

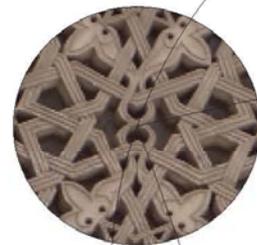


## Copenhagen University Islam Lecture Series

Mohamed Kerrou

Women, Veils and Public Spheres

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## **Women, Veils and Public Spheres**

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“Women, Veils and Public Spheres” is a research undertaking that empirically examine and scientifically investigate the ever increasing phenomenon of hijâb in the Islamic world. Center stage to my investigations was the following enquiry: how and for what reasons have we witnessed in recent years that a large number of Muslim women who happen to be educated in modern schools and known to be socially liberal have chosen to wear the veil and to cover their body?

Before giving you a brief on the major outcomes of my research, let me first delineate some conceptual and methodological aspects that I have taken into consideration before starting my investigation of this sweeping trend which has left the majority of sociologists and social scientists puzzled.

1 – First, I felt obliged to clear the foggy picture and to correct the prevailing ‘common sense’ analysis which is widespread in the mass media and journalistic writings about the purpose behind women start wearing the veil. In fact, in their unarticulated discourse and simplistic writings the mass media have misled the public and made the question of the object of veiling fluid and altogether complicated.

At the beginning I embarked on debating the following questions: What are we exactly witnessing? What sort of veil we are talking about? Are the current veils Muslim women have decided to wear the same as the customary traditional veils? Are the veils of daughters identical to those of old-fashioned mothers and grand-mothers?

The host of answers to these questions that I sought through my field investigations revealed entirely new facts: I came to the conclusion that in our recent times we are not dealing with the same conventional veil. This is another veil which has recently emerged and is currently spreading. This is a veil that is a form of trans-social and trans-generational clothing.

That is why we might preferably talk about "new veils" in a neo-traditional manner in order to distinguish the current movement of women’s veiling from the ancient and traditional customs which were communitarian in nature and imposed by society’s norms and values. In this realm, one can conclude that old and traditional veils were initially pre-modern in nature and during the twentieth century, in the inter-war period, have had some strong connotations with nationalism and the struggle for independence.

The "new veils" are different from these old and traditional veils. Additionally, they are also different from that of black and white Islamists veils which emerged during the 1980s, in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979).

Stylish, colorful and very different from each other, the “new veils” cannot be literally labeled Islamist veils because the direct political connotation is almost not there, although the protest

aspect may be found in some new veiled women. The "new veils" have other dimensions and political functions which gradually gave way to other dimensions which we, as researchers, have to discover.

This is the crux of the issue and if we are not able to grasp it, our analysis will be rendered un-historical and, as in the case of mass media writings, we will end up wandering in a general discourse on the veil.

2 - Secondly, to reach a reasoned conclusions, I took a distanced perspective on the veil phenomenon in which passions usually interfere. In fact, there is no more passionate discussion than the one on the veil because it is at the intersection of politics and religion, two areas plagued by issues of power, and also because the veil is linked with the taboos of sexuality.

It was a postulate for me to break with two normative positions that dominate the field of the debates about the veil. On the one hand, there is the position of the secularist vision which considers the veil as a regression in women's status and even a reversal of the entire society and, on the other, there is the conservative position which sees the veil as an internal liberation of woman and an expression of religious revival and salvation.

My belief is that we should go beyond both simplistic visions in order to understand the social logic behind new veiling or rather try to inquire why Muslim women have suddenly decided to wear the veil after they spent years of their lives dressed in western style and distanced from the idea of veiling.

3 - My vantage point is that in studying new veiling, one has to take into consideration that there is a wide variety of veils and a variety of ways to wear them and evidently a multiplicity of meanings behind each of them. However, there are two major types of veils known and visible today: the first one is the veil which covers only the head and especially the hair and neck; this applies to the majority of newly veiled Muslim women and it is a kind of head covering (the Arabic term is "ghita al-râs"). Therefore, it is not proper to call it hijâb or "Islamic veil", since it does not hide the whole body, only the head. The rest of body clothing stays modern (wearing jeans or tight pants).

The second is the veil which largely hides all or most of the body, whether it is the niqâb (leaving only the eyes visible) or the burqa (interposing a sort of open lace before the eyes). In both cases one can not identify veiled women's identity in public space. This integral or complete veiling, which is often accompanied by gloves as in Saudi Arabia and some other Asian societies, has strong connotations and associations, in recent years and decades, with the spread of radical Islam and fundamentalism.

As you might notice by now, we are dealing here with a kind of construction or "bricolage" as we call it in French associated with an ex-post-facto justifications. The "bricolage" concerns especially the headscarf, more than other veils which are also contemporary in nature and not ancient and traditional, especially because of the ornamental and various other aspects of "new veils".

With the "new veils", the normative register (the reference to the sacred texts) is far less structuring and determining than the practical one. In other words, women do what they

decide to do and their reference to the Text (the Qur'an), read and often not read, is less important as a reference to their imagination. Mostly, such decisions are not linked with ancient Islam constructed as imaginary, but on the bases of current social and political conditions.

4 - The fourth point to be highlighted before embarking on answering the original question is to focus on the close and specificity-centered relationship between the veil and the debate on the veil. Put differently, between "Words" and "Things" – to quote the title of the famous book of Michel Foucault.

Debates are so heated, strong and so passionate which leads some to suppose that Words have predominance on Things, while the truth is rather the opposite since words today have little effect on practices of the veiling or unveiling.

Now let me draw your attention to the debates on the veil which have taken shape recently in Europe and especially in France since 1989. This a brand new and an emerging debate if one compares it to the ongoing debate in the Muslim world which dates back as far as the mid-nineteenth century.

The contemporary debates around the veil highlight the ideological polarization between two main trends: a tendency "against-the-veil" and a tendency "with-the-veil", and sometimes a third compromising tendency with the aim to reconcile the two rivals.

These debates have also illustrated the complexity of the notion of "hijâb". Historically, it was initially used to designate the invisibility of God among his creatures (the case of Moses in the Old Testament) and also the case of Prophet Muhammad and his wives as mentioned in the Qur'an). All this has become, over time, like a curtain between men and women.

As regards hijâb, there are prevailing styles: a sort of shawl covering the breast ("khimâr") and a covering that falls over the body ("jilbâb") and later a scarf ("mahrama") or ("foulard") that hides only the hair. Anthropologically, there is a historical and nonlinear evolution linked with a semantic shift in which words have different meanings for similar and different things. There are, thus, an adventure of words and a history of Islamic clothing that constitute very interesting subjects for study.

As for the debate taking place in Europe, it should be noted that it has recently witnessed a shift. Since June 2009, the focus has been on the integral veil and not, as in previous years, on the headscarf or hijâb which has gradually become common and usually accepted. The law voted by the French Parliament, on 14 September 2010, has banned the complete veiling in the public space. According to the French police statistics, the complete veiling of women in that country is estimated at around 2,000 cases. Interesting findings of this kind of statistics show that majority of concerned women are white French converted to Islam and not the French naturalized nationals of North Africa or Middle East origins as the public wrongly believe.

Belgium, a country threatening to fall apart, was another case. It was the first country to enforce legislation on the integral veiling. In Spain, despite the Catalan Senate vote in favor of ban of the integral veil, there was a refusal to pass a law by Spanish parliament.

In sum, the tendency of banning in European countries will probably continue. In my opinion, it is not going to stop anytime soon.

5 –After this rather lengthy, but hopefully useful introduction, let me now turn to the main frame of reference that I have adopted to study this phenomena of hijâb and also the complete veiling (niqâb) from a sociological point of view.

In my opinion, veiled women in both cases try to convey to the ‘Other’ the following message: “I exist. I am a Muslim. I am veiled”. Therefore it is a revelation of Identity in Crises. From there, we have to take into account such statements and try to articulate the meanings in an exploratory way.

Put differently, the veil appears to be a symbol which basically signifies identity. The sociological and anthropological meaning of the hijâb or so called “Islamic veil” lies in the issue of self identity vs otherness: "I am a Muslim and veiled woman; I am not a westernized and unveiled woman”.

Faced with these implicit political symbols, discourses and social practices, we need a sociological interpretation in order to render scientific answers to the phenomenon that we try to understand.

Now I will shed some light on the assumptions and set of hypotheses that I have adopted and which my arguments and analysis in the book were built upon. Because of the complexity of the phenomenon, I have built several hypotheses which led me to argue on the following line:

The hijâb, in its new forms, is a clothing and corporal expression. It serves as a symbolic and plural identifier which refers to a social scene in which the political challenge is the rise of women to power in public spheres. There is also the economic stake which is linked to globalization signs accompanied, on the part of the veiled and defenders of the veil, by a will to moralize the social order and, on the part of their opponents, by a logic of domination of otherness.

On the basis of this thesis, there are several levels of analysis in the book in order to understand the significance of the veil. These levels are established alternately by clothing, body, aesthetics, ethics, politics and economics.

But the question remains: where is the religious factor in all of this? The religious language is diffused and spread over all levels. And I would go further to say that the religious is everywhere and nowhere. Contrary to what veiled women and also their critics say, the new veil is not religious even if it appears so and it is presented so, on both sides, such as hijâb and “Islamic veil” (“zay islâmî”).

In the book, I have written with a balanced and logically sequenced formula: "the veil is less religious than political, less political than cultural, less cultural than identity association". Let me briefly talk about the issues of identity and relationship to the new veiling.

As a sign and as a symbol, the veil which is at the heart of the identification process, is a clear marker and display of Islamic women’s identity. It’s the symbol by which the veiled women

express their cultural and religious difference and their refusal of the unveiling perceived as a form of nudity and alienation of the human body.

Unlike the traditional veil which was, as we already said, communal and historically linked to nationalism and the nation state, both having generated the access of women in public sphere, the "new veil" is the result of individual choice and is a symbolic referent by which Muslim women express their individuality and autonomy in the context of a globalized and inter-linked world.

Yet this assertion of individual identity has to be qualified as it is more and more theatricalized inside the "Islamic Umma" which is conceived of as an "emotional community" or an "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson).

The "new veil" is, therefore, both an individual and a collective/communitarian one. Veiled women are not isolated but linked to the Muslim community. In addition, the identities of veiled women are not, contrary to appearances and to discourses, closed identities and "hard" ones but, instead, soft and fragile identities that refer to a process of continual questioning and dialogue of and between the Self and the Other.

This process can lead either to closure, as in the case of transition to integral veil, or to an opening with "hijâb" and what it implies, at the end, as unveiling. Hence, the veil is not definitive and can be removed and changed in specific circumstances. That is why dialogue with veiled women is better than the control or prohibition of "religious symbols" on the basis of legislation, except for school where minors may be instrumentalized by adults from the family or outside it.

We have to note also, in countries where the veil is imposed (Iran, Saudi Arabia ...), the resistance of women with locks of escaping hair and face makeup which are a form of challenge to moral codes and normative religious discourse seeking to impose and reproduce the social male order.

Concerning the aesthetics of the veils, it is a kind of culture of being and appearance since the "new veils" are rarely "rags" but rather ornamental objects. Colour choices of veils and eye makeup of some veiled women show beauty and femininity like or even more than others in society. Still, the veil has become a fad fueled by magazines, websites and beauty contests as "Miss Veiled", "Miss good morality", etc.

To quote a revealing anecdote, Ms. Hayrunissa Gül, the First Lady of Turkey, a country known for its struggle with the spread of the headscarf, asked a Turkish designer based in Vienna and known to have dressed famous stars as Catherina Zeta Jones and Naomi Campbell, to renovate her wardrobe and update her veil. The result was a special scarf covering the hair and the neck and knotted at the side – it is somewhat similar to hats worn by the Hollywood actresses during the 1940s.

In short, the veil, like all other clothing and consumer products, is a fashion item. It is becoming a "coquetterie" that is, increasingly, directed by the promoters of the veils and the veiled themselves.

To grasp the social logic of the veil, it is absolutely necessary to connect to the physical, in dress and appearance, and especially to two structural variables, namely identity and the public sphere. On the identity front, we have already spoken, and we can add that it is a highly relational and historical one and not specific and fixed in a binary logic distributed between "Us" and "Others". Regarding the public sphere, it is defined as a place of debate and a way of gradual access to pluralism and modern democracy. Here, we find useful as inference, the historical and sociological approach of Jürgen Habermas which has been corrected by American social scientists who, thirty years after the famous book published by the German philosopher, have criticized and enriched it by the integration of three fundamental dimensions namely Gender, Religion, and Cultural Identity.

Historical process regarding the formation of a national public sphere, both linked to the state and to civil society, requires the existence of individuals who make a "public use of critical reason" to constitute a critical view of all power thus creating a democratic space for debate and deliberation.

Let us remind ourselves here that the initial question deals with the reasons for the spread of the hijâb in the public sphere among Muslim women. Now, the question is becoming: What links the social and political visibility of veiled women and "the public use of critical reason"?

One can argue that the veiled women have obscured the public sphere with a relation of duality and ambivalence as they claim their right as veiled beings in the name of pluralism and democracy, as these values are considered by them as Western, decadent and unreal. In this sense, the hijâb appears as a challenge to the widespread secularization induced by modernity. While the visibility of the veiled and Islam has questioned in a critical way, as demonstrated Nilüfer Göle, the concept of the modern public sphere as elitist and closed to otherness, I personally think that the emotions resulting from the political debates around the veil cannot substitute for public reason i.e. the ability to arrive at a speech of truth with regard to pluralistic and representative democracy.

Beyond these considerations, the "new veils" create great challenges to the political and economic spheres. The political challenge of "new veils" is precisely the rise of female power in the public sphere. Never in the history of humanity and especially Muslim societies, have women had access to public space so massively. Women have become visible in the public space, and the private space – as privacy and sharing of tasks - also changes slowly, certainly, but significantly. Outside, women - veiled and unveiled – have access to functions that were previously impossible. Everywhere, social structures appear to be moving, despite resistance in terms of gender.

The economic challenge of the "new veils" functions through the new order of globalized flows of goods, technologies and services. The national state is increasingly challenged by large conglomerates and by regional groupings. The public space which was previously national is becoming transnational.

The "new veils" are at the intersection of Market and Morality. They are a form of symbolic re-territorialization of triumphant liberalism and muddle up material and moral boundaries between nations, cultures and individuals.

It is as if Muslim veiled women adapt to modernity through the use of “religious symbols” patched at random. The Muslim women are walking in the market as if they are masked in order to acclimatize moral Islamic rules to the imperatives of marketing and mass consumption, as shown by the sociologist Patrick Haenni. In practical terms, the veil is “business” and it flows between countries with high speed and sells in large amounts, relating Chinese industries and Islamic trade networks.

We have also to recognize that the Islamic morality claimed by the veiled is a contradictory one since it is increasingly undermined by two inexorable trends: first, aesthetic trends towards taking off the veil and its sexual theatricalization as shown in some new clothing designs and, secondly, by the massive female access to the public space, as was illustrated by the political events of June 2009 in Iran with the active participation of young people and women half-veiled, half-unveiled.

Finally, I would like to speculate about the political transition of the hijâb to the integral veil and the renewal of the public debate in relation to the current European tendency to ban “religious signs” from the public sphere because of the challenge of social and political identity: with the integral veil, women are considered as person without identity, face and participation to civil society.

With this transition, the relationship to public space has been transforming for Muslims into a super-religious identity and, for the authorities, in a severe control of this identity in order to impose homogeneity and domination of otherness based on arguments about civil society, citizenship and the public sphere.

However, that political control and domination are not easy to achieve because of the resistance of Muslims, miscegenation and the plural logics of globalization which are generating, at the same time, the individualism and the interconnection of real and virtual communities.