

THE HEADSCARF ISSUE IN FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN TURKEY*

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I. Introduction

The controversy around headscarf issue is still an important subject in Turkey as this is related to the visibility of those women who wear headscarves in public. Its significance directly relates to the question of democracy and the definition of the public sphere. There are many different arguments on the headscarf issue among feminists in Turkey. These arguments differ from each other based on the ideological and political positions of these feminist women. Are the various arguments of feminism related to the existence of different feminist groups or rather the individuals?

In this paper, feminism is taken into account as three distinct categories or political groups. These groups are Islamist feminist women, Kemalist or secular feminist women, and finally the feminist women whose primary political and ideological identity is feminism. I will be examining and comparing the different theses of these feminist groups in Turkey in order to understand the discourse of feminism concerning headscarf issue.

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II. The Establishment of “*ban on turban*”

The *turban* was banned towards the end of the 1997-1998 academic year with the new code on dressing at universities. The ban soon spreaded from universities to various work places. Turkey’s banning of *turbans* became the contentious subject at the heart of discussions on secularism, political Islam, democracy, and public life or women’s rights since the beginning of ban.¹

As result of the ban, women wearing headscarves could not enter university campuses, the work environment or Parliament, and they were not able to participate in public life as they may have wished. Taking off a headscarf was seen as symbol of modernization. There are several reasons that explain why this subject is of such great concern in contemporary society. First, the issue is linked to a group of people that is growing rapidly in numbers. Second, religion, beliefs (or a headscarf issue) became a matter of such concern for Turkish society, especially following the first period of the Turkish Republic, as compared to the past. However, the following should be noted here: After the 1980s, women who wore headscarves became different than the women who lived at their homes previously. Rather it was the contrary. They began demanding to find their place in social life; these women wanted a place for their identities within the islamic life style and political projects.

In every social project, a certain status, position and identity was provided for women. Women’s dress styles were developed by these social projects as well.

Fundamentalist religions had started rising since the 1980s worldwide and this could be an explanation for the fact that the Turban became the main subject at the centre of political agenda. In Turkey, political Islam had been represented in parliament by growing numbers of its members which was later followed by the AKP’s (Justice and Development Party) rise to power. In Turkey’s political arena conjuncture, the woman with headscarf became easily recognised in public and the pressure on them became the major subject of discussions for feminists. Moreover, the issue was related to subjects such as democracy, the public sphere and human rights.

Some feminists argue whether the headscarf represents a political symbol and if it does, they consider the ban to be incorrect from the point of de-

¹ Turban is original term used to define headscarf in Turkish language ‘*Turban*’ is used as symbol of political Islam; ‘*Headscarf*’ is a style of belonging to traditional society.

mocracy and human rights. According to this approach, some people are deprived of their rights to study and work because of their outfits. The other feminist approach says that if the Turban is a political symbol, it should not be identified with Islamic symbols which might serve as a threat to the present political system.² Other feminists say that the headscarf is actually a religious requirement for women (as in the slogan “Headscarf Is My Honour”) and is used as an argument in discussions on identity.

III. Islamist Feminism

Most of the Islamists or those religious people defending women’s rights do not identify themselves as Islamist feminist. Some define themselves as Islamists who are also women’s rights activists.³ It is also said that many of the religious women who are called feminists, continue their lives in a very traditional way. Others such as Nazife Şişman, for example, do not think that they represent the identity which is based on their gender, while some others say that the concept was imported by Islamist feminists themselves. For example, Yıldız Ramazanoğlu is a writer and defender of women’s rights but she does not accept the definition of an Islamist feminist. She says, “*In Turkey there is nobody who recognizes themselves as an Islamist feminist*”.⁴

On the other hand, Hidayet Şefkat Tuksal, who is considered to be one of the leading figures of Islamist feminism, says that this is not a new concept. According to her, the first wave of feminism in the West which aimed to gain equality had influenced Ottoman women. Islamist feminists were involved in these movements then. However, women of that period were more involved in religion and of course the idea of any women movement’s separation from Islam did not exist. These women were considering feminism not without but together with Islam. However, under Kemalist modernization, women have been thought to become feminists by separating themselves from Islam. As a result of these developments Islamist feminists began to appear in Turkey. They were not just attracting the attention of Kemalists but were considered dangerous. Islamist feminists were protecting women’s rights not without but with Islam. According to them, the cause of suppressing

² The discussion here is not based on how to understand from a person’s outfit. Rather is about whether it is connected with religion of politics or not.

³ For instance, Sibel Eraslan.

⁴ “İslami Feminizm”, *Aksiyon Haftalık Haber Dergisi*, 12 November 2008.

women in Islam was tradition and not God's commend.⁵

Fatma Benli, a lawyer and member of the Women Rights Association Against Discrimination (AKDER)⁶ says that despite covering the standards of equal human rights, the headscarf represents unequal standards in a democratic country like Turkey, and that, "*certain rights exist, but not for women with headscarf*". Moreover, the form and meaning is becoming more and more antidemocratic. For example, "*do women with a headscarf actually have the same general rights or not? To what extent are they allowed to use their rights,*"⁷ asks Fatma Benli. According to her, the major point in the argument on the headscarf is not constitutional law; rather it is mentality, because this ban is applied in different ways according to places and time.

This means that there is no constitutional rule in differentiating and separating women. This also means that it should depend on her own will to decide whether to use a headscarf or not. She is free to cover her head, or not.

In each case the problem arises around use of free will. A significant portion of women with headscarf do not recognize themselves as "feminists". The reason for this might differ for every woman. The most mentioned reason is prejudice against feminism. For example, some say that feminists are sexists. Other state that the unfairness of being suppressed is not based entirely on gender but it is based on strength and weakness, therefore it is more important not to be let to be suppressed. In other words, the fact about a man lowering a woman is not only because of their gender, it's because of the power that is in the hands of the man.⁸

But the most important reason for head-scarfed women to stay away from feminism is apparently its secular understanding. According to Ayla Kerimoglu, feminism from its very first appearance until today has had the viewpoint of not recognizing religion. According to her, this viewpoint produced the phrase of "*My body belongs to me*".

The relationship to one's own body is very important when the headscarf

⁵ Akyol, Mustafa, "Cinsiyet Konuları-11-Kemalist Feminizmin Trajedisi", *Turkish Daily News*, January 8, 2008, Translator: Ekrem Sınai

⁶ AKDER- Ayrımcılığa Karşı Kadın Hakları Derneği

⁷ Benli, Fatma (2008) "Yeni Gelişmeler Işığında Üniversitelerde Başörtüsü Yasağı Sorunu", *AKDER-Ayrımcılığa Karşı Kadın Hakları Derneği Bülteni*, Yıl.6, number 9, September 2007-2008 p.14

⁸ As an example they state the fact that being a woman did not prevent Condoleezza Rice from imposing violence in Irak.

is discussed, because for women with headscarf, their relationship to their bodies is connected with religion Kerimoğlu explains this as, “*I consider that revelation⁹ is connected with my body and therefore I do not call myself a feminist. But who I see involved in unfairness are mainly women.*”¹⁰

“If the subject is freedom, there is no any detail”

The announcements of “We are not free yet” is an important example of Islamists discourse that is worth mentioning. This announcement was made by a group of female students, the majority of which were with headscarf. When it comes to the meaning of the Turban or the headscarf concept, some women say, “*If the subject is freedom, there is no any detail.*” This women’s group received support from many women’s groups including women with headscarf. What they meant is:

“Since the day when the doors of universities were strictly closed for us, the pain we have suffered taught us many things: Our real problem is the mentality. The people think that they have a right to interfere people’s lives, views, and even thoughts.”

With this approach, together with the issue of the headscarf, all other injustices were taken into consideration.¹¹ In another statement, Fatma Benli said:

*“This is what I have experienced myself: This is not a field that should be discussed by others; this is why the ban is directly effects me and I am not defining it as something that is discriminating against me by force or not recognizing me as a person.”*¹²

Ayla Kerimoğlu, Head of *Hazar*¹³, an association that claims that woman are not the only ones who have suffered from the headscarf ban. However this ban is a serious restriction for women with headscarf in public life.

⁹ Revelation is (as a vahiy) an event, experience etc. That is considered to be a message from God.

¹⁰ “Türkiye’de Başörtülü Olmak... Fatma Benli ve Ayla Kerimoğlu ile Söyleşi”, *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*, Söyleşi: Özlem Aslan, Öykü Tamer, October 2008, İstanbul, p. 21

¹¹ *AKDER-Ayrımcılığa Karşı Kadın Hakları Derneği Bülteni*, Yıl.6, Number 9, September 2007-2008 p.27

¹² Aslan, Özlem, 2008, 5

¹³ *Hazar* is an Islamists oriented Women organisation.

Therefore they had to struggle in order to keep their headscarf.¹⁴

On the other hand, “*the ban on headscarf*” is said to have served not the ones who banned it but the ones who faced it. These women experienced important traumas in their lives. However despite these bitter experiences, they have developed themselves significantly. Moreover, they stood up against all the restrictions.

According to the research titled “*Turban-covered truth*” which was conducted by Hazar, it appears that 94% of women could not fulfill their dreams as a result of wearing the headscarf. Whether it was precisely the headscarf that had prevented their dreams from coming true is not certain but it is widely believed that the ban served as an obstacle.

The explanations of Islamist feminists about the wishes of families to cover their daughters with headscarf is very interesting. They claim that many religious families want their daughters to wear a headscarf at universities. They do not see a problem in giving this kind of directives to their children. They think this is no different than a family directing their daughters to receive ballet lessons or go to medical school. According to them, this ban is a double-standard and families should be able to bring their children up as they wish, with or without a headscarf. Ayla Kerimoglu explains the legitimacy of this position: “*This is a much more sensible way of bringing up children rather than letting the government bring them up in a one-way style.*”¹⁵

IV. Kemalist / Laic Feminist Discourse:

Prof. Dr. Turkan Saylan¹⁶, head of *Association For The Support Of Contemporary Living*¹⁷s, believes covering of women and daughters with headscarf is a discrimination. She emphasises the importance of the real need to use a headscarf. Her view is that islamists believe that, “*if women’s heads are not covered, she may provoke men*”.

According to her, this mentality contradicts human rights principles, especially women’s rights. Based on this expression, the concept of the headscarf is openly used as a political Islamic symbol and the ban is “*a*

¹⁴ “*Türkiye’nin Örtülü Gerçeği*”, www.hazargrubu.org

¹⁵ Aslan, Özlem.. (2008); 14

¹⁶ Türkan Saylan was one of the most important representatives of Laic / Kemalist discourse, about women’s rights)

¹⁷ ÇYDS- Çağdaş Yaşamı Destekleme Derneği

way for countries to protect their regimes and democracies with rules". According to this view, the headscarf is a functional covering used by rural women in a traditional sense. However, the reason for using this cover is not protecting themselves from men. For instance, a rural woman uses a headscarf to be protected from the sun or remain clean, therefore she is not using it for religious reasons. According to Saylan, a headscarf turning into a "Turban" came along with politicization of the religion which started after 1980's: "*Imam Hatip schools (religious schools) had started to accept female students after 1980's and this was a big gain for political Islam. The subject of women to be covered developed soon after and spread quickly. As a result, the exploitation of religion and women actually started.*"¹⁸ Here, the headscarf obviously received additional meaning, which was being a symbol of political Islam and accordingly was seen as a threat.

The ideas expressed from Laicism perspective in Turkey had much resemblance with arguments on the headscarf and laicism in France. In 2004, the French government introduced a law restricting "*attention-attracting religious symbols*" in state schools. The targets of this law were mainly Turbaned Muslim girls.

The makers of this law saw that this law was necessary for the protection of French laicism. From this point of view, a headscarf was a way of spreading Islam in modernity. Joan Wallach Scott was opposed to this idea, saying that a headscarf should not have been analyzed in connection with gender, and claiming that what the authors of this law were actually dealing with was laicism and individual right, appearance of man and woman bodies.

According to Wallach, the headscarf was only a symbol from the perspective of gender relations.¹⁹ From this point of view, the argument is that the headscarf actually popularized and politicized Islamic demands. The difference is becoming apparent at this very point. The headscarf as a political symbol goes back to citizens' acceptance of laicism which was brought with the foundation of Republic of Turkey.

¹⁸ *Milliyet*, 28 May 2003, p.14

¹⁹ Scott, Joan Wallach, (2008), "Örtbas Etmek: Fransızların Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği ve İslami Başörtüsü", *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*, Number: 06, October 2008, <http://www.feministyaklaşımlar.org/magazine.>, p.1-16.

V. Feminist Discourse

According to feminist views, the headscarf alongside being an expression of religion is also a symbol. *“Suppression of women makes them show their bodies only to the men that they have belong to. In order to avoid provocation of other men, they would be covering their bodies. This is coming from the thoughts about men and women having seperate roles. A man is not responsible for his desires – it is the woman who should try not to provoke him. But if women say that ‘our bodies belong to us’ then we do not share the above-mentioned idea and become against headscarf. But the right to choose to wear a headscarf – is another subject.”*²⁰ Feminist women continue to say *“no to the ban”*²¹ as they believe the ban is lacking the legitimacy. Their stand on the issue is that due outfits, some women are deprived of the opportunity to study and work. Therefore, *“women’s human rights”* are violated. Feminists consider the headscarf as a patriarchal mentality tool of casting women away. At the same time we should not forget that a headscarf is actually a patriarchal instrument.

For instance, some of the women who are involved in activities with headscarfed women express their discomfort about the slogan *“the headscarf is my honor”*. According to them this slogan implies the idea that those who are not wearing headscarves are apparently dishonorable. According to feminists, the main problem lies in the meaning of a woman and the use of Türban in Islamic system, which requires covering bodies of women in order to avoid men’s excitement and allowing women to show their bodies only to the men they belong to. Therefore females are suppressed and their nature is admitted to be different from that of a men. At the same time their roles are thought to be unchangeable.

A man is not responsible for his desires – it is woman who should try not to provoke him. But if the women shout the slogan of *“our bodies belong to us”*, this means that we do not share the above-mentioned idea and we are against the headscarf. However, the right to chose whether to wear a Turban or not – is another subject.²²

²⁰ Tura, Nesrin (2007), “No to the banning of Türban”, *Pazartesi*, File: 6, Religion, No: 113, Istanbul.

²¹ Tura, Nesrin (2007), pp.156

²² Tura, Nesrin (2007), p.159.

“Our bodies belong to us”

There are some critical opinions among the feminists as well.

For the feminists the fact that Islamist women are not questioning the patriarchal traditions is a big shortcoming. Historically, patriarchal institutions implied religious beliefs about the superiority of men and these beliefs were accepted by women without question. As a result, women – being lowered by suppressive politics – were put within borders drawn by men. According to this view, the question to ask here is, “*whose choice is it really to use the headscarf?*”

As long as this question has not been asked then the women will stay in this patriarchal trap.

In an Islamist approach, the Holy Koran’s basic requirement is the use of the headscarf and this is regarded as an unchangeable rule. The problem we find here is the fact that in modern patriarchal society, the subjective attitude towards women’s bodies and gender has changed dramatically. If so, according to Pateman’s views, the main subject of criticism in modern contract is the freedom of access to women’s bodies.

Islamist women saw a solution in covering themselves without arguing about this approach.²³ This way they became involved in the politics of choosing the ‘headscarf’ as a symbol in the male-dominant Islamist system. This means Islamist men’s politics is not only restricting women from public places but also imprisoning them in the husband-child-home care triangle.²⁴

Other socialist feminists say that the problem is not in the question of whether women choose to wear headscarves or if they are forced to do so. This question will lead us to a discussion of whose is right and whose is wrong. These feminists say that the right question to ask is, how far can the struggle of headscarfed women go?

- Entering public places with Turban/headscarf is not the only fight for constitutional and human rights, but also a struggle for freedom.
- But as long as women belong to society where they are only recognized with their bodies, there is no fight for freedom.

The reason is this phrase shows the acceptance of wearing Turban/headscarf and based on the identity problem it provides an identity system.

²³ Pateman, Carol (1988), *The Sexual Contract*, Polity Press.

²⁴ Zihnoğlu, Yaprak (2007) “Konca Kuriş’i Anarken”, *Pazartesi*, File 6, Number 13, Istanbul, p. 199.

In this context, feminism should not be involved in the argument about the identity politics.

- Meanwhile, headscarf continues to be a pain from the pressure of patriarchal system as a result of which a woman is restricted from studying and working.

Nükhet Sirman, a member of *KADER*²⁵ and a feminist academician discusses the disadvantages of living in the period of modernization of Turbaned women and she describes this subject as very sensitive. Assumptions of women wearing headscarves on the same criticizing attitude are explained like this:

*“We criticized the privileges provided for us in Republic of Turkey. I hope that Islamist women will do the same. They are not doing this. Islamist women, instead of interrogating their sayings at the cost of refusing the privileges provided for them, are actually using the criticism we have made against the republican sayings in reference to us.”*²⁶

Sirman states that it is impossible to dialogue with Islamist women movements despite the desire to do so, because these women are only criticizing the Republic. What needs to be done is discuss what differences the subject of the Turban may bring into the lives of women. According to Sirman, the position of feminists on the subject of the Turban should be as follows: *“as feminist if I reconcile, then I need to know with whom and to what extent this agreement will be made. Therefore I can defend their rights to enter universities wearing Turbans; but when I agree with them, I want to know what they think about their own ideology.”*²⁷

The head of *KADER* and one of the most important feminist activists in Turkey, Hülya Gulbahar, says that she has been involved in the same activities together with an Islamist feminist group, *Ankara Capital Platform (Ankara Başkent Platformu)*. However, according to her, this subject is not discussed enough by Turkey’s political and social actors. Therefore, she considers that the accusation of the feminists not being part of this newly

²⁵ *Kadın Adayları Destekleme ve Eğitim Derneği- Association for the Support and Training of Women Candidates*

²⁶ “Cumhuriyet Mitingleri, Kadınlar arası İttifak ve Seçimler Üzerine Sohbet”, *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*, Hülya Gülbahar, Nazan Üstündağ, Nükhet Sirman, Şemsa Özar, Zeynep Kutluata, Derya Demirler, June 2007, number:03, p.7

²⁷ Gülbahar, Hülya...(2007);9

discussed issue is unfair and she states that. *“What male politicians actually do frequently is using us as follows – they are blaming us, women who are not wearing Turbans, of not being supportive for the Turbaned women and that we did not protect them or that by standing next to them we appeared to be soft... Inventing a problem and waiting for the solution from women or female movements is also man’s politics.”*²⁸

A headscarf, no matter if worn voluntarily or by force, defines and controls women’s lives, implements borders and at the same time represents a social and political symbol. In this view, a woman is not equal with a man, does not have equal rights with him and is actually a second class gender that serves men. Because of being regarded as a gender object, she has to be covered or Turbaned. When considering the freedom argument, this approach is definitely restricting women’s rights. In order to avoid receiving attention, women, young girls and even female children are dictated to about all their actions, choices and even places to go.

Because of these reasons, feminism should stay against the Turban and at the same time protest the restriction of women from public places and protect them from being discriminated against. They should also try to show that the headscarf should be understood as a control mechanism over women’s bodies and lives which at the same time, also makes her and second class human being.²⁹

“We are with each other”

The common discourse for feminists both with and without the headscarf is: *“We are with each other.”* In March 2008, a group of feminists both with and without headscarves made an informative publication named *“we are with each other”*. This publication which was supported by many women organizations in Turkey had the following summary: *“We are the women who can stand together in concepts of women rights and freedom as believer or non believer -, women with headscarf or without headscarf... We do not say to each other that “if you are there, I will not be there”. We stand against discriminating definitions of Turbaned women or dissimulation (takiyye) or opportunist people. This is a violence used against Turbaned women. We oppose to the fact that women without headscarves are seen as gender*

²⁸ Gülbahar, Hülya...(2007);10

²⁹ Turban Özgürlük Mücadelesi Mi?”, *Birgün Gazetesi*, 6 June, 2007

goods exposing their bodies or being provocative. We understand that the abyss that was produced between women is going to make the female discrimination easier. We also know that we can defeat the pressure imposed on women only through the way of peace, freedom and equal rights.” One of the Turbaned members of the group ‘*we are with each other*’, Yıldız Ramazanoglu, criticized the enlightening or modernizing approach of Kemalist ideology and stood up against the one-style role that was given to women. For this reason, various women’s groups from different fields should reach an agreement between themselves. She added,

*“The public fields that we cannot enter is holding each other’s arms, not our ones.”*³⁰ According to her, the main understanding of the Turban subject is the opening discussions on Western paradigms and in modernization of Turkey “*Women with no headscarves were agreed to be the educated one*”, while Turbaned women remained to be accepted as uneducated ones. However, already there was another additional category of “*A Turbaned educated woman*”.³¹ Additional contribution to the richness of headscarf subject was made by a group from the Bosphorus University saying “*we are all weird, we are all details*”.³² Their group, named “*do not touch my friend*” took headscarves from their Turbaned friends and put hem on, by this expressing a fair demand from everybody.³³

VI. Conclusion

The attitude towards the subject of no access to universities for Turbaned women is openly stated and clearly visible in feminist discourse in Turkey. More often, this subject requires a solution without even referring to feminists because this is matter of human rights. At the same time, in connection with the to feminism, following argument should be noted that: “*The current situation lets men enter, while women are being cast away.*”³⁴ Therefore, it can be said that feminism may reach a solution about headscarves. But there is no need for the organization to do something about this subject, because in general view, it seems more correct that feminists

³⁰ Ögünç, Pınar, “Yıldız Ramazanoğlu ile Röportaj”, *Radikal* 2, 29 November 2008, p.4

³¹ Ögünç, Pınar (2008); p.4

³² Group of Weird Details from the Bosphorus

³³ *AKDER-Ayrımcılığa Karşı Kadın Hakları Derneği Bülteni*, Yıl.6, Number 9, September 2007-2008 p.26

³⁴ Gülbahar, Hülya...(2007), p. 10

do not organize everything on behalf of the others. The subject of the Turban leaves feminists between two walls: On one side, there is the Kemalist approach that is on basis of laicism discourse “*no to Turban*”, which also regards the headscarf as a symbol separating and differentiating women from men. On the other side, there is a liberal-oppositional approach, that alongside Islamists, deals with the issue of the Turban only in connection with freedom and democracy.

What we can understand from this discussion is that Turban is one of the points of separation for women’s movements and feminist discourse in Turkey: These two serve as points of opposition between Islamist feminist discourse and the Laic or Kemalist feminist discourse.³⁵

Arguments between laicism and Islamism brought about an item for agenda, where women are again influential instruments of political arguments. In 1990’s, modernization was simply identified with laicism and war about using or taking off a Turban. This identification was, brought about a vulgar, and formalist modern politics, which has, strongly shaken the basis of this harmony.³⁶ Generally feminists consider that, they were late in this argument. Because of this, they consider themselves to be representing one side, when involved in this period, which was originally started by men. Therefore, they think that feminist movement has either, joined the Kemalists or, liberalist and Islamist viewpoints. This produces another problem: admitting that Turban, is a problem that only began with the ban. This ban contradicts with feminist movements in Turkey, the subject of headscarf and other dimensions of a woman in patriarchal system. Because whether we look at modern or laic paradigm or religious one, in both systems a patriarchal characteristics are visible. Majority of feminists claim that, in

³⁵ Iran origin historic and theorist of social gender, Afsaneh Najmabadi, reveals a similar determination in her article of the discussions on covering women in Iran. In 1963, Riza Shah Pehlevi ordered women to take off their Türbans in fate of modernization. But this gave way to the isolation of the women who either because of their believes or a pressure from their families opposed the idea of taking off Türbans. These women were obliged to leave their schools and work places. According to another thought, modernization led to certain decrease in women’s freedom in public field. Najmabadi, Afsaneh (2008) “Feminizmi Ört(me)mek”, *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*, october 1988, number: 06, <http://www.feministyaklaşımlar.org/magazine>., p:1-16

³⁶ Sancar, Serpil (2003),”Üniversitede Feminizm? Bağlam, Gündem ve Olanaklar”, *Toplum Bilim* 97,Güz Sayısı

both systems women have roles of objects, and that they are represented and, they are governed in various ways.

In this understanding, feminism takes the case of the headscarf as a whole and discuss the basis of women's freedom in connection to it. It has also revealed other dimensions of this subject too. For example, on one side there are women who were alienated from public life because of wearing a headscarf, while on the other side, there are their daughters, who are forced to cover their heads with Turbans.

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