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Islam and women; Europe and Islam

Mirror play

Throughout their history, Moslem societies have created a widespread popular belief as to what men and women should be like. The Koran, the holy scripture, has provided the foundations for these identities involving a supposedly sexual complementariness based on biologicist differentiation criteria that are clearly materialised in a sexual compartmentalisation of space.

INTRODUCTION

But the veracity of the Koran as a text revealed by archangel Gabriel to the prophet Mahomet would enable legitimating a gender construction based on an idea of authenticity that is extremely useful for stressing their differences with other non-Moslem societies. This fact was displayed in Maghrebi societies throughout the 20th century, in countries where the affirmation and recovery of their own cultural specificity, after bloody colonisation periods, required adopting symbols to act as bastions of the “Moslem way”. Among these symbols there are women and, inseparably connected to these, the veil –*hijab*.

Now we should also point out the need to analyse the social construction of Moslem women that has been created in Europe, as this is often a perception close to their victimisation, illustrated with certain particularly clear cases as regards female subordination (though this could hardly be generally defended in all Moslem societies). In this respect one should point out how, for example, in Maghrebi societies women have had powers, sometimes peripheral, which enable them to transform their daily reality. In spite of this, the lack of knowledge about these countries and the socio-political and media interpretation of some cultural practices ended up forming a pejorative discourse based on Moslem traditionalism and its cultural backwardness. Europe clearly set itself

up as spokesperson for denouncing female subordination in Moslem lands from the criterion of its “superiority” and “social modernity” as regards the equality of individuals within society.

WOMEN IN ISLAM: from the Koran to legal practices

There are diverse studies defending the possibility of interpreting Moslem women’s everyday life from a rereading of the Koran which enables female duties and obligations to be specified from an almost essentialist angle (for example, Motahari, 2000).

However, in spite of the Book providing a social construction of the sexes based on sexual complementarity, it is true that this Moslem social ideology built on the Koran as regards sexual categorization has often later collided with the social practices of each setting.¹ In fact, this stance was developed in my doctoral thesis (Aixelà, 2000), where the aim was not to find a singular and ahistorical description of Moslem women, but to analyse the influence of the Koranic gender construction in legal practices of the Moroccan Family Code, *Mudawwana*.

One should point out that there are major differences in the legal practice of each country which depend on its particular interests. We hence find that although the Koran may give many proposals it is each government that has the power to develop the one coming closest to its social policies.² On this matter, we now give two examples on the polemical rereading of the Book: one shows the importance of legal selection when drawing up family codes in each country and the other stresses the contradictions themselves contained in Islamic societies.

As regards the first example, Tunisia needs to be specified as a special case in the North-African sphere in certain legal matters connected with women (Aixelà, 1998). For example, polygyny was banned there. This was possible because the legislators who drew up their Family Code, *Madjala*, inspired like all the others in Arab Moslem countries by the Koran, chose the suras that backed up their own proposals. They were able to defend and legitimate monogamy in the following way: First they took the sura that regulates marriage, which consists of two parts with very different contents: the first says “marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four...” [sura iv “Women”, verse 3]; a second affirms: “but if you fear that you will not do justice between them, then (marry) only one... This is more suitable so as not to be inequitable...” [sura iv “Women”, verse 3]. Then Tunisian legislators chose the part of the text that proved most appropriate for them within their scheme of government: instead of taking the first part, which allowed polygyny, they took the second, which censured this due to the difficulty in being completely fair with all four wives. The result was that Tunisia was able to approve monogamy with the backing of the Koran, enjoying the Moslem legitimacy necessary to defend this in its society.

■ ¹ A good collection of legal practice in the Moslem world is given by J. Nasir (1994).

² To find out about how the legal system works in the Moslem world A. Wahhâb Khallâf can be consulted.

Collage sobre fons gravat
(Collage on an Engraved Background).
Antoni Tàpies (2005)
paint and collage on paper with
an engraved background, 56 x 63 m





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The second example comes from Saudi Arabia. This country has a great influence on the whole Moslem world and produced a very interesting controversy in the nineteen-eighties to do with women's obligations (Hijab, 1994: 47). On one hand, some highly conservative interpretations of religious institutions, represented by sheikh Abdel-Aziz Bin Abdullah Bin Baz, defended that the Koran ordered women to stay at home, wear veils and obey men's orders. This was defended on the basis of a verse referring to the wives of the Prophet, who considered that these ought to be differentiated from other women through their purity and faith. However, other sectors of the country's Moslem fabric did not agree. In their opinion, the very fact of not being the Prophet's wives released them from these Koranic obligations.

These two cases, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, are of great use when demonstrating the major Moslem legal contradictions existing in diverse Moslem countries. In fact, they vouch for the difficulty of establishing a totalising uniformity in social and legal practices in respect of women's everyday lives in the Moslem world.

MOSLEM WOMEN AND COLONISATION

The European colonial structures established in different countries in the Mediterranean Moslem sphere criticised the situation undergone by women. Criticism has not always implied any change in their social situation —in fact, hardly any changes were actually generated (Aixelà, 2000). For example, schooling, which was one of the factors considered to be able to facilitate the end of their subordination to men, would spread extremely slowly in a good many of these societies, and no real progress in the different countries would be made until after independence.

In spite of this, and the fact that most of the colonisers did not include any social or legal improvements in women's condition in the whole colonial occupation, the female group came into European's focus. One very clear case was that of Algeria, skilfully explained by Fanon (1966: 22), who tells how, in an attempt to reduce the social influence of Islam during the war of independence, the French themselves chose women as the group that needed to be subverted in order to bring about profound changes in the occupied society: "First all they went for destitute women. With each kilo of corn they added a dose of indignation against the veil and confinement. After the indignation came the practical advice. Algerian women were called to play a 'fundamental, capital role' in the transformation of their destiny... Colonial administration invested major sums in this fight. After affirming that women represented the core of Algerian society, every effort was made to control them... In the colonialist programme, women were entrusted with the historical mission of sidetracking Algerian men. Women were intended to be converted, won for foreign values...". However, Fanon (1966: 31) also narrates the failure of the self-seeking French policies: "the occupier's tenacity to unveil women, to convert them into allies in the task of cultural destruction, reinforced traditional habits". And he added: "the colonialist offensive against the veil was opposed by the colonised people's cult for the veil... the Algerians' attitude to the veil was interpreted as an overall stance against foreign occupation".

“A strange bond was established between nationalism and feminism from terms such as authenticity and complementarity”

Something very similar took place in Egypt, where the colonial structures strongly criticised certain matters connected with women such as spatial exclusion, the veil and female circumcision³ (Hijab, 1994). It was assumed that Egyptians should give up these social practices which revealed their cultural backwardness. In spite of this the colonial pressure only helped to make certain structures consider that these changes were non-negotiable as

such through representing a part of their cultural specificity in respect of the occupants. In fact, as happened in other countries, neither did colonisers develop specific policies to condition their social decline.

IDENTITY AFFIRMATION THROUGH WOMEN: nationalisms and feminisms

At the same time as colonial structures were considering the need to transform women's status, there were many conservative and nationalist parties using women as social assets whose role was to facilitate Moslem identity affirmation as cultural reproducers: it was understood that the changes arising in their status could be understood as symptoms of the transformations which could appear in contemporary Moslem states, as a threat of sociocultural change, and as a way to establish where these countries were attempting to go from a cultural perspective. In fact, a strange bond was established between nationalism and feminism from terms such as authenticity and complementarity, which would later be contested by some left-wing political parties who would defend a transformation of female status from concepts such as “equality” and “human rights”⁴.

One clear example of the nationalist standpoint was Moroccan Allal el-Fassi, who links “women” with “moral rebirth” since he felt that they had managed to remain unaffected by the temptations of the West. A good deal of el-Fassi's proposals for women would appear in one of his best-known works, published in 1952, *Self-criticism*, where he would tackle the need to get rid of polygyny and limit repudiation. In spite of this, el-Fassi would never consider the equality of sexes as he defended the complementarity of men and women.

One should point out that behind the nationalist or left-wing political claims there was a vindication of women as leading actors in society. The most significant difference lay in the end to be obtained: on one hand, this would consolidate a discourse which would connect the need for women, after reaching national independence, to be the perpetrators of Islam's cultural specificity by strictly following the gender proposals filtered from the Koran, and on the other, there would be a discourse which would defend the necessary transformation of female status seen in their acquisition of new rights and duties which would make them equivalent to men in the different political and economic spheres.

We should in any case stress the close relationship established between nationalism and feminism, fostered by many politicians through diverse publications: the objective was to

display the excellencies of Islam towards women by being the first to denounce custom as a great corruptor of laws that were originally egalitarian.

MOSLEM WOMEN. From the late nineteen-sixties to the present day: new social visibilities

Women have gradually joined the working world and political life in many Moslem countries since the nineteen-sixties. Indeed, in some cases, such as Egypt, this participation goes back to the early 20th century. Through it has been a slow incorporation process that has taken place in different periods depending on the context, this is a wholly reversible process in spite of the rejection of some Moslem structures. This acquisition by women of new responsibilities now implies the restructuring of a gender construction, which was traditionally based on sexual complementarity, and which is still now defended by those who look to the Koranic text to establish men's obligations towards women and vice versa; nowadays women and men work in the formal and informal economy and are militant and participate in all kinds of politic parties and associations.

These factors, which have gradually been developing in the societies of origin, also visible among European Moslem women, have indeed transformed the view that used to be had of Islam as an eminently masculine religion; a feminisation of Islam has been generated, fostered and conditioned by female public perception (Amiriaux, 2003) and by their social participation, which has in Europe been closely associated with the historical victimisation of this group (Aixelà, 2000).

However, it should be pointed out that Islamism has contributed a lot to female visibility as a large part of its discourse has been developed around this. As Imache and Nour (1994: 15) pointed out, for many Islamists "the *hijab* distinguishes the Moslem woman from the non-Moslem woman". As Kasriel affirms, the veil enables an image of traditionalism to be given to a society that has changed now. What is more, some of these Islamist groups, such as the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, proposed a whole series of prohibitions to be respected by women in their publication *Mounquid*, such as: 1) no women can be state politicians; 2) no women can be judges; 3) women cannot practice a wage-earning activity (a matter on which they constantly contradict themselves); 4) women have to wear the *hijab*; 5) women have to refuse to share space with men; 6) women have to avoid practicing sports.⁵ In fact, this same publication stressed women's rights: 1) the right to learning; 2) the right to respect; 3) the right to inherit; 4) the right to give their opinion; 5) the right to vote; 6) the right to fight in God's name; 6) the right to carry out a wage-earning activity (the one most qualified).⁶

■ ³ One should point out that Egypt is the only country in the African Mediterranean where clitoridectomy is practiced. We could also mention a book from the nineteen-sixties covering the colonial view of Egyptian society. This is published by El Masry, *Drama sexual de la mujer árabe*.

⁴ The specialists classify these in different ways, but the political objectives and social contents were very similar. To go further into the debate one can consult Aixelà (2000).

⁵ Imache and Nour (1994: 46).

⁶ Imache and Nour (1994: 45).

All these questions connected with women's rights and duties have taken root in a conception of women which clearly established their priority activities: maternity and education of children. These groups considered that they were responsible for future generations.

These very explicit Algerian proposals have not been very visible in the Moroccan case, partly perhaps because the top member of the Justice and Charity group (al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsan) in recent times has been a woman, Nadia Yassin, daughter of the historic moderate Islamist Abdassalam Yassin. It proves highly interesting to analyse Yassin's discourse since she advocates women's socio-political participation in Morocco, through proposals close to the affirmation of the Moslem woman as mother and wife and criteria of spatial separation and Moslem authenticity.

THE SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF MOSLEM WOMEN IN EUROPE

The controversy about the way Moslem women are thought of in their societies of origin is also found in Europe, though it must be said that less is known about the way they have acquired new social responsibilities throughout the 20th century.

In European contexts, the female sector has often been connected with "patriarchy": the woman has been imagined as confined to the home, subordinate to the men in her family group. In fact, the discourse on supposed "European superiority" in respect of these societies, that authors such as E. Said denounced long ago, is still alive and has been corroborated by Islamists' strict attitude to women. The result has been an enormous misunderstanding, difficult to deal with on both shores of the Mediterranean, as the information exchanged is basically the fruit of social stereotypes.

Part of the distorted image of Moslem women in Europe involves the controversial use of the veil, the *hijab*. One sector of European people construes this as a symbol of female confinement, of their subordination to men and of Islam's cultural backwardness, an

“Religions form an intrinsic part of national identities in many European countries”

analysis that has been fostered in Europe by its political, media (Coman, 2003) and in some cases even scientific (Amiriaux, 2003) treatment, conditioned by certain structures eager to extend interpretations coming close to connecting Islam with barbarity (Said, 1991; Bartra, 1996; Martín, 2002).

However, certain statements made by different Moslem structures, both in their societies of origin and Europe, often fail to facilitate any reconsideration of these distortions, as they contain inflexible discourses about the use of the veil affirming that the *hijab* proves the value and dignity of women as well as making patent the continuity, value and dignity of Islam. Hence Motahari (2000: 13) gave the reason, essential in his opinion, justifying the female veil: "For a woman to cover herself in the presence of an unknown man is one of the major Moslem questions, and is specified in the noble Koran itself".

In any case, as has been seen by diverse authors such as Kilani (2000, 2002, 2003) or Amiraux (2003), the female veil is interpreted in Europe as the symbol of anti-modernity, as an archaism of which Moslem women are *victims*. This is important because it is one of the foundations on which the irreducible incompatibility between Islam and the democratic values of “modernity” has been constructed. A clear example of the controversy is wearing the veil at schools, an issue that has led to a debate on this matter in different European countries such as France and Spain.

On this question, Kilani (2000) took a clear stance as regards the attitude of certain European countries towards their subjects practising the Moslem religion: the political discourses only served to encourage one particular aspect of the differences used to build the essential difference, the difference which would generate all the others and which would explain them at the same time. Islam would be the cultural difference distinguishing the immigrants coming from Moslem countries from the others, whether or not these had citizenship, and had been born in Europe or not: they were the so-called second, third and fourth generations.

CONCLUSIONS

As has been observed in this article, the outlooks on Moslem women of both European and Moslem societies have been crossing for a long time now. This has given them an unfair responsibility which did not pertain to them: the perpetuation or not of Moslem society. Access to their opinions on the social role that they should play—or have played—in the legitimation and consolidation of Moslem identity has however been wholly impossible.

The situation becomes even more difficult to analyse clearly when these Moslem women are in Europe (or are European) and want to make use of a hijab, which is also connected in our popular thinking with the traditionalism of Islam, with female subordination and, what is worse, with a religious identity of supranational nature.

Behind all these questions, and beyond the gender perspective, something becomes increasingly evident: Europe, apart from being Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, amongst other things, is Moslem. This 21st century cultural and religious reality, resulting from migration processes, ought to involve a review of how the construction of the *other* is being handled, above all because that Moslem other will increasingly be closer to us and end up being European—as was recently affirmed by Roy (2003). However, there can be no doubt that this will involve conflicts, and not only through the utterly negative image that the Moslem group has in European societies, but also because religions form an intrinsic part of national identities in many European countries. One should nevertheless point out that many of the Moslem women who wear the veil in Europe do so through a chosen religious practice and for the sake of a vindicating political practice. But again, this will entail conflicts since, as different official bodies are wondering: how can this *other* form part of our population if apparently it seems so different from the rest and does not accept the rules of the game? ||

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