

The veil in the Islamic world (and outside)

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In recent years, in particular after the Twin Towers attacks on September 11, 2001, growing attention has been paid to Islam, until then generically associated with sandy dunes and pointed minarets and then increasingly recognized within the Western world as unsuspecting and exotic next door tenant

We have become more aware – though often not in a correct way – of a culture whose main traits have been identified with the prohibition of pork consumption, the practice of fasting in the month of Ramadan, religious – often extreme and irrational – fundamentalism, the idea of women within family and society. We have asked ourselves to what extent modern Islam was compatible with the idea of Western democracy, thus establishing a parallel between religion and politics. In particular, the veiled heads of Muslim women with veils of many shapes and colors, have become objects of interest and curiosity and have become in a certain sense the symbol of the Muslim religion but also of submission and control over the women who live in this type of context.

However, this view appears to be reductive and partial, given that the veil (hijab, “tent” in Arabic) has a much more varied history and origins that date back to before Islam, as well as evidence of use in the Western world itself.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FEMALE VEIL

If we just think of a fifteenth-century fresco, the depictions of the Virgin Mary or read the medieval novels about courtly love, we will realize that the custom of veiling the body is not the prerogative of Muslim culture. The Roman patricians wore it to emphasize their social status, the ladies of the court shyly adorned their heads as a symbol of reserve and purity, still today some old ladies of Southern Italy wear it as a sign of mourning or as a symbol of reverence to God. The common denominator is always one: make the parts of the body that are covered “sacred”, not only the heads, but also the gloved hands and the legs sheathed in silk stockings. Likewise, uncovering the body communicated its greater sexual availability. Over the centuries, there has been a “unveiling” of the female body, in different ways and with different meanings. In some cases, there was even a disruption in the use of veil, such as in Iran: in the thirties of the twentieth century, veils were forcefully removed from women to align the country to the modern Western ideal while, after the Shiite revolution of 1978-79, the idea of a utopian Islam to counterbalance American neoliberalism made its way back. In 1982, Iran reintroduced the obligation to wear a veil – both for resident women and for tourists – an obligation that is still in force. In this context, the veil assumes a

predominantly political connotation (similarly also in Turkey and Tunisia), which has more to do with the imposition of an ideology rather than with religious beliefs.

Likewise, the introduction of the burqa (the integral veil that has a grid that hides the face from view while allowing the wearer to see) by the Afghan Taliban in the nineties, has nothing to do with a theological obligation, but is essentially an extreme and politicized interpretation of the Qur'an, a polysemic text that can be interpreted in different ways.

Currently, the use and meaning of the veil for women of Muslim faith varies from country to country and, especially for second generation women, it is experienced differently from person to person becoming sometimes conflicting. Let's see why.

WHY DO WOMEN WEAR THE VEIL?

Why do we often see Muslim women wearing a veil? What meaning do the different types of veil have? Is it a question of imposition or will?

These are legitimate questions, but it is impossible to give an unequivocal answer without running into a trivialization and simplification of the multi-faceted Muslim world. Generally speaking, observant Muslims expect a girl to start wearing the veil with the age of puberty, i.e. after their first menstrual period. After this first step – which in any case is not mandatory or the same for all – the use of the veil becomes an expression of faith to God on the part of the woman, an act of Faith in all respects, a way to please the Divine. It is no longer a religious and cultural symbol but an intimate and personal way of religious expression.

Contrary to what most people think, in fact, the Koran does not contain the explicit obligation to veil the head but rather not to show one's body off and to observe modest behavior.

“And tell the faithful women to lower their gaze and be modest, and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils down to their bosoms and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sister's sons, or their women, or the (female) slaves whom they possess, or male servants who lack desire, or young boys who have no interest in the hidden parts of women. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. Return all repentant to God, oh believers, so that you may prosper “(Sura 24, v.31)

Wearing the veil should not therefore be an obligation, but rather a matter of individual conscience and responsibility between God and the faithful, whose dimension according to Islam is based on three pillars (relationship with God, relationship with oneself, relationship with society and the environment in which we live).

So why are males not called to observe such a prescription, to express their devotion? In this case as well, it would be hasty to judge the non-use of the veil by Muslim men on the basis of their alleged submission of women. It should be reminded that Islam is a religion based on orthopraxis, characterized by various gestures and acts that the faithful are called to perform throughout their days and lives as believers, as for example the recitation of the five daily prayers, the pilgrimage to Mecca, observance of fasting during Ramadan and many others. These are actions that serve the purpose of rebalancing the individual's spirituality and to renewing their relationship with God. It is therefore clear that Muslim men also have their own part of rituals to follow, albeit different from those of women.

THE VEIL AS A MEANS OF IDENTITY REAPPROPRIATION?

We have already said several times that the analysis of the Muslim world cannot and should not be simplified, but must be contextualized in historical time and in the geo-political space on a case-by-case basis.

For example, how is the use of the veil seen by second generation Muslims, born in a Western country?

The relationship with the veil depends largely on the family of origin, which can advocate its use or leave the decision to the woman. Some girls choose not to wear the veil to feel more Western, not to be “different” from schoolmates but also not to embody the stereotype of the Muslim woman submissive first to the father and then to her husband.

But there are also many girls who veil their heads to reappropriate the identity inherited from the family of origin but whose contours fade and merge with that of the country in which they live. In this sense, the veil becomes a means of identity reconstruction, becomes a way not to cut the umbilical cord with the original cradle, integrate precisely through their “otherness”.

This brief excursus is just a fleeting reference to this garment that has played a big role in the course of history and finds various new collocations also in literature and iconography. It fascinates but at the same time makes us uneasy, because veiling covers, but nevertheless lets us have a glimpse of distant and yet close worlds beneath its ethereal mantle.

Sources: Reports of the meeting “The veil in the Islamic world” with Sumaya Abdel Qader (Biology and Linguistic and Cultural Mediation graduate) and Sara Hejazi ([FBK-ISR](#) researcher, anthropologist and journalist).

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