contrary, it tends to emphasize the participation of religious responsibility of both men and women in society, that is to say everyone is equal before Allah.

Bloom and Blair also write that the Qur'an doesn't require women wearing veils; it was rather a social habit picked up with the expansion of Islam. In fact, since it was impractical for working women to wear veils, the veiled woman silently announced that her husband has to be rich enough to keep her idle.

Surat An-nour, ayah 31 states:

Oh, you, who believe!....And when you ask of them(the wives of the Prophet) anything ,ask it from them behind a curtain That is purer for your hearts .”

From this versicle was born the idea that women must cover their heads or even their face (giving rise to clothing like burka), although the divine revelation covers especially the relations between believers and wives of the prophet and that the word veil alludes here clearly to a curtain and not to an article of clothing. In fact, the word hijab appears seven times in the Qur'an and in none of the cases it says anything about the feminine clothing, for which are used other terms. Nevertheless, none of these specifically alludes to cover the head or the face. A versicle near the previous one says thus:

Prophet:Tell your women and your daughters and the women of the believers to fit their veils. That is the best way to be recognized and not to be bothered. God is indulgent, merciful. (Qur'an , 33, 59).

The word here which usually is translated by "veils" is in fact jalabab, which is chilabas or túnicas. No one talks about the article of clothing that covers the head or the face.

“And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof ,and let them wear their khimar over their bosoms - coverings (khimars) to cover to their bosoms (jays), and not display their ornaments except to to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or to their brothers' sons, or to their sisters' sons, or to their women, or their slaves, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that **they should not strike to their feet** in order to draw attention to to their hidden ornaments.

Apparently, the Qur'an never mentions that women must cover their heads or faces, but alludes in general terms to use hijab cautiously in order to show modesty and humbleness.

Javed Amhed Ghamidi, an Islamic scholar well-known for historical contextualization of Muhammad's revelation, has a point of view shared by too few people. According to his interpretation surat An-Nour [Qur'an 33:59], “That is the best way to be recognized and not to be bothered” plainly shows that hijab has specific purposes like, for example, disclosing belonging to a certain family.

There are also believes that the special restrictions for wives of Muhammad are not applicable to all women at all times. According to another scholar, Leila Amhed, nowhere in the whole Qu'ran the term hijab is applied to any other women than the wives of Muhammad.

Muslim women probably began wearing veil as a way to emulate the Prophet's wives, who were revered as` the Mothers of the Ummah (which is mothers of the community), but the veil was neither compulsory, nor widely adopted until generations after Muhammad's death.

Some contemporary Muslims have relativist approach to hijab. They believe that the recommendation for modesty must be interpreted with regard to the surrounding society. What is considered modest, or daring, in one society may not be considered as such in another. It is important, they say, for believers to wear clothing that communicates modesty and reticence.

At the end of the 19th century certain aspects of hijab begin to be questioned, especially the female tradition to cover the head and, mainly, the face. In some places, the covered face had become a sign of social distinction that differentiated the urban women from the rural (the latter were with uncovered faces). And in spite of this most people think of it as a symbol of women's isolation from the public life.

After the advance of Arabic culture during the 14th and 15th centuries, new conquests and internal problems lead to a decline. But in the middle of and in the late 19th century – period known as Nahda - intense social, political, scientific and cultural activity is set in. After centuries of idle policy and isolation, the Islamic world seems to have woken up. It is currently trying to inaugurate a new policy, following first the lead of Europe and second the splendid past of the Arab-Islamic civilization, with its intense artistic, scientific and intellectual activity.

Egypt is at the top of the process. It is in this country where wearing hijab and women's position in society is questioned. In 1899 the modernist writer Qasim Amin publishes a famous book, Tahrur al-mar'á (the liberation of the woman). Amin, supporter of the total incorporation of women in public life, considers that hijab is consequence and symbol of their isolation and promotes awakening. Nevertheless, the great promoter of awakening is Huda Sháarawi who is considered a mother of the Arab feminism. When she returns from a feminists' conference in Rome, she uncovers her head in front of many women who had come to welcome her in Cairo. It is the spark that fires up the following process: bold women make demonstrations in the streets of the Egyptian capital demanding their place in public life and this way provoking scandal as well as approval.

In many places the feminist movement coincides with revolts against the colonizers. Such is the case of the countries of the Magreb, like Morocco. Before the revolts Moroccan urban women wore haik or jaique, which is a long white fabric that covers one's body and face and thus restricts the natural body movements. But in the forties middle-class women begin to substitute chilaba for jaique and started taking part in the fights. The women of that generation continued covering their heads with the hoods of the chilaba and their faces with white sheer fabric, but in the following decades they subsequently adopted European habits.

The upsurge of the panarabism in the fifties and sixties pushes on both the women's participation in public life and the dropping out of hijab. Thus in the sixties it was rare to see a woman with covered face except in some countries such as Saudi Arabia.

At the beginning of the seventies appears the phenomenon Islamism. It alters fashion and Islamic identity accordingly. Men had to have beards and, which is more important, the veil reappears among urban population. The first to cover their faces again were the young girls.

Nevertheless, the idea of the hijab is relative: its meaning varies greatly according to the country, class and even people. To wear a hijab could mean the social, religious or ethnic belonging or simply that the woman doesn't want male attention. This is the proof that every sign in history is very subjective and relative.