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WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION IN TURKEY: IS ISLAM REALLY THE VILLAIN?

Ayşe Kadioğlu

IN Turkey during the early 1990s the issue of women's head covering acquired politicized momentum, along with a concomitant polarization between secular groups, organized around the cult of Kemal Atatürk, and Islamists. This polarization has become so acute that it is reminiscent of the late-nineteenth-century Dreyfus Affair in France, when supporters and opponents of Captain Alfred Dreyfus publicly and acrimoniously debated his cause.¹ The controversy over women's headdress has involved politicians, bureaucrats, intellectuals, artists, businessmen, writers, students, and average citizens. The politicization acquired further momentum in the course of campaigning for the March 1994 municipal elections. In those elections, the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party made significant gains, its candidates winning mayoral positions in the country's two largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara, as well as in scores of other cities and towns. The strong showing of the Refah Party ensured that women's dress would remain one of the focal points of political debate for the foreseeable future. The Turkish media has covered these debates extensively, portraying them as cultural clashes between "modern" women who wear short skirts and carry Atatürk badges, and "traditional" women who are turbaned. The former have been organizing expeditions to Atatürk's mausoleum in Ankara in efforts to publicize their disapproval of turbaned women. These public protests and fights over costume are impeding the possibility of developing a feminist discourse in Turkey. Issues that are common

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Publishers, 1973), pp. 89–120; see also, Ayşe Kadioğlu, "Türkiye'de yaşanan hizipleşme ve Dreyfus meselesi" (Sectarian tendencies in Turkey and the Dreyfus Affair), *Birikim* 59 (Mart 1994), pp. 98–101.

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to all Turkish women are losing ground by virtue of absorption into a more general political discourse.

The debates over women's headdress is part of the wider resurgence of religious movements that has been in process for more than a decade. Turkey is not, of course, the only Middle East country that has been experiencing the political revitalization of Islam. Whether in Turkey or elsewhere, it is obvious that the importance of Islamic values has not diminished. What is new is the emergence of a fundamental difference in outlook between what may be termed "traditional" and "political" Islam.²

Whereas traditional Islam is confined mostly within the private domain of the believer, political Islam has pushed its way into the public realm. Political Islam sees itself as having a political mission. Political Islamists, furthermore, differ among themselves in their interpretation of this mission; some opt for participating directly in political power struggles to alter the existing system from above by capturing the state apparatus; others with a more populist tendency place primary emphasis on the individual and the means to transform gradually his/her internal value systems.³ The many factors behind the current revitalization of Islam have become the subject of numerous analyses in the literature.⁴ While some analyses focus on the centuries-old asymmetrical encounter between the industrial West and the underdeveloped Middle East, and therefore adopt a view of Islamic movements as ideologies of *jihad* (holy war) against the West, other analyses evaluate such movements as manifestations of a legitimacy crisis of secular ideologies in the region.

Political Islam in the 1980s and early 1990s has assigned a central role to women. Yet, this is not the first time in the history of the Turkish republic that women's public visibility has occupied a central place in political controversies. Women have been burdened with the difficult task of defining the boundaries between tradition and modernity since the initiation of modernization projects from above by the Ottoman bureaucrats at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the early republican years, the Kemalist intelligentsia instigated a sharper turn toward modernization with the explicit goal of bringing Turkey to the level of contemporary civilization. The ensuing reforms constituted an onslaught on the existing cultural practices.

2. Bassam Tibi distinguishes between traditional and political Islam in accounting for sociopolitical factors behind the politicization of Islam; see his *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of Social Change* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 122–34.

3. These different currents within the political Islamists, for instance, are represented in the thoughts of two critical figures of the Islamic movement in Turkey: Abdurrahman Dilipak and Ali Bulaç. For a review of their different stances, see Nilüfer Göle, *Modern Mahrem: Medeniyet ve Örtünme* (Modern Privacy: Civilization and the Veil) (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1991), esp. pp. 105–11. See also, Michael E. Meeker, "The New Muslim Intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey," in Richard Tapper, ed., *Islam in Modern Turkey* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991), pp. 189–219.

4. In the Arab context, see, for instance, Tibi, *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of Social Change*; in the Turkish context, see Şerif Mardin, *Din ve İdeoloji: Toplu Eserleri II* (Religion and Ideology: Collected Works II) (Ankara: İletişim Yayınları, 1983).

Political Islam has unleashed debates concerning male-female relations and the position of women in Muslim societies. These debates are crystallized in the controversy over women's headdress. The debates stem from remarkably different sources, including the colonial feminist, native Orientalist-Kemalist, and political Islamic discourses. These discourses sometimes have intersected with certain feminist claims. It is the purpose of this article to reveal that such discourses, in fact, have inhibited the development of feminist movements from below in Turkey by enhancing concrete modes of control of female sexuality.

Colonial feminist and native Orientalist-Kemalist discourses have placed an unwarranted significance on the modern outlook of women. In so doing, they have shifted the argument away from universal feminist claims regarding public and private role dichotomies. The Kemalist discourse, furthermore, created an image of women who were burdened with the difficult task of maintaining a balance between being too traditional or being unchaste—too modern and promiscuous like Western women.⁵ Women's modes of public visibility became the focus of major political controversies in the aftermath of the Kemalist reforms. The political Islamic discourse began partaking in these debates in the 1980s. The new Islamic women voiced grievances regarding the double burden placed on modern Kemalist women who successfully managed the home and a career. Their claims seemed to intersect with some feminist points. Yet, they envisaged an instrumental role for women in the process of restoring an *asr-ı saadet* (golden age) of Islam. The veil became the symbol of these women's confinement within the private realm at a time when they physically were located within the public domain. In other words, the veil provided a means of re-seclusion in the aftermath of women's debut in public life brought about through Kemalist reforms.

POLITICAL ISLAM AND WOMEN'S HEADDRESS

Perhaps the most remarkable example highlighting the distinction between traditional Islam and political Islam revolves around the issue of women's headdress. This distinction stems not only from the various styles of headdress representing different currents but also from the contrasting background, education, public participation, and militancy of the women who cover their hair. For example, there is a significant difference between *başörtü* and *türban*, both signifying styles of headdress. A *başörtü* is a smaller piece of cloth covering only the head and not the neck. It is worn by women who observe traditional customs and behavior and whose activities are confined to household chores usually without an active role in the public realm. Women who wear the *başörtü* mostly reside on the outskirts of large cities in squatter settlements that were formed as a result of internal migration, and in small towns. Women who wear the *başörtü*

5. Ayşe Kadioğlu, "Alaturkalık ile İffetsizlik Arasında Birey Olarak Kadın" (Women between being traditional and unchaste), *Görüş* 9 (Mayıs 1993), pp. 58–62.

include elderly women who were youngsters during the modernizing reforms of the 1920s and 1930s and never internalized the new dress codes initiated by the Kemalists. Their perceptions are pre-Kemalist rather than anti-Kemalist, and they represent a continuation of traditional ways and modes of behavior rather than a missionary, militant image. Women who wear the *türban*, accompanied by a complementing long coat regardless of seasonal change, undoubtedly represent a more activist group. The *türban* is mostly an urban phenomenon, and it epitomizes the political aspect of the Islamic movement in Turkey during the past decade. Most women who wear the *türban* are students in higher educational institutions.⁶

The distinction between the *başörtü* and the *türban* is qualitatively different from the issue of *bad hejabi* (improper veiling) in Iran.⁷ *Bad hejabi* is a term that conservative zealots in Iran coined to criticize those women who took advantage of the relatively freer atmosphere created by the pragmatic policies in the aftermath of the 1989 death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Some women adopted more stylish, colorful coats and replaced the black head cover with brightly colored scarves that revealed more hair. As a result, in the summer of 1992, they became the targets of a renewed clamp down on women's public attire. The debates over *bad hejabi* represent a cleavage within political Islam between more conservative groups, who are keen on denouncing women's sexuality, and pragmatists, who have supported moderately reformist policies and arrangements with the aim of reducing the strict separation of the sexes. Nevertheless, those divisions notwithstanding, both currents purport to be Islamic in justifying their political programs. In contrast, the most important distinction between the *başörtü* and the *türban* is the political character of the latter. The political Islamists represent a post-Kemalist, as well as an anti-Kemalist, current and are radically different from the pre-Kemalist traditionalists.⁸

THE ONSLAUGHT OF MODERNIZATION

Political Islamists were not the first to assign a central role to women's public visibility in Turkey. In fact, debates over women's dress occupied the agenda of the intellectuals in the aftermath of the modernizing reforms during the nineteenth century. These reforms were inaugurated from above in 1839 with Sultan

6. In research conducted by Göle with Islamic university students, some of these students point to differences between styles of headdress, such as *başörtü* and *türban*. See Göle, *Modern Mahrem*, p. 87.

7. For a discussion of *bad hejabi* in Iran, see Nesta Ramazani, "Women in Iran: The Revolutionary Ebb and Flow," *Middle East Journal* 47, no. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 409–28.

8. This distinction perhaps signifies a generational difference as well. In spite of the fact that there has not been any empirical research regarding the mothers of turbaned women, personal observation suggests that they either do not cover their heads or cover them with *başörtü*, indicating their apolitical character. It is the younger, turbaned women who symbolize an Islamic political mission.

Abdülmeceid's promulgation of the Tanzimat charter. The reforms embraced various liberal principles, including the equality of persons of all religions before the law. The leading intellectuals of those times—the Young Ottomans—envisaged a new role for women in the course of implementing these reforms. The intellectual debates mainly focused on the necessity to strike a balance between traditional conservatism and extreme Westernism. An influential Young Ottoman, Namık Kemal (1840–88), proudly identified himself as neither an Islamist nor an extreme Westernist.⁹ He assigned women the role of preserving society's traditions in the process of modernizing reforms. He maintained that it was essential to protect women's privacy and keep them secluded as well as subordinated; he referred to dancing in Western style as no different from flirting with the devil.¹⁰

Arguments geared toward legitimizing Islamic practices consistently were employed by such reformist intellectuals who tried to unravel the egalitarian teachings of *asr-ı saadet*. For example, Fatma Aliye, Turkey's first female novelist, tried at the end of the nineteenth century to reconcile her arguments against polygyny with Islamic teachings. She denounced the misinterpretation of Islam and urged women to become educated.¹¹ A similar rhetoric is used by political Islamists at the end of the twentieth century.

Women's public visibility acquired renewed importance during the early republican era when the Kemalists promoted Turkish nationalism and Westernization at the expense of Islam and traditional culture. The Kemalists, in fact, were influenced by what Edward Said calls Orientalism, the manufactured Western image of the Muslim world.¹² This image is epitomized in the secluded, veiled, and hence oppressed women of the Muslim world. Anyone who often travels to the United States or Europe cannot help but notice that many Western academics, journalists, professionals, and laymen are preoccupied with the status of women in Muslim societies.

Orientalism is deeply ingrained within the literature that endeavors to shed some light on the internal causes of underdevelopment in Third World societies. This literature is inspired by the works of preeminent scholars such as Ferdinand Toennies, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. These social theorists began the tendency of referring to societies as representing two ideal-typical polar types. Toennies's distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Durkheim's focus on mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity as characterizing simple and complex societies, respectively, and the themes Weber explored in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and his other writings constitute the origins of what may be referred to as the modernization perspective, that is, the practice

9. Göle, *Modern Mahrem*, p. 22.

10. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 23.

11. Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986), p. 29.

12. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 5–6.

of studying societies as two polar types, namely traditional and modern, and defining modernization as a movement from the former type to the latter.¹³

The modernization perspective entails an assumption that the preponderance of traditional features, internal value systems, and institutions constitute both an expression and a cause of underdevelopment that prevent modernization. This emphasis on patterns of action and internal value systems led to the modernization scholars' preoccupation with variables that are devoid of any historical content.¹⁴ Weber, for example, analyzes the relationship between capitalism and rationality and refers to the importance of education in arousing the Calvinist ethic that he contends was related directly to the emergence of modern capitalism. Modernization literature gives this spiritual factor a rational character, and its absence is associated with the predominance of irrational behavior that characterizes traditional societies.¹⁵ Hence, traditional values, attitudes, and institutions are viewed as highly detrimental to modernization. Modern usually is defined by studying Western societies. Thus, "the traditional end of the dichotomy is largely a *residual* category established by logical opposition to the modern end."¹⁶ The use of terms such as "underdeveloped," "backward," "Third World," and "peripheral" to characterize societies that are at the traditional end of the continuum is quite common in the modernization literature. In addition to terms that reflect a relationship of economic hierarchy and dependency, there is an increasing tendency to refer to the Islamic nature of some of these traditional societies. Using terms with a religious connotation for referring to certain parts of the world stems from the predominance of the aforementioned modernization perspective that situates these societies in terms of their characteristics vis-à-vis the modern West. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that Islam is no more repressive than Judaism or Christianity.¹⁷

The image of the Muslim woman epitomizes the Other in reference to her Western counterpart. In the colonial era, the Victorian male establishment tried to confront British feminist claims by relying on a conflictive double discourse: it employed theories on the biological inferiority and domesticity of women, while at the same time it used the language of the English feminists to further its colonial

13. For a review of the works of Ferdinand Toennies, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, especially regarding their connection to modernization perspectives, see Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of Marx, Durkheim, and Max Weber* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

14. See, for instance, Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: The Free Press, 1968).

15. For a critical review of the modernization literature, see Irene L. Gendzier, *Managing Political Change: Social Scientists and the Third World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985).

16. Samuel J. Valenzuela and Arturo Valenzuela, "Modernization and Dependency," in Roy C. Macridis and Bernard E. Brown, eds., *Comparative Politics: Notes and Readings* (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1986), p. 494 (emphasis added by author).

17. See, for instance, Fatima Mernissi, *Women in Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1991), p. vi.

plans.¹⁸ Hence, there was a fusion of the languages of colonialism and feminism, what Leila Ahmed calls *colonial feminism*.¹⁹

The discourse of colonial feminism viewed Islam as innately oppressive to women. The veil and seclusion symbolized that oppression as well as the backwardness of Islam. Veiled women came to be viewed as obstacles on the road to civilization. Hence, the modernization project that colonialism purported to export made the veil an open target of attack. As a result, the issue of women came to occupy a central place in the colonial narrative of Islam. This Orientalist narrative of Islam was being reproduced simultaneously within Muslim societies. Native Orientalists rearticulated in their own languages the colonial thesis, pointing to the inferiority of the Muslim tradition and incorporating the issue of women into the center of their modernization projects. Such rearticulation of the colonial thesis in native voice represented the gradually emerging self-hatred of the native Orientalists. The founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who unleashed a series of fundamental Westernizing reforms in the 1920s, referred to the incivility of veiling and expressed an uneasy feeling of embarrassment at being ridiculed by the civilized world.²⁰ Veiling of women thus became an issue for the Westernized, native Orientalists. Measures that were taken to civilize Muslim women in Iran extended to Reza Shah's banning of the veil in 1936.

TURKISH WOMEN AS SIMULATED IMAGES OF MODERNITY

The early republican Westernization reforms in Turkey never went so far as banning the veil at the national level.²¹ Nevertheless, the instigation from above of policies regarding women were extensive enough to warrant their later characterization as "state feminism."²² In the aftermath of the proclamation of the republic in 1923, many steps, including the abolition of the caliphate and the closure of the *şeriat* (sharia) courts, represented the republic's "clear distaste for

18. The activities of Lord Cromer are particularly illuminating at this point. A champion of the unveiling of Egyptian women, in England Cromer was a founding member and sometime president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 153.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

21. At a Congress of the People's Republican Party in 1935, a proposal regarding the abolition of the veil was discussed, yet no national action was taken except in some municipalities where the practice of veiling was outlawed. Interestingly, the religious headgear of men, the fez, was abolished and all men were compelled legally to wear hats. On the reticence of the republican legislators vis-à-vis women's dress, see Nükhet Sirman, "Feminism in Turkey: A Short History," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1989), pp. 1–34.

22. For the expression "state feminism," see Şirin Tekeli, "Emergence of the New Feminist Women in Turkey," in D. Dahlerup, ed., *The New Women's Movement* (London and Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986), pp. 179–99.

religion.”²³ The ensuing secularization brought dramatic changes to the Turkish social and political structure. In the course of the 1920s and early 1930s, a series of fundamental reforms were launched, including a prohibition on the religious headwear of men (the fez), the dissolution of the dervish orders, the reform of the calendar, the adoption of the Latin alphabet, and the use of Turkish instead of Arabic in the Islamic call to prayer.

The reforms regarding women were included in the Turkish Civil Code that was adopted in 1926 to replace *şeriat*. The new law declared polygyny and marriage by proxy illegal, and granted women equal rights with men regarding divorce, custody of children, and inheritance.²⁴ Women were given the right to vote in local elections in 1934 and national elections in 1935. Despite the existence of a women’s movement from below, in order to obtain the vote between 1926–34, women activists were thwarted by pressures from above.²⁵ Hence, all the major rights conferred on Turkish women during these years were the result of the efforts of a male revolutionary elite, who had the goal of bringing Turkey to the level of contemporary Western civilization.

Even though the early republican reforms encouraged women to participate in the public realm, women’s primary responsibility remained within the private domain. In 1923, Atatürk said:

History shows the great virtues shown by our mothers and grandmothers. One of these has been to raise sons of whom the race can be proud. Those whose glory spread over Asia and as far as the limits of the world had been trained by highly virtuous mothers who taught them courage and truthfulness. I will not cease to repeat it, *woman’s most important duty, apart from her social responsibilities, is to be a good mother.* As one progresses in time, as civilization advances with giant steps, it is imperative that mothers be enabled to raise their children according to the needs of the century.²⁶

The early republican reforms constituted an onslaught on existing cultural practices. They created an image of a modern Turkish woman who was honorable, chaste, enlightened, and modest. These virtues suppressed her sexuality while highlighting her modern outlook. The women who became products of the early republican reforms were similar to the *noblesse de robe* (nobility by virtue of dress) of pre-revolutionary France, who joined the ranks of the nobility by purchasing offices and putting on aristocratic clothes. These women of twentieth-

23. Şerif Mardin, “European Culture and the Development of Modern Turkey,” in Ahmed Evin and Geoffrey Denton, eds., *Turkey and the European Community* (Opladen, Germany: Leske and Budrich, 1990), p. 21.

24. Nermin Abadan-Unat, “Social Change and Turkish Women,” in Nermin Abadan-Unat, ed., *Women in Turkish Society* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), pp. 13–14.

25. See Zafer Toprak, “Halk Fırkası’ndan Önce Kurulan Parti: Kadınlar Halk Fırkası” (The party founded before the Populist Party: Populist Party of Women), *Tarih ve Toplum* 9, no. 51 (Mart 1988), pp. 30–1.

26. Cited in Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, p. 36 (italics mine).

century Turkish history became *modernes de robe*, who wore modern clothes and adopted certain Western codes of conduct, but nevertheless remained traditional, especially regarding relations with men and their self-perceptions within the confines of the family. They became simulated images of modernity.²⁷ Their clothes symbolized the political ends of the male republican elite.²⁸ Hence, a state feminism instigated from above inhibited the evolution of a feminist consciousness on the part of these women.

IS ISLAM REALLY THE VILLAIN?

The Orientalist narrative of Islam was a massive assault on Islam as the cause of backwardness and inferiority of Muslim societies, as epitomized in the deplorable position of veiled and segregated women. Such female stereotypes are the subject matter of a sizable Orientalist literature and cinema that unravel many Western fantasies about the exotic Orient. There are many contradictory analyses in the literature, all making reference to the Quran, hadith, and the works of Islamic scholars on the subject of women and Islam.²⁹ Most of these analyses refer to the pre-Islamic practice and mores involving women in the Middle East in order to elaborate the impact of Islam on gender relations. Whereas some of these analyses maintain that Islam upheld the equality of women, others claim that Islam paved the way to their enslavement. A review of some of these analyses is crucial to comprehending such contradictory claims.

Some analyses emphasize the egalitarianism inherent in Quranic reforms, whereas others refer to the Quran and the ensuing hadiths as essentially sanctioning practices that gradually have led to the subjugation of women. Why do these interpretations of Quranic text and hadiths generate such controversy and endless debate? Is Islam really the villain? Is it possible to transcend this futile controversy and direct the argument in the field toward a more meaningful locus? It is important to note that the debates over the inherent nature of Islam have crucial political implications in Islamic societies. Such controversial analyses—despite the academic depth of some—have been subject to the abuse of various interest groups and political parties.

27. I believe an exaggeration of such simulated images of modernity is reminiscent of an art current of the 1960s to mid-1970s called hyper-realism and/or photo-realism, which generated realist paintings with a photographic vision of reality. These paintings were similar to the modern images of women that were created in the early republican years in the sense that they looked natural, but, in fact, were manufactured.

28. Interestingly, men's ties in Turkey are popularly called "the reins of civilization." It is also interesting to note that the most conspicuous items displayed in the museum located at Atatürk's mausoleum in Ankara are his clothes, all of which are tailored in modern European fashions.

29. Hadith refers to all the practices and sayings that are attributed to Muhammad. Hadith was recorded either by the testimony of those who heard sayings directly from Muhammad, or as indirect testimony of the second generation. The person who recorded the hadith had to account for the chain of people who transmitted a saying from its original source, Muhammad. See further, Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, pp. 32–7.

In order to evaluate the impact of the advent of Islam, most analyses study the position of women in pre-Islamic Arabia. While some analyses interpret the position of women as more liberated in pre-Islamic times, others emphasize the inferior status of women in *jahiliyya* (age of ignorance).³⁰ By the same token, while the former analyses evaluate the impact of Islam as negative for the position of women, the latter emphasize Islam's liberating effects.

The analyses that emphasize egalitarian gender relations in pre-Islamic Arabia often refer to the marriage of Khadija to Muhammad as well as to the marriage of Muhammad's parents.³¹ Other evidence raised in the literature indicates a respectable status of women in pre-Islamic times. For example, the three idols worshipped by the Meccans—*Lat*, *Uzza*, and *Menat*—were all female.³² Moreover, it is believed that after capturing the city, Muhammad received the keys to Mecca from two women.³³ Some analyses refer to the pre-Islamic practice of *mut'a* (temporary marriage) as a sign of more egalitarian gender relations.³⁴ Since only the consent of the marriage partners, and not the consent of the father or other male guardian of the woman, was necessary for *mut'a*, this practice has been regarded as a sign of an initiative granted to women in marriage contracts in pre-Islamic times.³⁵

The opposing analyses refer to a different body of evidence to support their assertion that Islam improved the position of women in Arabia compared to the *jahiliyya* period. Female infanticide in pre-Islamic Arabia is one practice often cited as proof of women's inferior status.³⁶ Quranic laws put an end to this pre-Islamic custom. Second, the existence of unlimited polygyny in pre-Islamic times often is referred to as a sign of the low position of women. Third, the inferiority of women in the *jahiliyya* period is attributed to the increasing prevalence of patrilineal marriages.³⁷ Patrilineal marriages led to the deterioration of women's status because their virginity and pre-marital chastity became an important asset that men controlled to raise the bride-price. Compared to the *jahiliyya* period, many analyses maintain that the social status and rights of

30. On the one hand, see, for instance, the contradictory analyses of İlhan Arsel, *Şeriat ve Kadın* (Sharia and Woman) (Istanbul: TÜMDA, 1990); and Oral Çalışlar, *İslamda Kadın ve Cinsellik* (Women and Sexuality in Islam) (Istanbul: AFA Yayınları, 1991); on the other, see John Esposito, "Women's Rights in Islam," *Islamic Studies* 14 (1975), pp. 99–114.

31. Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, p. 28.

32. Çalışlar, *İslamda Kadın ve Cinsellik*, p. 25.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

35. Arsel, *Şeriat ve Kadın*, pp. 26–7. Arsel, a true native Orientalist, devotes a whole section in his study to the pre-Islamic practices of the Turks as well as the Arabs. He argues that while Turks gave equal rights to women and elevated them to higher public offices in pre-Islamic times, Islam gave rise to practices detrimental to the social position of women.

36. See Esposito, "Women's Rights in Islam," p. 100; and Barbara Freyer Stowasser, "The Status of Women in Early Islam," in Fred Hussain, ed., *Muslim Women* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), pp. 11–43.

37. Esposito, "Women's Rights in Islam," pp. 101–2.

Muslim women were improved through Quranic reforms.³⁸ These reforms led to an improvement in women's status regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The reform to restrict polygyny, for instance, limited the number of wives to four, provided that all four received just and equal treatment.³⁹ The Quranic laws also guaranteed women the right to have full possession of their wealth and the bride-price while married and after divorce.⁴⁰ While pre-Islamic wives could be divorced by their husbands immediately, Quranic divorce laws called for a waiting period (*idda*) of four months, giving them full maintenance. In case of pregnancy, this period was extended until delivery of the child. This practice slightly ameliorated the wife's position.⁴¹ Moreover, Quranic laws guaranteed women the right to inherit property, although female heirs were awarded half the amount given to their male counterparts.⁴²

It is important to note that while Quranic laws might have improved the status of women compared to the practices of pre-Islamic Arabia, they did not create an equality of the sexes. Hence, the above analysis does not imply an absolute betterment of women's status. While the Quran did not establish the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, it nevertheless did raise their spiritual equality as members of the community of faith. The emphasis placed in the Quran on the spiritual equality of the sexes, as well as the recognition of the sexuality of women, also was reflected in hadith.

The controversy over women's status in Islam also appears in the mutually exclusive analyses regarding the seclusion and veiling of women. First, while some analyses make a clear distinction between the seclusion and veiling of women as portrayed in the Quran and as represented in hadith, others ignore that distinction and view the Quran and hadith as two different aspects of the same evil—Islam. This distinction delimits the border between historical analyses and analyses that are devoid of historical content. In unraveling the interests and complexities behind hadith, Fatima Mernissi praises the positive attitude of Muhammad toward women and their sexuality.⁴³ She observes a clear difference between the original message of Islam conveyed during *asr-i saadet* and represented in the Quran and the practices of the ensuing periods as codified in the form of hadith. Mernissi refers to the "phobic attitude" of pre-Islamic Arabia toward women.⁴⁴ By the same token, she inquires whether the *hijab* (the veiling of women) that is claimed today to be basic to Muslim identity, is nothing but the

38. See, for instance, Esposito, "Women's Rights in Islam"; and Stowasser, "The Status of Women in Early Islam."

39. The injunction in the Quran stressing the necessity for the just and equal treatment of each wife is interpreted as a sign of encouragement of monogamy. See Esposito, "Women's Rights in Islam," p. 103.

40. Stowasser, "The Status of Women in Early Islam," p. 17.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

42. Esposito, "Women's Rights in Islam," p. 104.

43. Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, pp. 115–40.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

expression of the persistence of the pre-Islamic mentality, the jahiliyya mentality, that Islam was supposed to annihilate.⁴⁵ Mernissi's focus challenges the fundamental Orientalist assumptions regarding women and Islam. Yet, it also paves the way to further politicization of the existing argument that focuses on the question: Is Islam really the villain?

At the time of Muhammad's death (632 AD) some of his followers emphasized the ethical and spiritual message of Islam by arguing that the regulations put into effect by the Prophet reflected the peculiar traits of that particular society and were not permanently binding on the Muslim community.⁴⁶ Hence, they argued that the laws applicable to the first Muslim society were not necessarily binding upon later ones. However, it was the view of the political, religious, and legal authorities after Muhammad's death that prevailed rather than the position of those who emphasized the ethical and spiritual dimensions of Islam. The former views were consolidated especially during the Abbasid era (750-1258), the period referred to as the *asr al-tadwin* (the era of putting the religious texts into writing).⁴⁷ The misogynic features of Islam were strengthened during this period that "interpreted the Islamic message into the textual edifice of Islam," recorded in hadith, *fiqh* (religious knowledge), and *tafsir* (explication of the Quran).⁴⁸ It has been noted that the views on women of the supreme theologian of the Abbasid age, Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, were more in line with the views of the early Christian church fathers rather than with those expressed in the Quran.⁴⁹

Second, it is important to distinguish veiling as a religious edict from veiling as a social custom, since the practice of seclusion of women existed long before the rise of Islam—as far back as the Assyrian era (circa 1200 BC).⁵⁰ It is obvious that misogynist practices existed long before the advent of Islam. Yet, the existence of misogyny in other cultures and religions should not necessarily imply the purification of Islam from all misogynic features. During Muhammad's time, there may have been a slight improvement in the status of women, but Islam did not interfere with the overall trend toward misogyny.⁵¹

The contradictory analyses of women under Islam stem from two opposing historiographies, Western and Islamic, embedded in the Orientalist and anti-Orientalist discourses, respectively. The Western historiography, dealing with ancient civilizations in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region, emphasizes the separateness of these civilizations by obscuring the continuities among them. Some students of Byzantine society, for instance, maintain that the strict

45. Ibid., p. 81.

46. Ahmed refers to Sufis, Kharijijis, and Qarmatians in that respect. See her *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 66.

47. Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, p. 16.

48. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 67.

49. Ibid., p. 68.

50. Ibid., p. 14.

51. Ibid., p. 33.

segregation of women in that society was due to “Oriental influences.”⁵² Although it is true to a certain extent that Byzantium borrowed some customs from the Persians, Greek society—the most direct antecedent of the Byzantine—also had a tradition of misogyny.⁵³

The Islamic historiography, on the other hand, relegates the period preceding the rise of Islam to the category of jahiliyya and also does not bother itself with the interconnections and continuities among ancient civilizations. Accordingly, the only source of all civilization is viewed as Islam. As a result, Islamic civilization is viewed as delinked and disinherited from the past. Ironically, the Western historiography, too, in emphasizing the separateness of ancient civilizations, views Islamic civilization as an anomaly that does not share the same foundation with Western civilization. Nevertheless, it is obvious that both Western and Islamic civilizations are direct heirs of the ancient Middle East. To the disappointment of the Islamists, just as one cannot drink the same water from a river twice, there can be no return to an unadulterated, purified culture of *asr-ı saadet*. As one author puts it astutely, “the West is everywhere, in structures and in minds.”⁵⁴

TURBANED WOMEN

The past fifteen years have witnessed the emergence of turbaned women in Turkey, especially in large metropolitan centers like Istanbul and Ankara. These women are often students of higher education. Paradoxically, they have been called “turbaned feminists” by the popular media because some of their stances have intersected with the feminist discourse—especially their critical view regarding the objectification of the female body and sexuality in modern societies. Their visible rise has also been accompanied by the proliferation of Islamic women’s journals and newspapers that feature sections on women’s issues. This literature has been characterized by its critique of modernity and Western women. Islamic men and women writers employ a discourse on Western women against which they situate the image of Islamic females.⁵⁵ While Western women are portrayed as unhappy, subordinated, exploited, and unfulfilled, as well as unchaste, Islamic women are warned of the danger of becoming like them unless they look and behave in Islamic ways. Although differences exist among the journals in terms of militancy and the characteristics of their readers, they all devote sections to the

52. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 28.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 236.

55. For a review of three Islamic women’s journals, see Feride Acar, “Türkiye’de İslamcı Hareket ve Kadın: Kadın Dergileri ve Bir Grup Üniversite Öğrencisi Üzerinde Bir İnceleme” (Women and Islamic movements in Turkey: A survey on women’s journals and a group of university students), in Şirin Tekeli, ed., *Kadın Bakış Açısından 1980’ler Türkiye’sinde Kadın* (An Account of Women by Women in Turkey in the 1980s) (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1990). The women’s journals that Acar reviews are *Kadın ve Aile* (Women and Family), *Mektup* (Letter), and *Bizim Aile* (Our Family).

fate of women who choose to internalize morally corrupt and degenerate values in society and, therefore, become prostitutes, drug addicts, and criminals. The lives of these women are revealed in order to underscore the lessons that could be learned from their experiences.

The discourse on Western women is employed by politically Islamic women in order to justify seclusion. University students who have adopted Islamic dress evaluate the *türban* as a manifestation of a deliberate act on their part as opposed to the traditional styles of veiling of other women, who sometimes include their own mothers. Through the *türban* they purport to emphasize their “personality rather than sexuality” in the public domain.⁵⁶ Turbaned women maintain that their primary responsibility is within the private realm as wives and mothers. They rationalize their higher education as a step toward their overall endeavor to raise their children better.⁵⁷

The *türban* is a symbol reminding others of the true identity of these women, which evidently is located within the private realm. These women purport to maintain their privacy even when they are active within the public realm. The *türban*, then, has become an emblem of privacy within the public realm. In that sense, turbaned women are set apart from Western-looking *modernes de robe* as well as traditional Islamic women.

Existing field surveys generally have been conducted with turbaned university students who converted to political Islam in the urban university setting. These students usually come either from families with lower-middle income levels in large metropolitan centers or from provincial Anatolian towns. Both groups are characterized by low levels of internalization of the Kemalist reforms. Some studies refer to the class-biased impact of the republican reforms and maintain that they have been internalized solely by upper-class, elite women.⁵⁸

These women were able to receive higher education and work in prestigious, fulfilling jobs while receiving help for domestic household chores from hired female servants. Therefore, a shift in their roles did not necessarily generate an alteration in men’s responsibilities. Housework still remained the primary responsibility of women, if not the wives themselves. Such a relegation of responsibility to domestic female servants was naturally the privilege of elite women who could afford it, either through their own or their husband’s income.⁵⁹

For the majority of women, working outside of the home led to the imposition of a double burden on them, since they continued to be responsible for all the household chores. Political Islam seems to rationalize the choice of these women to limit their activities only to the household. Many turbaned women voice

56. Göle, *Modern Mahrem*, p. 128.

57. Acar, “Türkiye’de İslamcı Hareket ve Kadın,” p. 81.

58. See, for instance, *ibid.* See also, Deniz Kandiyoti, “Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case,” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987), pp. 317–39.

59. Ayşe Öncü, “Turkish Women in the Professions: Why So Many?,” in Abadan-Unat, ed., *Women in Turkish Society*, p. 193.

dissatisfaction over the fate of their overworked mothers and embrace the Islamic order, which not only discourages them from outside employment but also praises them for being good, nurturing homemakers. Islam reduces the anxiety and guilt that these women feel for being unemployed against the background of ever-increasing competition in large metropolitan centers.⁶⁰ By confining their sexuality to their husbands in the privacy of their homes, Islam serves as a shield protecting these women against sexual competition instigated by other uncovered women.⁶¹ The *türban* is the emblem of such protection.

CONCLUSIONS

The question of whether Islam really is the villain responsible for the subjugation of women seems to be the issue around which deepens the chasm separating political Islamists and Westernized, native secularists in the Middle East. While the former are absorbed in the myth of *asr-ı saadet* and profess a return to the golden age of Islam, the latter, viewing Islam as an anomaly or an antithesis of modernity, try to erase it from their history by unleashing a process of voluntary amnesia in the name of modernization.⁶² Such voluntary amnesia was the cornerstone of the modernization projects that were initiated from above in Turkey and Iran in the 1920s. The status of women and their public visibility symbolized the success of these modernization projects. Dress and codes of conduct designed for women were quite central to the modernization of these societies. Since the past was voluntarily forgotten, and the present posed a "distressing *contretemps*" in these societies, the modernization projects focused on the future of the "citizens of this culturally invaded area."⁶³

A disparaging view of the past becomes quite evident with the initiation of Kemalist reforms in Turkey that infiltrated every social sphere. The exaggerated, militant Westernization efforts expressed in the modernization projects unleashed by native Orientalists promoted the public visibility of women as emblems of civilization. All the values concerning women, such as concepts of beauty, dress codes, and expected behavior patterns, underwent a major transformation in the course of this social engineering. Still, it was important not to become totally Westernized and to keep some native traits free from Islamic influences. The Kemalist women, for instance, were expected to relegate their sexuality to an insignificant realm and focus on their public visibility as emblems of modernization. As balancing actors, they were expected to be calm, clean, nurturing, asexual companions to their men as opposed to acting loose and promiscuous like

60. Acar, "Türkiye'de İslamcı Hareket ve Kadın," p. 86.

61. One of the mottos of turbaned women is "to be nice and cute at home and repulsive outside," cited in *ibid.*

62. Particularly illuminating on this point is the statement by Ernst Gellner: "Nationalism is not based on common memory but common oblivion." (Lecture on "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict," presented at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey, December 2, 1993).

63. Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, pp. 20–1.

Western women. It is ironic that post-Kemalist, turbaned women also wish to be free of their sexual identity by embracing the motto “personality rather than sexuality.”⁶⁴ Such rejection of sexuality also is present in the analyses of the Turkish Socialist feminists.⁶⁵ Given the records of the Kemalist, Islamist, and Socialist feminists, it is not surprising that a feminist movement emphasizing women’s sexuality did not attract many followers in Turkey. Social engineering from above and absorption of women’s issues into larger societal projects have inhibited the evolution of a feminist discourse.

In Iran, too, the codes of conduct for women were central to the modernization project that was unleashed by Reza Shah. Women were expected to be “modern yet modest.”⁶⁶ The tension between modernity and modesty has devastated Iranian women since then. In the 1960s, for instance, when mini-skirts became fashionable, the exact length of a woman’s skirt posed a serious boundary problem, as too long a skirt indicated a too traditional outlook, whereas too short a skirt was viewed as unacceptable sexual promiscuity.⁶⁷ Such confusing messages in this culturally-invaded area undoubtedly took their uneasy place in the psyches of women and have been carried through generations. The Turkish *modernes de robe* also have tried to strike a balance between modernity and modesty by putting on modern dress and adopting certain Western codes of conduct, while simultaneously maintaining low profiles behind their men.

It is ironic that the ever-deepening rift between political Islamists and Westernized, native secularists has crystallized over veiling, an issue that was initiated by the colonial establishment. The turbaned university students sometimes have been forbidden entry into classrooms by virtue of legislation adopted by certain university administrations. These practices are not so astonishing in a country like Turkey, where women’s dress always has been regulated from above in the course of the nation-building process.⁶⁸ The categories that constitute the clash between secular and Islamic groups neither emerge from the native home context nor are they exclusively Islamic. They reflect the struggle over the identities of women, who always have been the subject matter of major social engineering projects from above. Perhaps what is needed is a feminist Émile Zola who will point to the adverse effects of the nihilism of both sides for the evolution of a feminist movement in Turkey.

64. Cited in Göle, *Modern Mahrem*, p. 128.

65. See Fatmagül Berktaş, “Türkiye Solu’nun Kadına Bakışı: Değişen Bir Şey Var mı?” (Turkish left’s view of women: Has there been a change?), in Tekeli, *Kadın Bakış Açısından 1980’ler Türkiye’sinde Kadın*.

66. This expression was used by Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State, and Ideology in Contemporary Iran,” in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam, and the State* (London: Temple University Press and Macmillan, 1991), pp. 48–76.

67. Ibid.

68. The process in Turkey is described more appropriately by the expression “nation-building” as opposed to “nation-formation” experienced in West European countries. The former indicates a process of social engineering while the latter signifies a gradual evolution “from below.”