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## The Image of Veil in Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*

Samet GÜVEN\*

### Abstract

Most of the time suppressed and disempowered throughout man's history, the gender of woman has undergone a dissipating process where such an overpowering oscillation between two genders occurs. In spite of the fact that this bias creates a generalization, the position of the 'womanhood' wasn't always under subjugation. As a matter of fact, this essay intends to throw light upon women's 'past, present and future' by relying on mainly Leila Ahmed's flagship works into by drawing a map showing how the veil plays a critical role in the representation of women.

**Key Words:** the veil, hijab, post-colonialism, feminism, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said

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\* Karabuk University

## Introduction

Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* concentrates on the progression of women gender from the Ancient Sumerian History to nowadays. Ahmed enables her readers to have a short journey from ancient times to the present from the point of a woman. To give a general look on the issue of 'woman' and her position, Ahmed disembarks her discourse from the 'pre-Islamic' Mesopotamia, by this way the ancient mores and traditions can be traced back to their origins where they coalesce into ancient societies. Furthermore, Ahmed puts forward her theory regarding how misogynist patriarchal society came to be. Granted that Mesopotamia was first inhabited by Sumerians, then invaded by Alexander the Great and then Persians and then Sasanians, there was such an amalgamation of culture that boosted by ancient Sumerian Law which is mainly shaped by Hammurabi in 1752 B.C.E. Most of these codifications that were initially designed by Hammurabi put women into an inferior position against men. To give an example, men had the full rights to divorce their wives any time if she was incapable of fulfilling her marital responsibilities such as providing fully satisfaction as a 'sex object' or giving male 'heirs' to their husbands. Meanwhile, there were also some advantageous laws that protected women as well; they could divorce their husbands too if the man cheated her with another woman –but not a mistress, mistresses were not counted- and she could immediately divorce him and turn back to her father's home (Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* 12-19). In addition to that, some upper class women had some privileges over the other women. Those were the women who devoted themselves to become a temple priestess or someone who was rich and holding some valuable commodities. Whenever they wanted to marry someone, they had even the right to offer a marriage contract to those with whom they were willing to unite. When we turn back to Mesopotamia, thanks to the emergence of urban societies and being institutionalized, specifically in Çatal Hüyük, there are female figures of the privileged women on the walls. Moreover, she is seen as "the mother-goddess" in the Neolithic.

The studies having discussed the roots of veiling follow the historical background of the veiling including Mediterranean and Mesopotamian civilizations claiming that the origin of the veil goes back to the time even before Islam and Christianity. Unlike the assumptions, it has been more common outside Arab community throughout the history (Grace 14).

Considering the 'veil' as one an important discourse from the academic point of view it is not a mere coincidence to realize that 'veiling' issue is commonly studied in both feminist and postcolonial theories. As a controversial topic, it has symbolic meanings relevant to some other issues, such as resistance, oppression, identity, colonialism, and patriarchy rather than being just an object. Although it is disputed by the social studies in terms of its cultural value as well as the increasing inclination towards 'veiling' in the west that leads 'islamophobia', it is accepted as the symbol of oppression in a patriarchal society by western feminists. They see the veil as emblematic of the abuse and pressure of the oppressed 'oriental' women in a male-dominated community or due to the influence of neo-imperialist and colonising western powers (Grace 1).

Veiling was another significant symbol for women even in ancient history. For example, in Sumerian Civilization, Veiling was a symbol for women who were under the protection of men; in other words, it was a class status for the women who were married. Ahmed indicates "Wives and daughters of seigniors" were obliged to veil, "concubines accompanying their mistress had to veil; former sacred prostitutes, now married, had to veil; but harlots and slaves were forbidden to veil" (Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* 14). The veil as an image is aimed to mark the upper classes and mostly to make difference between respectable women and the others. Another function of the veil is to identify which women belong to male protection (Ahmed 15). However, when several invasions occurred in Mesopotamia, the very social status of women status started to decline as a result of Persian and Sasanian cultural impacts over the Mesopotamian people. Owing to the fact that Persians and Sasanians tended to see the female gender more of a commodity, the male gender did not hesitate to 'use their wives as rental sex labors':

Any offspring that might ensue belonged to the husband, according to the belief that a 'woman is a field...All which grows there belongs to its owner, even if he did not plant it.' Wife loaning was regarded by Sasanian jurists as 'fraternal' act, an act of 'solidarity with a member of one's community which was sanctified as a religious duty'. (Ahmed 20)

Coming to the fifth and sixth centuries, in the Mediterranean Middle East, Byzantine society was the dominant imperial power in which women were always expected to veil that symbolized the honest woman in the Byzantine society (Ahmed 26). In the early Christian

era, the practice of infanticide, especially girls was quite normal. Fathers were choosing all their sons and just one girl to grow up. Due to the fact that the church affirmed abortion, female body became the symbol of shamefulness and had to be concealed. Men began to escape from women since they saw the women as a danger, because of this, the veil gained meaning as a concealing clothing (Ahmed 35). Including pagan rituals, veiling was not only a symbol of purification but also a symbol for demarcating upper class pure women and concubines. As a result, too long ago before Islam entered the Mesopotamian area, 'Veiling' tendency had already existed to show a higher status or decency.

Going back to the time when Islam was raising first in Arabia and then the regions around it, veiling was already common that Prophet Muhammad did not introduce it into Arabia. It was worn in some groups, but mostly in the countries which were in connection with Syria and Palestine. Until that period, Greeks, Romans, Jews and Assyrians had veiled partially. As Ahmed states "It is nowhere explicitly prescribed in the Quran; the only versus dealing with women's clothing... instruct women to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms" (55). During Muhammad's prophethood, veiling was practiced by his wives more explicitly. As a discourse, "She took the veil" meant that she became the prophet's wife. However, how the veil spread throughout the Muslim regions is obscure. Ahmed makes an assumption that Muhammad's wives were taken as models in the following years. As a matter of fact, since 'veiling' was especially commemorated and pronounced to denote Mohammed's wives, 'veiling' was a necessary denotation to display purity. Naturally, the tendency towards 'hijab' became synonyms with purity and decency (56).

Ahmed claims that Egypt is the most appropriate place to observe the changes in the Islamic world. Through the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century especially in Egypt, there was imitation of the west especially in the upper class. The veil began to disappear slowly because of the Europeanization. There were changes in the way of dressing among women. They veiled when they were in Egypt, otherwise they used to be unveiled while travelling to Europe. The veil seemed to be more transparent, a kind of fashion that belonged to Istanbul, in Turkey. Women in Egypt were wearing in different styles, veiled or unveiled joining a lot of professional activities (Ahmed 143).

Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Woman* written in 1899 includes radical proposals for women. As a symbolic reform, he offers the abolition of the veil. He emphasizes the urgency

of a comprehensive cultural and traditional innovation in the country. To provide the desired transformation, abolishing the veil is rather urgent, in fact, it is the key process for a widely change (Ahmed 145). Leila Ahmed indicates "... the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centered on women... Islam was oppressive to women, that the veil ...was the comprehensive backwardness of Islamic society" (152). Veiling was apparently the most striking signal of divergence and inferiority of Muslim countries from the view of the West.

Amin and Lord Cromer's<sup>1</sup> attack on veiling caused a counter attack and emergence of an Arabic narration depending on the resistance to colonial thinking. The veil gained a new symbolic meaning that was the resistance narrative. Fanon indicates "...the Algerians affirmed the veil because tradition demanded the rigid separation of the sexes and because the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria" (*Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, 164). In his enduring and dynamic text *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon became a spokesperson of colonized people and his struggle inspired the masses to regain their own identity. The veiled woman turned out to be the symbol of resistance in Algeria that fuelled the sense of identity and independence. It is because women took an important role in the independence war between Algeria and France. The Algerian War lasting from 1954 to 1962 resulted in Algeria's victory over the French military forces and Algeria gained its independence. To emphasize however vital it is to make women join the resistance, Fanon reflects the colonial point of view and their theory: 'If we want to destroy the structure of Algeria, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women' (14). Apart from symbolizing woman and the honor of a nation, the veil was also used to conceal the weapons in due course of the war.

In the 50s, 60s of the twentieth century, head covering or veiling vanished in the urban areas. However, in small towns and rural areas the veil kept on being common among the women as a norm. In 1970s, after Egypt was defeated by Israel, Egyptians thought that it was God's punishment and God had abandoned them. From then on, Islamist groups became widespread. Saudi Arabia and Libya used their wealth for the adoption of Islamic dress. They even made a proposal for every woman to wear a veil. It was also an important issue in education, especially among university students. The veil first appeared in urban areas in certain centers like Cairo, Alexandria, and Assiut. It gained popularity among the young students and professionals ((Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* 164).

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<sup>1</sup> A British statesman, diplomat and colonial administrator, a British controller-general who was ruling Egypt

It wasn't actually until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that 'veiling' underwent tremendous changes and implications. Especially after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and decolonization period, 'veiling' became a symbol for resistance. This resistance could be observed in Algeria, could be noted in Pakistan, and exclusively after 9/11 attacks, in America. As Ahmed states in her book, *A Quiet Revolution*, Muslim women in hijab were exposed to the attacks or harassments by the people in America. In such a case, a group of non-Muslim women organized "headscarf days" to support the women in hijab that gained its meaning as resisting against oppression (Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution* 204). The Muslims in the USA experience such discrimination because the western world tends to see Muslims as potential terrorists, stereotyping them with "the frequent caricatures of Muslims as oil suppliers, as terrorists, and more recently, as bloodthirsty mobs (Said, *How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* 6). In Said's theory of 'orientalism', he puts emphasis on the mission of European culture over the 'orient' to put the West in the position of ruling side and the east in the ruled side. It is a master-slave relationship in a sense which empowers the colonizer and disempowers the colonized. One of the representations of the east described by the European culture is the 'veil'. Said treats negative portrayal of the east by the west and the words that are attributed to the veiling women, such as 'backward', 'suppressive' and 'inferior'. Said rejects such superstitions about the 'orient' and reflects the description and observation as "the fictions presented by writing about the Orient" (Said, *Orientalism* 34).

Even today, being influenced by both Islamophobia and traditionalism, the veil has gained a symbolic meaning that represents tradition and religious identity in Britain. As Grace indicates: "The veil is central to the discourses of west versus east, democracy versus 'fundamental' Islam, and still remains an icon of the otherness of Islam and a symbol of Muslim women's oppression" (Grace 12).

In conclusion, as it is stated above, there are religious, social, political and gender occasions that are influential in creating the causes and emblems of veiling. Before the 19th century, the veil had quite a different meaning; it was something that upper-class women wore to show their honor and protection by her male partner. At the end of the 19th century the veil symbolized the oppression faced by Muslim women. During Lord Cromer's reign in Egypt, women had to throw off the veil so that Muslim men could become civilized, as Ahmed states "The custom of veiling and the position of women in Muslim countries became...the proof of the inferiority of Islam... to undermine Muslim religion and society"

(*Women and Gender in Islam* 237). Those ideas were adopted by the upper classes who share the same ideologies with the colonial figures. However, that young American women increasingly began to wear veil does not mean they are fundamentalists. Some of those are extreme feminists. It can be concluded that Leila Ahmed handles the issue of veil as an image within a sophisticated historical knowledge which includes the issues of today on gender studies.

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