

Sociology of burka

Friday 6 August 2010, by [MANN Carol](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2010).

Three universities, besides Al-Azhar, in Egypt stopped their female students to turn up to exams dressed in niqab. Since July 18th, the same law applies in Syria and 1200 teachers have been fired



From Sabir Nazar: Viewpoint's cartoonist's viewpoint

The recent commotion about the veil in France and the ongoing saga concerning the Afghan burka prompts one to think a little further about the issues concerned. Assorted pundits have been debating about whether or not such a prescription is indeed to be found explicitly stated in the Q'uran (it isn't) or if and why it is turning into such a political issue (it is).

Let's go back to origins. According to Gerda Lerner, author of the authoritative *History of Patriarchy*, the issue is a social one before becoming gendered. In ancient Babylon concealing one's head and shoulders was a sign of respectability, it indicated high social status. Slaves, dancers, prostitutes were expressly forbidden to cover the heads, their hair a metaphor for the public region, indicating sexual availability. In Ancient Egypt, they went even further: slaves, like animals, were naked, whereas the privileged were entitled to clothing.

Whose privilege is the next question? By covering up the female body, one indicates male ownership. In the patriarchal societies which produced such customs, it means that any female belonged either to her father or her husband and therefore the covering indicated that someone had exclusive rights on the contents of the human package. Even looking was forbidden and the next step was the construction of a secluded space which doubled the function of the veiling. This is how in the Middle-East, Assyrian and Babylonian potentates built massive harems filled with sexual slaves given the pompous name of concubines, which meant that any children they produced belonged to their father. These traditions were far stronger than in the Arab world of North Africa, as the customary top-till toe covering instituted by the Ottoman empire shows, and help explain where the Iranian type of veiling really comes from. Jews obliged married women to cover their heads- again as a sign of marital property, whereas their daughters could show off their crowning glory, an aid to

attracting potential husbands, one presumes, notwithstanding that they probably had little to say in terms of choice, same as every other girl in the area. Early Christians went further, Tertullian (c160-222), author of the definitive *De Virginibus Velandis (Concerning the veil of virgins)* a stern theologian from Carthage in present day Tunisia, claimed that all women should be covered, as an eternal punishment for Original Sin which purportedly exiled Adam and Eve from monotheistic Paradise "Women, you should always be in mourning, covered in rags and spend your time repenting in order to buy back the sin of having confounded mankind". The covering he recommends is also a permanent marker of social inferiority, as women are not allowed any rights whatever or any kind of participation in Christian religious ritual.

By the time Islam came along, there was a hefty patriarchal tradition which equated the covering of women to a total lack of independence or right to autonomy. Naturally, Prophet Mohammed could not go totally against the dominant discourse. Nevertheless, as we know, he managed to introduce a partial right to inheritance (where there was none before), a theoretical right to accept or refuse a spouse and some kind of personal dowry (when this was unheard of). In Afghanistan today, customary law which supersedes any kind of other legislation, continues to base itself on such pre-Islamic practices which the prophet tried so hard to change. Alas, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, he failed to this day.

Head coverings ended up being ubiquitous in the Mediterranean world: Christian and Greek Orthodox women knotted black scarves round their chins, Spanish women bore alluring mantillas, and besides Western women always went around wearing hats, till after World War Two.

Now about the all-enveloping Afghan *burka* with the net coving the eyes. It seems that this particular costume may have originated in the Ottoman Empire and somehow found its way into Northern India as a marker for the (Muslim) Pathan upper classes. Once again this indicated social privilege, statutory inferiority and usually male wealth as women were naturally incapacitated by such restricted clothing. The same goes for the wearers of the *abaya* in the present-day Gulf States. Female idleness was the supreme indication that men were rich enough to keep them; their main obligation was and remains reproductive (of males, that is) and sexual entertainment, preferably left to lesser wives and/or concubines. In the olden days as now, this supposed idleness was naturally something very few women could in fact enjoy: it is just that their work did not take place in public space, but on a domestic, therefore private scale. Pierre Bourdieu in his ground-breaking study of Kabyls has done much work about what constitutes male and female occupations and ways of occupying space. Practically everything he has written applies to present day rural Afghanistan. Any kind of socially ennobling work- using metal tools, tasks carried out standing, sowing, trading etc was deemed male privilege whereas work implying a crouching position, or marketable skills from food preparation to carpet weaving was and is carried out in the domestic space, then sold by the menfolk. This is not considered 'work' by men, since it is not carried out in a publicly visible manner. Whereas men will proudly show their faces, enact their sense of honour in a proactive aggressive way, women, on the contrary hide in veiled anonymity, their role being to passively sustain family respectability. Which is why they need to circulate in the all-covering burka. In the case of extreme poverty (in the Afghan refugee camps or in Kabul today), this is naturally a pretence, because the idleness it symbolizes and therefore the male financial success it is meant to advertise is non-existent. But the illusion remains and that suffices: family honour is safe.

What about the present day veiling in France which the French law now forbids. What is being debated here is not the scarf, but the niqab, the opaque black veil which entirely covers female faces. Some French intellectuals have sprung up, as is their wont, to violently criticize this. As I wrote in a recent post on Viewpoint, in answer to an article which concluded with a remark about what would happen to a veiled tourist arriving in Paris: "What would happen to any Western female traveler arriving in Teheran, Mecca or Kabul bare-headed wearing a sleeveless tee-shirt?"

We all know the answer to that one.

In the meantime, what has largely been forgotten is that this total veil is part of a package deal. It is generally worn in families of Muslims of Salafist/Wahabi persuasion, which includes many French converts. This a truly Fundamentalist creed which believes in the most literal reading of Islam: any form of *bid'ah*, innovation is totally forbidden. The Taliban were ardent defenders of this creed. Wahabbism implies that the notion of the state is unacceptable, let alone democracy, civil and human rights prescribed by most of the world's constitutions. For these Fundamentalists, religion (the Islamic religion that is, not any other) has to be the guiding principle of any and every kind of government which excludes adherence to any laws put forward by a secular government that considers religion to be a private matter. The French sociologist Oliver Roy has written interesting texts about this now globalized form of Islam that bans the notion of any frontier and aims to unite the Umma under its radical banner.

This issue is at the centre of the most important debate going on within Muslim-majority countries today. Whilst self-righteous minds upbraid France for its purported racism against Muslims, they would do well to consider what is going in other countries where Muslims are dominant. Since 2008, the famed Al-Azhar university, specialized in the study of Sunnite Islam in Egypt, has forbidden the niqab on its premises, even the version where a slit has been accommodated for the eyes. Three other universities in the country forbid their female students to turn up to exams dressed in this way. Since July 18th, the same law applies in Syria: female students, thus shrouded are not allowed access to university and 1200 teachers have been fired from their posts in June. Syrian feminists welcomed the ban. Ghiyat Barakat, the Syrian Education Minister claims that it is not part of Syrian culture. Indeed he knows exactly what threat the spreading of this costume means to democratic institutions, something the Tunisian government has also been worried about.

These countries are fighting Political Islam on its own ground, because they know full well the issues that lie behind what is much more than a mere sartorial debate. France in its clumsy way is conscious of it too, remembering the civil war in the former colony Algeria (1992-2002) when the Islamic Salvation Front sought to control the country by extreme repressive means. Many victims have sought refuge in France. The rise of radical Islam in French suburbs is a serious cause for concern for democrats and such groups as the famous 'Ni Putes ni Soumises' (which translates as 'neither sluts nor submissive), founded and run by feminist Algerian and Tunisian women.

In brief, it is essential to look at the whole veil issue in terms of history and sociology and meditate on its medium to long-term consequences.

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* From Viewpoint online issue no. 12, August 6, 2010:

<http://viewpointonline.net/fullstory.php?t=Sociology%20of%20burka&f=full-3-aug-6.php&y=2010&m=august>

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