

The Islamic Veil from Cosmology to Identity

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Abstract

Mentioned in the Code of Hammurabi (king of Babylon between 1792-1750 B.C.) and later in Assyria in the tablets of Tiglath-Pileser I (king between 1115-1077 B.C.), and present afterward within other cultures neighboring the Middle East, the veil, adopted by Islam as well, came to be seen mainly as a mark of segregation between men and women.

But the veil's symbolism goes far beyond, if we take into account that its cosmological function was that of separating the realm of God from the realm of man, the sacred from the profane, the harām from the halāl. Besides the natural, social, and religious reasons which determined its use within Islam, during the past century the veil and, by extension, the Islamic dress, began to acquire strong political connotations motivated by strong identity feelings, marking the status of the Islamic man as essentially Other, and becoming a political radical insignia of segregation between the world of Islam and the rest of the world.

Keywords

Islam, veil, fundamentalism, identity, segregation

1. Introduction

Mentioned for the first time in Babylon and Assyria and present afterward within other cultures neighboring the Middle East, the veil, adopted by Islam as well and apparently directly influenced by the similar practices of Byzantium and of the Sassanian Persia, is commonly seen by the Western culture as mere mark of segregation between men and women, as a token of gender inequality.

But the veil's symbolism goes far beyond, if we take into account that its cosmological function was that of separating the realm of God from the realm of man, the sacred from the profane, the forbidden from the allowed⁴⁵.

As in other cultures and civilizations of the world stretching from India and China to the territories of ancient Mesopotamia and Greece, in Arabia too the veil used to assume a cosmological function, as well as a natural and a social one.

The cosmological function implied: a) the separation between sacred and profane, and b) the protection against the destructive manifestations of sacred. The

⁴⁵ From the etymological point of view, the idea of veil in Arabic is expressed by the triconsonantal root *ḥajaba* which means: "to shelter", "to cover", "to seclude", "to hide", "to conceal", "to make invisible", from which derives the substantive *ḥijāb* meaning, besides "veil", "cover", "curtain", "screen", "partition", "barrier".

natural function concerned the protection against the natural elements (sun, wind, sand, rain) while the social function was build around the idea of respect and social stratification. Related to women the veil represented: a) a token of respectability; b) a sign of the marital status^{46, and} c) a way of protection against unwanted or unlawful sexual relationships⁴⁷.

Influenced by its neighbors and, above all, basing itself on the Qur'an, Islam developed a particular culture of the veil, transforming an item of clothing into a guarantor of moral behavior in its society built by and around the word of God, which maybe it couldn't regulate otherwise. How did the veil appear in Islam, what determined its use until today within Muslim communities and why did it become a symbol of resistance of a culture of the world towards the other cultures of the world, these are some questions to which this article, without any pretension of exhaustiveness, will try to give an answer.

2. The veil in pre-Islamic Arabia

Pre-Islamic Arabia was characterized by a particular social and political situation as it was populated by different nomadic tribes engaged in endless conflicts caused by “the perpetual partnership of hunger” (Miquel 1994: 35) and united only by the language of poetry understood as a common basis of cultural achievement. Thus, the main pre-Islamic sources which give an idea about the diversity of the Arabian tribes or clans, about their customs and social relations are the literary creations. According to these sources it seems that several tribes were dominated by women, perhaps a reminiscence of matriarchy, who enjoyed privileged social⁴⁸ or even political positions. If we take into account a statement attributed to ‘Aisha, prophet Muhammad's wife (see Watt 1956: 378-379) some women even practised polyandry, a custom still present among the Tuareg tribes of Sahara. During the so-called epoch of “barbarity” (*jahiliyya*)

[...] women were priests, soothsayers, prophets, participants in warfare, and nurses on the battlefield. They were fearlessly outspoken, defiant critics of men, authors of satirical verse aimed at formidable male opponents; keepers in some unclear capacity, of the keys of the holiest shrine in Mecca; rebels and leaders of rebellions that included men; individuals who initiated and terminated marriages at will, protested the limits Islam imposed on that freedom, and mingled freely with the men of their society until Islam banned interaction (Ahmed cited in Rhouni 2010: 232).

46 In Babylon, according to the *Code of Hammurabi* all married women had to wear veils in public as a token of their respectability. Later, in Assyria, the prostitutes, slaves, concubines, and common women were not allowed to wear a veil in public as it was considered a mark of social status.

47 In pre-Islamic Arabia a woman could end the relationships with a man by lowering a veil across the mouth of the tent.

48 The first wife of the prophet Muhammad, Khadija, was a respected merchant in Mecca.

In pre-Islamic Arabia the veil didn't have any special connotations different from those inherited from the ancient cultures and traditions which influenced the Arabian Peninsula.

Commonly the veil was worn either by women and men as a means of protection against the harsh natural conditions which marked their everyday life. In other circumstances it seems that it was used by the married women but only by those who had a certain rank and wanted to mark thus their social status. Men used it too in order to keep away the evil-eye (al-Guindi 1999) or when they wanted to show someone a particular respect⁴⁹.

Even if the veil didn't have any assumed cosmological meanings, it contained a general idea of segregation between what was good and what was bad or between what was allowed or prohibited, an idea that will acquire special connotations in Islam.

3. The veil in Islam

In Islam, besides its natural functions as a means of protection against natural elements, the veil acquired or maintained the following symbolic acceptations:

- a) metaphysical:
 - separation between good and evil
 - separation between God and man
- b) physical:
 - seclusion from the outside world
 - separation between sacred and profane.

3.1 Qur'anic acceptations

In the Qur'an the veil has two types of acceptations, one cosmological, another social.

In the first case in the Qur'an the veil (curtain, seclusion) is referred to as:

- a) a separation between the servants of good and the servants of evil:

And the dwellers of the Garden cry unto the dwellers of the Fire: We have found that which our Lord promised us (to be) the Truth. Have ye (too) found that which your Lord promised the Truth? They say: yea, verily. And a crier in between them crieth: The curse of God is on evil doers. (*The Qur'an*, 7:44)

Between them is a veil. And on the Heights are men who know them all by their marks. And they call unto the dwellers of the Garden: Peace be unto you! They enter it not although they hope (to enter). (*Ibid.*, 7:46)

- b) a separation between the world of God and the world of man:

And it was not (vouchsafed) to any mortal that God should speak to him unless (it be) by revelation or from behind a veil, or that He sendeth a messenger to reveal what He will by His leave. Lo! He is Exalted, Wise. (*Ibid.*, 42: 51)

49 The Tuareg males still wear it from the age of puberty in all circumstances, even when sleeping.

And he said: Lo! I have preferred the good things (of the world) to the remembrance of my Lord; till they were taken out of sight behind the curtain. (*Ibid.*, 38: 32)

And make mention of Mary in the Scripture, when she had withdrawn from her people to a chamber looking East, / And had chosen seclusion from them. Then We sent unto her Our spirit and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man. (*Ibid.*, 19: 16-17)

c) a separation between understanding and misunderstanding or between belief and unbelief:

Of them are some who listen unto thee, but We have placed upon their hearts veils, lest thy should understand, and in their ears a deafness. If they saw every token they would not believe therein; to the point that, when they come unto thee to argue with thee, the disbelievers say: This is naught else than fables of the men of old. (*Ibid.*, 6: 25)

And We placed upon their hearts veils lest they should understand it, and in their ears a deafness; and when thou makest mention of thy Lord alone in the Qur'an, they turn their backs in aversion. (*Ibid.*, 17: 46)

d) a barrier between the transmitted word of God and the word of man:

And they say: Our hearts are protected from that unto which thou (O, Muhammad) callest us , and in our ears there is a deafness, and between us and thee there is a veil. Act, then. Lo! we also shall be acting. (*Ibid.*, 41: 5)

e) a barrier between truth and falsehood:

God hath sealed their hearing and their hearts, and on their eyes there is a covering. Theirs will be an awful doom. (*Ibid.*, 2: 7)

From the moral/social point of view the veil is mentioned in the Qur'an only as a proof of women's modesty and 2) as a separation between what was considered forbidden (*ḥarām*) and what was seen as allowed (*ḥalāl*⁵⁰):

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto God together, O, believers, in order that ye may succeed. (*Ibid.*, 24: 31)

O, ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you. But if you are invited, enter, and, when, your meal is ended, then disperse. Linger not for

50 In Arabic *ḥarām* and *ḥalāl* mean as well “sacred” and “profane”.

conversation. Lo! that would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be shy of (asking) you (to go); but God is not shy of the truth. And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. And it is not for you to cause annoyance to the messenger of God, nor that ye should ever marry his wives after him. Lo! that in God's sight would be an enormity. (*Ibid.*, 33: 53)

3.2 The veil in legalistic Islam

Even if in the Qur'an the veil is mostly referred to from the perspective of its cosmological acceptations, in Sunni legalistic Islam, the social and moral aspects prevailed over the elements of cosmological symbolism.

The common acceptance, favored by the Sunni scholars, of the veil as a garment meant to protect women against men and men against women is based on the two Qur'anic passages cited above (24: 31 and 33: 53) to which adds the following one:

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, that so they may be recognized and not annoyed. God is ever Forgiving, Merciful. (The Qur'an 33: 59)

The interpretation of these passages was put into relation with *zinā'* (fornication, adultery) which was considered one of the most serious moral disorders of the *jahiliyya*. In this respect and in the light of the Qur'an, women were held responsible for the moral corruption of society taking into account that men according to the Edenic paradigm could easily fall into temptation:

Narrated Ibn 'Abbaas: I did not see anything so resembling minor sins as what Abu Hurairah narrated from the Prophet who said, "God has written for the son of Adam his inevitable share of adultery whether he is aware of it or not. The adultery of the eye is the looking (at something which is sinful to look at), and the adultery of the tongue is to utter (what it is unlawful to utter), and the inner self wishes and longings for (adultery) and the private parts turn that into reality or refrain from submitting to the temptation" (Al-Bukhārī 1997: 324)

Nevertheless, in early Islam, the veil did not represent a special topic in the juridical debates which were trying to configure the Islamic Law, as it was not seen as a part of the Islamic religious compulsory obligations considered directly commanded by God. On the other hand, according to Mernissi (1991), the wearing of the veil, understood as a specific way of clothing meant to differentiate Muslim from non-Muslim women as well as free women from slaves, was seen as an obligation *per se*.

The wearing of the veil by women became a matter of debate only during the medieval Islam but the Schools of Jurisprudence failed to reach a legal consensus on the matter as the views of the four Islamic schools of law differed.

There were two currents of opinion, the first arguing that women should cover completely in public leaving uncovered only their faces and hands and the

second, that they should completely cover leaving uncovered only the eyes. The debate became more vivid after the introduction in Islam of the *fitna*⁵¹ doctrine, following the Great Schism between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites, and this because of the polysemantic character of the word.

Thus, the term *fitna*, understood both as “temptation” and “discord” was put into relation with the concept of *‘awra*, meaning in Arabic, among other things, “defectiveness”, “faultiness”, “weakness”, but also “pudendum” and “genitals”. The subtle conclusion of this was that the sexual attraction exercised by women “weakened” men and, therefore, was susceptible of generating major social disruptions. This was the reason for which – although *fitna* doesn't appear in the Qur'an in relation to sex as a possible cause for disorder within the Muslim community, nor it refers to veiling as a means of preventing such disorders –, the majority of Muslim medieval scholars used the term in order to back their views concerning the necessity of imposing on women the wearing of the veil⁵² (see El Fadl 2001: 233). They argued that, otherwise, the sexual temptations exercised by women outside marriage could have induced a major social disorder preventing people in general, men in particular, from performing their religious or social duties and making them return to the habits of the *jahiliyya*. To this opinion regarding women as main reason of temptation contributed the image of Eve portrayed in the Islamic tradition, as in the Judeo-Christian one, as temptress of Adam. In this respect the Shafi'i jurist Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī (1233-1277) wrote:

Since God made men desire women, and desire looking at them, and enjoying them, women are like the devil in that they seduce men towards the commission of evil, while making evil look attractive. We deduct from this that women should not go out in the midst of men except for a necessity. (El Fadl 2001: 237)

Taking into account the topic concerning female nudity mentioned in the Qur'an and the sexual temptation women exercise on men, the sole element debated by the Muslim jurists was how and to which extent women had to cover their bodies, namely whether they were allowed or not to appear in public with their hands and faces uncovered, a matter on which the opinions of the four Islamic jurisprudential schools differ. The adepts of the Hanafi and Maliki schools chose a less conservative way unlike the Shafi'i and the Hanbali schools who have been privileging until today a rigid or even extremely rigid approach.

For the Malikis, the face and hands of a woman could not be considered as “tempting” parts of the body, therefore women were not obliged to cover them.

51 In Arabic, this term has the following meanings: “temptation”, “trial”, “charm”, “attractiveness”, “enchantment”, “captivation”, “temptation”, “infatuation”, “riot”, “discord”, “dissension”, “civil strife”.

52 The necessity of veiling applies to men too, according to the Islamic Law. Men are forbidden to wear tight or sexually provocative clothes. They are obliged as well to have the area between the navel and the knees covered in front of everybody except their wives. They are not allowed to wear in public clothes similar to those worn by women, nor silk or gold and their way of dressing should be a proof of modesty.

Nevertheless, although they ruled this lack of obligation they opined that face covering was a recommendable thing.

The Hanafis adopted an ambiguous position. On the one hand they opined that a woman's face cannot be considered as “tempting”, but on the other hand they ruled that face covering was compulsory as a woman could not tell whether she was looked at with sexual desire or not. Therefore they ruled that women had to cover their faces in public or in front of men not belonging to their family.

The adepts of the Shafi'i school opined that the face covering in the presence of stranger men was recommendable, but that it became compulsory only when men did not lower their eyes in the presence of a woman or if the face of the respective woman was susceptible of exercising a great sexual attraction on men.

The Hanbalis went far beyond these acceptations and produced two types of legal opinions in relation to the entire female body. According to the first opinion the entire female body was “tempting”, except the face and hands. Thus, face covering was not considered compulsory. A second current of interpretation opined that the face, hands and even the fingers and fingernails of a woman were “tempting” so a woman had to completely cover her body in public.

In spite of all debates, the prescriptions concerning the veil were more or less influenced by many local practices which generated many interpretations referring to the form of the veil and to what exactly it had to cover, as the Muslim legalistic scholars were not so much preoccupied by the veil in itself but by the prevention of any disorderly sexual relation among the members of the Muslim community.

However, according to these legal views, in Islam there are several types of veils, headscarves, and dresses which cover entirely more or less partially the bodies of women: the *hijāb*, the *niqāb*, the *burqa*, the *chador*, the *al-amira*, the *shayla*, the *khimar* etc. The *niqāb* and the *burqa* are the most restrictive of all and are promoted by the rigid Hanbali tradition.

3.3 The veil in mystical Islam

Unlike the Sunnis, the Sufis approached the veil and veiling in a rather different manner, because for them the cosmological dimension of the veil was more important than its moral and social functions. For them unveiling seemed more important than veiling as they strove to remove the barriers between God and man, so that the human being could regain by inner purification its original status of Perfection and Completeness (*al-insān al-kāmil*), a status which makes men and women equal in the eyes of God.

They too based their conceptions on the Qur'an:

(And unto the evil doer it is said): Thou wast in heedlessness of this. Now We have removed from thee thy covering, and piercing is thy sight this day. (The Qur'an, 50: 22)

The threatened Hour is nigh. / None beside God can disclose it (*Ibid.*, 53: 57-58)

For the Sufis the veil was a barrier that prevented human beings from knowing themselves in order to be able to attain the union with God. Thus the veil

transcended the literalistic interpretations of the Sunnis leaving behind its segregationist dimension and becoming an invitation addressed to mankind to remove it by faith and knowledge of God. For the Sufis, the veil is the world which deforms the inner reality of any human being, a veil that through good deeds and inner introspection and purification could be removed, by God's will.

Therefore, they did not try to impose any veils. On the contrary they strove to eliminate the veils covering hearts, eyes and ears as stated by the Qur'an, this being for them the sole possibility of reaching the ultimate Truth.

The so-called Divine Essence is considered by the Muslim mystics as a veiled reality, which rarely reveals its beauty and when it does, it reveals it only to those who deserve to see, as the worldly passions and desires of man veil the inner eye of the intellect and prevents it from seeing the Truth. Thus, in consonance with the Qur'an, the Sufis consider that the veil does not cover the Divine Essence but the eyes which strive to see it.

Even if they accept the necessity of veiling established by the Islamic Law as a token of modesty, respectability and as a sign of belonging to the Muslim community, they generally consider that all human beings, both females and males, have walked since the beginning the same path of reunion with the Source of Being. Thus, for them there cannot be a gender segregation, as Adam, the primordial Human Being, contained both genders within its nature. Therefore, the Sufis consider that the role played by women in society and their rights should be equal to those of men.

4. Modern evolutions

Considered as either a regulator of the moral aspects of the Muslim community life, or a metaphysical barrier between the realm of God and the realm of man, beginning with the colonial era the veil started to change its meanings, becoming more a political symbol than a social/religious and metaphysical concept, as it extended its primary acceptations to a new one that referred to the veil and, by extension, to the entire Muslim traditional dress as a token of resistance towards any foreign influence considered dangerous for the inner and outer structure of Islam as religion and way of life.

As the national costume became almost absent [...] reaction to its absence began with the Islamic dress, the beard and the *jilbāb*⁵³ as forms of reclaiming Arabo-Islamic identity [...]. The more Westernization took hold in lifestyles, the more attachment to national or Islamic dress increased as a reaction against it as has happened in the Islamic revolution in Iran and in the contemporary Islamic groups in Egypt. So did attachment to the Prophet's natural medicine as a reaction against modern medicine, and to Quranic sciences in response to modern sciences." (Hanafi *apud* Sadiki 2004: 125)

Seen mainly as a symbol of traditional Islam, the veil, increasingly politicized during the last decades, acquired several new connotations which

53 Traditional long dress worn in the Arab countries.

transformed it in:

- a) a mark of Islamic identity;
- b) a mark of the refusal to assimilate to other cultures where the Muslim diaspora lives;
- c) a mark of the separation between Islam and the rest of the world.
- d) a mark of separation between Muslim fundamentalists/traditionalists and modernists.

5. Conclusions

Unlike the fundamentalist/traditionalist Islam, be it moderate or radical, which manifests more or less acute tendencies of intolerance towards other ideas and conceptions different from its own, the contemporary modernist Islam, still majoritarian, tries to accord its own values to whom it is attached in different degrees, with the values of modernity, trying to understand them not only from the point of view of a technical and scientific utilitarianism.

But even if they do not agree with the fundamentalist/traditionalist views regarding the Other, this doesn't mean that the modernist Muslims blindly accept the Occidental views sometimes pushed to the edge of absurd.

Caught in the middle between a dictatorship imposed in the name of God and another one imposed in the name of man for whom God doesn't represent too much, these Muslims remain in a limbo because for them "modernism" doesn't necessarily mean "secularism".

Thus although the Muslim veil is affirmed as an ethnic insignia mainly in the fundamentalist/traditionalist milieus, while in many Muslim countries which are not dominated by the fundamentalist ideology it remains a matter of custom and tradition, in the light of the recent global evolutions which violently oppose Islamic fundamentalism to the rest of the world, and of the reactions generated by it which tend to affect many non-fundamentalist Muslim communities, the importance of the Muslim veil seems to expand its meaning marking the status of the Islamic man as essentially Other and contributing to the segregation or self-segregation of Islam from the rest of the world.

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