

MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN, ISLAMIC IDEOLOGY, AND SOME THOUGHTS ON THE TURKISH CASE

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The "Self" and the "Other": Male Occident Versus Female Orient

The Middle East was transformed into an economic backwater, became increasingly dominated and then colonised by major European powers at a relatively early stage of the development of the capitalist world system. The relationship between the Middle East which is also known as "the Orient", a term which has ideological associations and connotations far beyond a description of geographical boundaries, and the West has inevitably been one of power and domination. European culture gained an identity by setting itself off against the Orient, that is by "otherizing" it, and the "otherness" which was "central to Westerners' concepts of the Orient" was expressed in terms that were both racial/cultural and profoundly sexual.⁽¹⁾

Self-definition demanded an other, a "not-self" with characteristics different than one's own, against whom to measure one self. And this "not-self" was found in women and natives of the distant ("primitive") lands. C.E. Russett observes that race and gender were two of the great themes of the nineteenth century science: "Of all the permutations of physical differentiation sex is, together with colour, the most evident... Contact with native peoples aroused interest not merely in race but in sex, since it revealed sexual customs, cultural beliefs, and labor patterns quite at variance with European expectations."⁽²⁾ Projection of gender difference into different cultural worlds could give way to a more forceful and mutually reinforcing discourse of domination and subordination.

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- (1) J. De Croot, "Sex and Race: The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century" in *Sexuality and Subordination* (S. Mendus and J. Rendall, eds., Routledge, 1989), p. 104.
- (2) C.E. Russett, *Sexual Science*, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 7.

Thus, the Middle East, in the process of colonization by the West was also "feminized" through a discourse which endowed the Orient with qualities attributed to females by the men of the period, apparent in the use of the phrase "mysterious Orient" echoing "mysterious female". As J. De Groot points out, the parallel between the submission of the Middle Eastern societies to Western economic, cultural and political influence, and the subordination of women to male needs and authority, converged in a single image of imperial masculine power⁽³⁾.

Edward W. Said remarks that orientalism is premised upon exteriority, of which the principal product is representation⁽⁴⁾. Cultural representations are circulated and consumed in specific ways and representation functions to transform and mediate the world through the specific codes it uses and the institutions of which it is a part. In nineteenth century, the Western artists and writers were creating their own image of the Orient where no clear distinctions between observed and imagined reality were made. It was with this blend of observed and constructed experience contained in written texts, visual accounts and social investigation and exploration that the Middle East was opened up to classification and judgement, thereby colonizing and "orientalizing" it. In this period, the figure of "oriental woman" depicted as an exotic "other", often was taken to represent the Orient itself.

As Lynda Nead points out, the representation of women can never be contained within an investigation of gender; to examine gender is to embark on an historical analysis of power which includes the formation of class and nation⁽⁵⁾. Indeed, women have often been used as symbols or metaphors for orientalism, nationalism, westernization, and various religious ideologies. The reproduction of women in images makes "woman-images" more exotic and remote from any real experience of women, and the woman is used to represent meanings which usually do not include who she herself is.

Westerners generally represented the Middle Eastern woman as a captive in her cage (the **harem**), dressing and behaving according to the whims of her master. This woman, who had to wear the veil which continued her imprisonment even outside the confines of her home, was practically powerless, not more than a sexual object. And what is more significant, her situation was taken to be an indicator of the backwardness or decadence of the society that she lived in.

However, many of the features relating to attitudes about women noted as typical of Middle Eastern society were not peculiar to the Middle

(3) J. De Groot, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

(4) E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 21.

(5) Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*, Blackwell, 1988, p. 8.

East. Many have existed in Southern Europe, parts of Eastern Europe, China, India and elsewhere. The veil for instance, which was seen by the Westerners to symbolize Islam's special form of patriarchal subordination of women, originated in Assyrian times as a status symbol and was widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia, Greece and Byzantium. The "eternal black scarf" worn by Sardinian, Corsican, Sicilian and other women of the Christian Mediterranean is a vestige of what was once a very widespread accoutrement⁽⁶⁾. Moreover, seclusion and veiling was largely an urban phenomenon in the Middle East. Although a high degree of sexual segregation was quite common, strict seclusion of women could be practised only by the small proportion of well-to-do urban families where women did not have to play an active economic role. It should also be noted that patterns of sexual segregation varied greatly from one community and region to another. It is not difficult to understand the Westerners' fascination and shock by the sight of veiled women in the streets of the Middle Eastern cities, visible yet invisible, presenting a challenge to the colonialist's "penetrating" gaze. In their shock, they must have forgotten that the visibility of women in public was also controlled in other Mediterranean societies and until the late nineteenth century in "genteel" society in many parts of Europe⁽⁷⁾. Although the Middle Eastern society has its own specificity, it is not, in itself, an exception!

Is Cultural Relativism a Solution?

Women in the Middle East were, of course, neither totally powerless nor did they only operate in the private sphere having no influence in the public domain at all. But to achieve such an understanding, other cultures and peoples had to be studied from a non-repressive, non-manipulative perspective which would inevitably lead to the questioning of the stereotypes concerning Middle Eastern women. Recent literature dating from 1970s onwards on women in the Middle East by mostly women (some of whom are feminists) have contributed a lot to the critique of the orientalist stereotype.

These studies show that women do play an important role in the public affairs of their community, even if they do so from private positions. The woman as daughter, sister, wife and mother acts as an "information broker", mediating social relations within the family and larger society. "The implications for power (reciprocity of influence) are obvious in that by these networks of relationships, the woman is in a position to channel or withhold in-

(6) J. Minceş, *The House of Obedience*, Zed Books, 1982, p. 49.

(7) Susan Graham -Brown, *Images of Women*, Quartet Books, 1988, p. 72.

formation to the male members of the community."⁽⁸⁾ In this context, Lila Abu-Lughod points out to the advantages of women's social invisibility in the company of men for gaining access to information in Bedouin society. She also notes that Bedouin women are deeply concerned with strictly political matters concerning the tribe and group conflict, and that they are highly influential⁽⁹⁾. Barbara C. Aswad gives another example in this vein, from Turkey. Upper-class women's "reception day" custom in Hatay, Southeastern Turkey, enables them to play a semi-public role, exchanging information of economic, political and social nature. The power of the individual families here is so extensive that much of the "domestic" becomes "public"⁽¹⁰⁾. The "reception day" custom is of course not confined to a region or social class in Turkey. It is widespread among non-working women, but among the lower stratas where families do not exert any public power this custom operates as a social solidarity network for women. It should also be noted that, women, by forming their own exclusive solidarity groups may and do exercise a considerable social control.

Abu-Lughod's study shows even veiling has a meaning extending beyond being merely a means of sexual seclusion. She maintains that women in the Bedouin society do not veil for those lower in social hierarchy ("dependents and those without honour") even if they are male. The operating principle is that women veil for those who have authority over them or responsibility for the system; therefore they sometimes veil for older women, while they go unveiled with non-Bedouins because they have no responsibility for upholding or embodying the ideals of the system. In this interpretation, which calls for a change in our conventional perception, veiling - a sign of status itself - becomes an indicator of other people's status as well: "the system is flexible, leaving room for women to make judgements about relative status and even negotiate status", thus deciding for themselves, to some extent, who they should veil for, and who they should not⁽¹¹⁾. Moreover, "honour" becomes coterminous with autonomy which in turn is closely linked to social status. But still, honour or autonomy is associated with masculinity, whereas modesty (reflected in veiling) and dependence are associated with femininity: "Because *Awlad* 'Ali couch hierarchy in the language of moral worth, the association implies that men's precedence is due to their moral superiority." Women's association with nature is seen as a handicap to their ability to attain the same level of moral worth as men. Women's lack of independence from nature compromises them vis-à-

(8) C. Nelson, "Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World", *American Ethnologist*, 1974, p. 559.

(9) Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, University of California Press, 1986, *passim*.

(10) Barbara C. Aswad, "Women, Class and Power", in *Women in the Muslim World* (L. Beck and N. Keddie, eds., Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 479.

(11) L. Abu-Lughod, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-164.

vis one of the crucial virtues of honour, the self-mastery associated with reason⁽¹²⁾. One is not quite surprised to coming across the same old nature/culture dichotomy that has infiltrated the Western thought: male dominance and ideology is a universal phenomenon in a world where women remain unequal whatever the society.

As the recent studies show, "the framework of women's history has extended beyond exclusive concern with female subordination to explore the many and diverse forms of subversion, accomodation and resistance which women developed in order to deal with their situation."⁽¹³⁾ Women strategize within a set of concrete constraints set up by different forms of patriarchy, and systematic comparative analyses of women's strategies and coping mechanisms surely lead to a more culturally and historically grounded understanding of patriarchal systems.⁽¹⁴⁾

It is evident that women researchers, with an awareness against the ethnocentric bias, are trying to get rid of the "positional superiority of the westerner" that Edward W. Said speaks of, and they are trying to see the world from the eyes of the women they are studying. But it should be born in mind that "studying" something is, inevitably, creating an object-subject relationship which may, against all one's wishes, lead to the "otherization" of the object of study, although in this case, in a quite paradoxical manner. In the fear of being ethnocentric and of passing judgement for another culture different than one's own, these studies refrain from drawing conclusions or making comparisons, and confine themselves to a depiction of the existing situation which may only contribute to the maintaining of the status quo in the relevant societies, especially in the realm of male-female relationship. Susan S. Davis' attitude is an example in point: "Instead of accepting the common idea that men's status is high and women's low in Muslim societies, I tried to see status in the same way as village women did. For them, you do not compare women to men; that's like comparing apples and oranges. In a society in which the sexes function quite separately and sex roles are very differentiated, it is only reasonable to expect two separate status hierarchies, which is just what I found"⁽¹⁵⁾. Sexes do function separately in varying degrees and sex roles are differentiated throughout the world, but this most probably would not hinder Susan S. Davis from objecting to the course of things in her own society whereas she is willing to accept the "existing order" in a different culture. Is this not using another double standard, one valid for "us" and another for "others"?

(12) *Ibid.*, pp. 118-124.

(13) J. De Groot, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

(14) D. Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy", *Gender and Society*, Sept. 1988.

(15) Susan S. Davis, *Patience and Power*, Schenkman Books, p. 178.

Although neither in the East nor the West is the subjection of women absolute, see it every where. In this sense, I believe feminists could and should develop common political strategies in struggling against oppression, while taking into account the specificity of each different culture and society. Resorting to cultural relativism would not be an easy way to escape ethnocentrism. As C. Ramazanoğlu points out, this position destroys the basis of feminism as an international political movement*. Feminists both in the West and the East have much in common in terms of consciousness, analysis and criticism; and this cannot be dismissed by just stating that feminism is an imported ideology from the West which does not represent the ideals of the majority of women in the Middle Eastern countries. It is quite unfortunate to see Western (and in some cases even feminist) women taking the stance of the Middle Eastern male chauvinism.

**"Different -but- Equal" or
"Different -and- Subordinate"?**

The doctrines of all major religions tend to justify and sanctify the patriarchal family and society, and perpetuate the double standard of morality which patriarchy is based upon. Religion rationalizes and legitimizes patriarchal practises already well established in economic and social structures and political systems. In this context, major religions have much in common; but consciousness of the similarities must be balanced by an awareness of the characteristics of each religion and substantial differences between them.

As F. Mernissi points out, to be Muslim implies a particular cosmic vision of the world and a specific organization of institutions in general and of the family in particular⁽¹⁶⁾. Islam is not merely a belief system; as an integral religion it formulates a total pattern of living and thus the Qoran lays down specific and detailed rules as to how the believer should lead his life. It is not a coincidence that many of these rules are about women and control of their behaviour. In Islam, women are not perceived of as weak human beings without their own will. On the contrary, the Muslim man thinks that women should be kept under strict control because they are (sexually) powerful and dangerous and this control may even take a legalized form to the extent of the Islamic state using force against women. The appearance of women is directly linked to the probity of their behaviour in public which is a matter of honour for both the family and the state. The decrees and edicts issued by the Ottoman Sultans, for example, indicate the

(*) C. Ramazanoğlu, *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression*, Routledge, 1989, p. 142.

(16) F. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, Cambridge, 1975, "Introduction".

importance the authorities attached to the physical appearance of women in public⁽¹⁷⁾.

In Islam, sexuality is not condemned as such; it is the woman who must be controlled, as she is a threat to the feeling of security of the man. Fatna Ayt Sabbah maintains that the over-eroticized female body, "the unique concrete incarnation of desire", is neutralized by seclusion of women and the wearing of the veil when moving through male space, in Muslim societies⁽¹⁸⁾. Some orientalists and researchers have looked upon this vision of sexuality and the recognition of woman as a feminine being as constituting a kind of feminism in Islam. Unfortunately, the consequence of that vision leads in the opposite direction than its origin seemed to indicate. Male Middle Eastern-Islamic society has protected itself against its own conception of the active sexuality of women by introducing laws which circumscribe women's movement and put them in control of men. In this sense, segregation and veil were not meant to ensure the protection of women, but essentially that of men!

Muslim feminists and some researchers try to distinguish between Islam and male domination. Freda Hussain, for instance, argues that there are no Islamic societies to be found in the world today and that the limitations imposed on women in these societies were brought forth by the feudalistic states reigning in those societies⁽¹⁹⁾. She seems to be closing her eyes to the fact that religion and class dominance are mutually reinforcing and that although there are diversities and variations in its expression - which leads some authors to speak of "Islams" rather than a coherent Islam-, Islam all the same is the dominant ideology in Muslim societies.

Germaine Tillion maintains that the strict code of honour was not confined to Islam but compelled every individual in the Eastern Mediterranean to suit their actions to the community's standards. It existed before the emergence of Islam and in non-Muslim countries as well, and was an outcome of the familial pattern dominant in the region⁽²⁰⁾. Although the same mechanism operated in Islam, as F. Mernissi points out, the man's burden was heavier because the **umma**, the community of believers, conceded him an individual territory of which he would be the master and for which **he** would be responsible, thus placing him in the guardianship of his

(17) See Nora Sein, "Ville Ottomane et representation du corps féminin", *Les Temps Modernes*, July-August 1984; and also, Susan Crahan-Brown, *op. cit.* Although women were tried to be kept under strict control in the way they dressed and moved about in public, they nevertheless always found a way of escaping the rules imposed upon them, as the "fermans" themselves show. A closer study of them reveals that it was because one "ferman" was not very well observed that another one had to be issued.

(18) Fatna A. Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, Pergamon Press, 1984, p. 133.

(19) F. Hussain, ed., *Muslim Women*, Croom Helm, 1984, p. 2, "Introduction".

(20) G. Tillion, *Le Harem et les cousins*, Seuil, 1966, *passim*.

family, primarily over his women. The tightly controlled patriarchal family (in opposition to the former tribal bonds) was very important to the creation of the **Umma**, which was consisted of man, and to its cohesion and solidarity. Thus, any change in male-female relations would be a threat to the Islamic community's strength⁽²¹⁾.

Religion may diminish women and legitimate their subordination to men but it obviously satisfies many needs; otherwise it would not be so deeply grounded and widespread. Islam, especially in a world where many Muslim countries of the Third World feel threatened by Western capitalism's economic and ideological dominance, may be regarded by individual and communities as a sanctuary where they can seek refuge. This phenomenon leads to the reinforcement of the Islamic ideology and its internalization by women themselves, which may account for the spread of the "different -but- equal" argument. This argument that maintains women in Islam have a distinctive role to play different than that of men, implies an uncritical stand on the role of religion in legitimizing women's oppression. One of the supporters of this view, Charis Waddy, argues that what Muslim women bring with them into public life is not "self-centred claims to power" but "conviction of the potential collective force of women, which is available for national action"⁽²²⁾. Leaving aside the fact that women are again trying to be used for ends that do not have a direct relevance for their self-interests, this argument serves to avoid any challenge to the existing gender relations by dismissing women's demands for freedom as "self centred claims", something which we feminists of the Middle Eastern countries hear so very often!

Another example in this respect is S.S. Davis' depiction of Moroccan village women: "These village women do not conceive of themselves as competing for status with men, but rather functioning in a different system."⁽²³⁾. The fact that these women "do not conceive of themselves as competing for status with men" is in itself worth pondering. Why don't they? The answer may very well be that the male domination is too powerful which makes defying it really difficult and -within the existing power relations- quite unrewarding for women. In this way all the rhetoric about being "different -but- equal" adds up to elimination of any threat towards male identity and to the protection of the established gender relations. A world without any competition or struggle between men and women may be the heaven itself for some, but obviously not for women!

It is true that women in traditional societies, as elsewhere, hold varying degrees of power and they strategize and negotiate to optimize their life

(21) F. Mernissi, *op. cit.*

(22) C. Waddy, *Women in Muslim History*, Longman, 1980, p. 7.

(23) S.S. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

options, and even sometimes manipulate men and their relationship with them. But it is equally true that they have to operate and bargain within a set of concrete constraints, a "matrix" **defined and controlled by men**. And it is this matrix, the existing power relations that needs to be challenged, and eventually changed.

A Case in Point: Turkey

Turkey was declared a secular state after the foundation of the Republic, the Islamic family code was abolished and replaced by a civil code. Educational and professional possibilities were widely opened for urban women, and in 1934 they were given the right to vote. S. Graham-Brown points out that "for urban middle and upper-class women who gained most from the legal reforms as well as education and employment opportunities these changes were a breath of fresh air". And according to her, these changes "took the initiative **entirely** out of the hands of women themselves"⁽²⁴⁾ (my emphasis. FB.).

Although the mentioned changes were initiated by a "modernizing" male elite, and although a significant women's movement was absent in the period, to say that the initiative was entirely out of the hands of women underestimates the struggle women waged for emancipation from the **Tanzimat** onward. No social change comes out of the blue! The fact that reforms pertaining to women and the secularisation of social life have taken root in Turkey shows that they were not merely whims of a "social engineer". On the other hand, I would argue that the absence of a strong women's movement does make a difference.

This is best reflected in the contrast with the Egyptian case where a political vanguard upholding women's rights was absent, as Leila Ahmed and many others point out. Women were much more actively involved in the fight for their rights in Egypt than they had been in Turkey. But "whereas in Turkey from the inception of feminist ideas to the granting of new rights had been a remarkably swift process, in Egypt many of the rights granted to their Turkish sisters in the 20s were not -and still have not- been granted."⁽²⁵⁾ Here one cannot help but remember the Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi who was awarded the state decoration in 1945 for advocacy of women's rights but ironically had no right to vote. Reforms instigated by a political vanguard may and does have limitations, but I for my part feel to be quite fortunate for having been born and brought up in a secular soci-

(24) S. Graham-Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

(25) Leila Ahmed, "Early Feminist Movements in the Middle East: Turkey and Egypt", in *Muslim Women* (F. Hussain, ed., Crook Helm, 1984), p. 118.

ety! This of course is not to deny that the ideological challenge by women against the male ideology and patriarchal family is still a task that remains to be fulfilled. Although national and cultural loyalty, and from 60s onward loyalty to various Leftist ideologies did blur women's vision on their road from "emancipation to liberation",⁽²⁶⁾ there are fresh and forceful signs that this task is finally being taken up. The feminism of the post-1980 period in Turkey has addressed itself not only to fighting for women's rights but also to the task of self-identification and of questioning traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

This task is an arduous one, no doubt, taking into account all the counter forces and the resistance it creates. Deniz Kandiyoti writes that "there is one persistent and underlying concern which unites nationalist and Islamic discourse: it is an eagerness to establish beyond doubt that the behaviour and position of women, however defined, is congruent with the 'true' identity of the collectivity and constitutes no threat to it"⁽²⁷⁾. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the Marxist Left of the post-1960 period has also taken over this position. The attitude of the Turkish Left towards women is an interesting example of cultural continuity and shows that religious ideology is one of the most persistent elements of culture. Women, here again, are seen to be a source of disruption ("*fitna*", but of course the label has now changed into "bourgeois") which could destroy the organisation's unity and solidarity. Their behaviour and even the way dress is controlled. Women should behave and dress "modestly" because "they are the front window of the revolutionary movement" it is said! Discourses and forms might change, but the essence stays the same! the eagerness to keep the male community of activists (this time called "**the movement**" instead of "**the Umma**" in Islam) intact from the disruptive power of women who could destroy the organisation's solidarity and who could lower the esteem of the movement in the eyes of "people" by their "immodest" behaviour, and thus harm "the revolutionary cause". The woman, without any change in her traditional roles, has to become a self-sacrificing comrade-in-arms as well. This, quite ironically, brings to mind Dr. Ali Shariati of Iran who sums up Fatima's (Muhammad's daughter) character as the exemplary model of womanhood: ideal daughter, ideal wife, ideal mother and yet **also** the symbol of a militant woman⁽²⁸⁾.

"It is fortunate that the emancipation of women was the result of an all-party programme rather than a sex struggle" wrote Halide Edip Adıvar, one of Turkey's first feminists. Yet it also seems to be their misfortune.

(26) This formulation is Deniz Kandiyoti's.

(27) D. Kandiyoti, "From Empire to Nation State" cited in S. Crahan-Brown, *op. cit.*

(28) Cited in Farah Azari, "Islam's Appeal to Women in Iran: Illusions and Reality", in *Women of Iran* (F. Azari, ed., Ithaca Press, 1983), p. 35.

But it is equally important to note that the "second generation feminists" who have finally embarked on the questioning of gender roles and opposing sexism in all fields are mostly the daughters of those "emancipated but unliberated" mothers and grandmothers. Turkish women's struggle to create a **female individual** capable of thinking freely, standing on her own feet and realizing her full potential is, more and more, being captured by the contemporary women writers, artists and researchers. This endeavour doubtlessly contributes to the capturing of the sexed subjectivity of the Middle Eastern woman and also casts aside any need or justification for "otherization". Does this process need to leave out "Western feminism" as something strange and irrelevant? Certainly not, but it would be a matter of grasping the ideological vista that feminism opens up for women all over the world and applying it to one's own society's specific conditions, which in turn would contribute to enrich feminist ideology itself.

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