

HEADSCARFED IT!

Headscarf Debate in Turkey

Recently, headscarf debate is quite hot subject in Turkey and around Europe. Various forums, symposiums and projects are focused on the question of Muslim women's veiling. However few are aware that the question of headscarf in Turkey (or in other countries where Muslims are in majority) and among European countries has a crucial difference which leads us think about the subject on different basis. The main difference on headscarf debate between these two groups of (not only) geographically separated countries is the reality of being immigrant for Muslim communities around Europe.

First of all I will explain the debate in Turkey. Mostly, Turks maybe face up with the Islamic image of Turkey around Europe by the question of headscarf ban in the country. Turkey always has the image of a Muslim country abroad. For a European it is usually hard to understand the debate in Turkey. In fact, Turkey is a secular country on its constitution; in addition, the majority of people are Muslims. According to recent researches on population, approximately 62% of women all around Turkey cover their heads by scarf (TESEV report of "Religion, Society and Politics in Changing Turkey": 2006, 53). However, headscarf is forbidden at universities' campuses and social facilities of them (not only for students or staff but also for visitors). The ban is applied at the state offices such as hospitals, courts, schools and other offices for staff only. Although there are some exceptions to this situation such as in few universities visitors wearing scarf are allowed, such strict and systematic headscarf ban has been applied by the state since 1998.

The process prior to 1998 is important to explain the actual consequences of the ban in Turkey. Since 1960's headscarf has become a popular subject of political struggles and evaluated as a juridical case. If we ask "what happened during 1960's?" the answer gives us a good point. A student from the faculty of theology for the first time demanded to wear headscarf in the university in 1966. She faced up with a great opposition and another girl in a medical school followed her and demanded the same. Wearing headscarf especially outside home was a common tendency among women of not only Muslim but also non-Muslim communities. Wearing scarf was not a new or marginal practice for women, but it was new at universities.

It is needed to point out the founding pillars of new Turkish Republic here, because the new Republic did not just remove the image of veiled women at the first step but left some roles to them; they could have been our grandmothers, house keepers, villagers, housewives, etc. Those women were stigmatized and excluded from bourgeois public sphere as such. The founding symbol of woman comrade of the new state was created against that image: a woman without headscarf. The first political symbol of Turkish Republic was her.

During the first years of new state, the founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk actualized some reforms to shape a modern, secular and contemporary society of Turks. First reforms were mostly in shape of the lifestyles and customs of the society; some basic symbols of the old Ottoman Empire were relocated by Westernized way of them. Three basics were alphabet, measurements and scales and finally clothing of man and woman. By the way of changing symbols and lifestyles of people, a modern and secular project applied to the country. A new role model of woman for the new country was shaped in this process. She was *absolutely*

dressed up without headscarf, but not in sexually attractive clothes like a mother, mother of the nation, well-educated, brightened by the light of modern science. Although she was the symbol of modern Turkey, she was expected to hold her traditional role in the society. Headscarf has a crucial founding symbol for the role model of Turkish woman. Turkish modernization project has high symbolic representation as it is clear about woman's attire. When a woman demands to wear headscarf and does not give up while having education, it symbolizes the failure of the project. That is the main reason of why headscarf has become a problem after 1960's. Before, it was not a problem while maybe 80-90% of women in Turkey were covering their heads. However if they demand to have higher education and to share the privileged positions of elites, it becomes a problem.

Turkish modernization project located the woman without headscarf as the symbol of modern Turkey against woman wearing headscarf. Headscarf became always problematic since any women decided to struggle to wear it. It became an open question after 1960's, and a systematic ban applied by 1997 "postmodern" coup d'état. There is no concrete statistics on the ban but only more than 1000 students are now in Vienna for education. Thousands of women were expelled from their jobs and schools because of their headscarves. The author of this essay is one of them who faced up with the ban at school. I was at the second year of me at a university. Many universities applied the ban immediately in 1998, but my university was a *semi-private* university, so they just hide their students away from the inspections of the state as much as they can. Finally, a journalist took a photo of one of the student wearing headscarf in our university and wrote in his column that "there are women wearing headscarf in that university." After this article was published by newspapers, our university had to apply the ban immediately and I had a semester break, we protested classes but we knew that nothing will happen. Because it was a result of 1997 coup d'état and the army forces were behind the application of the ban.

No regulation, law or code was changed in 1997 to put the ban. The only change was in the interpretations of judges. There is already an open article in the constitution reflecting that "clothing is free in Turkish universities." By the coup d'état judges decided that the freedom of clothing did not cover headscarf. Although according to the same constitution education, health care and shelter are the basic needs of human beings. Nobody could put the ban unless there is an openly written article about it in the constitution. There is no open sentence banning headscarf. Contrary to this legal insurance, thousands of women expelled from their jobs while they were working for 10 years or even 20 years at the same positions in public offices and schools. In addition to them, thousands of students were expelled from their schools. Some of them created various "solutions" like wearing wig, hat, etc. instead of their scarves. However some universities and state offices put the ban on wearing hat or wig which is used for "ideological reasons". Few numbers could have a chance to go abroad to complete their education. There had been several courts decided that the ban was not acceptable according to constitution, but they immediately faced up with being driven to a lower position or to a worse place in another city. Since people saw those examples of judges, cases in the national courts were lost.

Consequently in Turkey there is a deep class struggle under the debate on Islamic headscarf. Since the fast urbanization period appeared in the big cities of Turkey, an immigration flow from rural areas to big cities appeared during 1950's, and they demanded to share the opportunity of having higher education for their children. First, these families were door keepers, cleaners, laborers in the cities. When their children coming from rural areas came to the doors of universities, it created new problems. Elites were aware that demand for

university education was the demand to share some privileges of them. That kind of class shift could be acceptable when they imitate the lifestyles and religious beliefs of ideal citizens of Turkey. In this sense, headscarf is a stigma of backwardness according to Republican elite, and it violates the horizon of Turkish modernization project. We can not see any prints of personal/ religious choice to wear headscarf or not to wear it.

Turkish people have experienced the way of Republican reforms for 85 years; it is clear that Turkey's way of secularism is quite different than European examples. According to a secular, laiciest democracy the state must not be dominated by any single religious or philosophical ideology. However it ensures protection to all kind of ideologies in the society; it ensures to protect its citizens freedom of religions and beliefs. When we examine the Turkish way of laicism, we see that there is a ministry of religion which represents Sunni Islam. There are some schools to train Imams for mosques but a single school to have education for priests is closed; there is another big debate on it. A Muslim woman wearing headscarf cannot be a state officer; she cannot represent the state as she is, but a non-Muslim cannot represent the state and cannot be a state officer as well. There is a form of "ideal citizen," which is Turkish, secular, Sunni Muslim. The distance between a citizen and that ideal form explains us how much we could be acceptable by the state and become 'good' citizens. Headscarf debate is not totally separated from the given picture.

However, European countries need to evaluate the question of Muslim women's attire together with the immigrant reality of them. A Muslim woman in Europe is visible not only by her religious identity but her immigrant identity as well. Being an immigrant in a European country already includes various other problems. It feeds prejudices on "other." Woman behind veil is a blurred agent to a European. In addition to this it consists of historical conflicts, recent applications, colonial fantasies and modern discourses. As an example to these, some European countries (Germany, France) try to limit the usage of headscarf by claiming that those women are under pressure. Instead of producing solutions to remove pressures on women, the authorities come to the conclusion of limiting or banning headscarf. The European story of headscarf debate is not the subject of the text and it needs a detailed examination. Brief facts on the issue are given to explain the different basis of the debate in Turkey and around Europe.

We cannot just ignore class struggle behind headscarf debate (especially in France) in Europe. However, headscarf's immigrant notion is crucial to understand prejudices and struggle around Europe. Contrary to European prejudices on headscarf, we could mostly talk about complexes on it in Turkey: complexes coming from the founding ideology and modernization project of the state. The debate is much more connected to class struggle and complexes developed by founders of the state.

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