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Beyond the Garment: the Muslim Veil as a Demarcation Line[2]

Abstract: This paper deals with the headscarf issue in Europe, which 'flared up' the public arenas of many European countries during the past two decades, provoking debates, massive media attention, policy measures, riots, violence, and xenophobic public speech. Herein it is argued that the Islamic head-covering garments have nowadays become, within the public arena, performative modes of social existence that question the dominant majoritarian social codes. The meanings and performatives of the headscarf go beyond Islam and enter the sphere of social communication between different world views and political stances. The logic of existence of this social communication reveals that Muslims living in Europe take up subcultural strategies to question hegemonic discourses and policies.

Keywords: head-covering, Muslims, performative, subculture, secularity

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Onstran tkanine: muslimansko pokrivalo kot razmejitvena črta

Izvleček: Članek obravnava problematiko naglavnega pokrivala v Evropi, ki je vzbudila burne reakcije v številnih evropskih deželah, povzročila razprave, silovito zanimanje medijev, politične ukrepe,

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nemire in sovražen govor. Avtor dokazuje, da v javnosti islamska naglavna pokrivala danes predstavljajo performativni način družbenega obstoja in postavljajo pod vprašaj dominantne večinske družbene običaje. Pomeni in performativi naglavnega pokrivala segajo onstran islama in vstopajo v sfero družbene komunikacije med različnimi svetovnonazorskimi in političnimi stališči. Logika te družbene komunikacije razkriva, da se muslimani, ki živijo v Evropi, hegemonističnim diskurzom in politikam zoperstavljajo s subkulturnimi strategijami.
Ključne besede: naglavno pokrivalo, muslimani, performativ, subkultura, sekularnost

The headscarf, a garment worn by women and men in many cultures and religions throughout history, appears to be a stumbling block on the path where the imagined *Europe* and the imagined *Muslim* meet. The Islamic headscarf has become a battlefield for power struggles between competing opposing world-view strategies that claim to be universal. In this paper, the headscarf is seen less as a religious and (or) cultural garment and more as a *performative*,[3] which as a mode of intervention constructs the political stance that challenges what is perceived as a secular social dogma.[4]

[3] Performative here refers to the social performance of the Self, which is "interactional in nature and by involving symbolic forms and live bodies provides a way to constitute meaning and to affirm individual and cultural values". Stern, Henderson, 1993, 3.

[4] In contemporary sociological theory, secularization is associated with the process of fading out of grand narratives. Secularization runs parallel to the privatization of beliefs. Therefore in secular Europe today, due to

The headscarf as a performative takes many shapes: it can be a matter of free choice, it can be a product of coercion and social expectations of certain families or communities, it can be a mere expression of belonging to a group, it can be an expression of deep religious convictions[5] etc.

Regardless of the background of the various headscarf practices and reasons for head-covering, in the public realm during the past two decades the headscarf (together with other practices of covering the head and the face) has acquired an additional meaning, namely: the practice of questioning, challenging and resisting what is seen as the hegemonic social and political life. Therefore, in the political and social arenas of Europe, the headscarf had ceased to represent a modesty cloth and has become rather an expression of agency of those groups who feel that the majority fails to recognize their cultural needs and identity. Hence, the headscarf, alongside being a way of performing belonging, has also become a way of political *being* (a variant of citizenship exercise)[6] in which members of various diverse and often competing communities articulate their quotidian stances on living in a secular setting.

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the increased individualization and privatization of the politics of religious affiliations, culture and social morality are seen as domains independent of any religious influence since morality is perceived as a personal concern. See more at: Amiraux, 2007, 132; Kosmin, 2007, 5.

[5] The Quran prescribes a modest dress code through Surah 24:31, which says: "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms..."

[6] I here understand citizenship as a number of discrete but related aspects on the relation between the individual and the polity, some of them being formal rights as well as psychological dimensions that make legible the tension between citizenship as a formal legal status and as a normative project or an aspiration. More at: Sassen, 2005, 81.

In this paper I argue that *the Islamic head-covering garments have nowadays become, within the public arena, performative modes of social existence that question dominant majoritarian social codes*. The headscarf (as a common denominator of all specific Islamic garments) contributes to the construction of a cognitive region[7] in which alternative citizenship gains legitimacy, opening thereby a space in which ever-changing and relational multiple identities are being performed. In such a socio-political context, the headscarf is a performative agent through which the sense of common sociality is being achieved by practicing a dress code that is a visible identity marker, and that sends a message to the outsiders, and thus re-enforces the demarcation line between *Us* and *Them*.

In the following pages of this paper, different practices and standpoints on head-covering (mostly in the UK, France and Germany) will be presented with an aim of supporting the aforementioned claims. Through the voices of both those who support the headscarf and those who renounce it, I will explore the headcover as a political tool, used to send political messages and to question what is, by some Muslims, perceived as a hegemonic society they live in.

Headscarf: a question of identity or something else?

Even though the headscarf is an identity marker often perceived by the majority as a practice that oppresses women, it is considered by those who embrace it to be an identitarian unit that emits a familiar set of meanings (such as religion, communal sense, relation-

[7] The notion of cognitive region, borrowed here from Emanuel Adler's theory of international relations, refers to socially constructed mental entities that are borne out of the belief that some people share their destiny with people of other nations and communities, because they happen to share the values and expectations of proper action in domestic and international affairs. More at: Adler, Crawford, 2002.

ship with the outsiders etc.). The headscarf is a practice that helps build sociality among those who embrace and support it, and who see it as a visible sign of belonging to a non-territorial contextual community. Head-covering paves the way to the processes that construct a cognitive region for those who believe that they share destiny with others. They also believe that they, within a specific context, share the values and expectations that lead them to take certain actions and understand the actions of others in domestic and international affairs.

The headscarf serves to express both their *belonging* and *being*,[8] and is often employed to send a message to the outsiders. At times this message is being constructed by the outsiders themselves, but those who wear it often willingly send this message as well. The headscarf as a material practice maintains the mutual cognitive maps of common sociality among devoted groups and communities. These cognitive maps echo a mode of exercising *subcultural* transnational citizenship by questioning what is seen as a hegemonic type of alleged universality. The subcultural potential of the headscarf originates in its attributed powers to stir up the public arena with claims for recognition, equality and equity.[9] Moreover,

[8] Within the dichotomy of *the immigrant* and *the indigenous* in a transnational context (clear of any discernable content) the *ways of being* designate "various quotidian acts through which people live their lives..", whereas *ways of belonging* are about "the realm of cultural representation, ideology, and identity through which people reach out to distant lands or persons through memory, nostalgia, and imagination". More at: Schiller Glick, 2007, 480.

[9] Subculture here stands for a mode of representation of certain Muslim claims and cultural practices as challengers to the established (secular, European, national) norms and values. The notion of the subcultural in this context also refers to strategies some groups employ in tackling the hegemony of the majority society. Europe in this paper does not stand for *the Culture* nor do Muslim *ways of being* and *ways of belonging* stand for

the headscarf, through its 'subcultural' strategies of questioning dominant social codes, forms a space in which those that cover their heads enter into the public arena, intentionally or unintentionally, thereby leaving the traditional private domain and speaking for themselves, regardless of their actual position within their communities of origin or in society at large.

Therefore, rejection from the majority society has prompted headscarf-wearing women to speak and advocate for themselves or on behalf of their communities. This helped them 'transgress' from their traditionally ascribed role in society, i.e. from the private domain in which their voices cannot be publicly heard.

This is not to say that headcovers are modes of resistance only. There are many cases in which Muslim women and girls living in the 'West' are either forced or, through their family's non-violent pressure, expected to place Islamic garments on their bodies. Socialization within the family often involves taking cultural practices for granted without questioning, and equally often, for the sake of peace in the family, leads one to likewise refrain from questioning them. Moreover, in some cases individuals internalize what they are expected to receive from the members of their community for the sake of earning the community's respect and acceptance. A person thus succumbs to practices they might not necessarily intimately embrace.

An important note should be made here, namely that even though head-covering may in some cases be the result of pressures and violence, in the specific context in which a community re-eval-

the Subculture. I use the culture-subculture dichotomy only as a tool for examining the relational structure of positioning *the Muslim* with *the European* in the context of exercising citizenship, i.e. within the context of inequalities in the distribution of material and symbolic resources in the political communities the Muslims of Europe live in.

uates the headscarf, it becomes a tool of resistance at the expense of some women. Hence the community may use the headscarf (*niqab*, *burqa*[10]) to resist the hegemony of those who they see as power holders, whereas some of the women may be manipulated to serve as a channel for communicating such resistance, regardless of their own position on the issue. Notwithstanding all these, many women assume agency through head-covering accompanied by going out into the streets to protest or speak publicly in favour of their, as they claim, choice.

Even though head-covering has many backgrounds and many meanings, it is in the public domain of (western) European societies, in political discourse as well as in conservative and some liberal media, often reduced to patronizing strategies that result from the belief that it is invariably a way of suppressing women. The punch line of such views is that head-covering should not have its place in a secular society that is based on *liberal* values and human rights. Consequently, Islamic garments are understood not only as symbols of the discrimination of women, but also as challengers to the very *essence* of secularity in Europe.

The secular gaze into the Islamic headscarf seems to be a gaze into a symbol of coercion by culture and religion in which a free voice is not to be heard. This gaze does not differentiate between old and young headscarf-wearing women, between black chadors and *Dolce and Gabbana* designer scarves, between the head-covered protesters on the streets of Paris, the head-covered highly skilled medical doctors from England and the head-covered women who leave their houses only to go to the market or accompany their children on their way to school. The secular gaze does also not see the Muslim families in which the mother visits her hairdresser regularly, whereas one of her unmarried daughters chooses to wear a

[10] The *burqa* is a piece of clothing that covers a woman from head to foot.

headscarf, nor is this gaze able to see a head-covered woman holding hands with her female friend dressed in a tight mini skirt with a transparent blouse, together shopping for sexy underwear in one of the many European shopping malls. All of them are normally seen as victims who do not have a say, and who need to be liberated from the backwardness of their cultures and families.

So-called headscarf controversies cannot be thoroughly examined without putting them in the context of the dynamics of Islam as a religion and a world-view that often shapes policies and politics in many countries across the world. The Islamic headscarf revival (as a discourse) started in Arab-speaking countries, beginning with Egypt, in the 1970s with the emergence of the Islamic consciousness movements. Anthropologist Fadwa El Guindi argues that at the time, the headscarf became the object and the symbol of the new consciousness and new activism, by providing the conceptual and material tools for identity construction as well as for resistance, "it was set forth in the name of Islam, and was born in a completely different historical context and socio-cultural setting".[11] This socio-cultural setting revolves around the new consciousness Guindi writes about, that is: the awakening of political, social and cultural reactions to corrupt and non-democratic post-colonial and foreign puppet regimes in the Middle East and throughout the Islamic world.

One of the aspects of this new activism was the process of imagining the Muslim woman and her role in society. The headscarf turned out to be one of the strategies of differentiation from what was seen as corrupt and immodest. Over the past two decades, headscarf activism had taken many courses and acted in opposition against many other actors in the global political and social arena. Some Muslims claim that "what Islam established is not a restric-

[11] El Guindi, 1999, 143.

tion on the freedom of women but rather their firm protection from falling down to the lowest levels of humility".[12] Such a statement, for someone coming from a society in which women achieved a high level of independence, might sound patriarchal and conservative. Who protects women? Do they need protection by a single garment they put on their heads? Why is such protection not established for men as well? And what exactly does 'lowest level of humility' mean? Indeed, such a statement involves the presumption that women themselves cannot and are not able to either speak or act for themselves. This presumption is embedded in the patriarchal narratives of tradition that differentiate between men and women in their rights and duties as well as in their roles in society. Such narratives help maintain a gender regime in which the role of women is fixed within the accepted norms of behaviour established and secured predominantly by men. The transgression of these norms sheds bad light on the 'disobedient' women, proclaiming them fallen from modesty and from Godly commandments. In families that embrace such a view, divorcing from tradition would mean divorcing from the family and could lead to ostracism from family members and complete exclusion from the community. Therefore, in order to conform to family beliefs and social convictions, wearing the headscarf sometimes means not being abandoned just as well as it might mean gaining recognition and respect within the family and the wider community.

However, as Fadwa Guindi argued, head-covering is not just about Islam as a religious system and doctrine. Even though the headscarf has had a religious (and cultural) background, it also gained a political meaning, i.e. it has become a tool and symbol of resistance to various hegemonies. Many Muslim women from all over the world nowadays do not wear Islamic garments just for re-

[12] Ismail, 2007.

ligious reasons. A number of them are sending messages to the rest of society (both insiders and outsiders) by using their body as the principal means for communicating their message. Islamic female garments are performatives, political and social interventions of women into the public arena. Therefore, not only are they sending the message, they are also actively challenging established societal norms and values in those societies in which the headscarf is publicly noticed.

Of course, as I already argued above, not all head-covering practices are autonomous performatives and symbols of resistance. If the headscarf (*niqab, burqa*) is imposed on women through pressures and violence, or simply through communal expectations, we cannot speak about it as a subversive strategy of questioning and resisting the hegemony. However, we here need to make a 'footnote' and say that even when a community imposes the headscarf on its women, this may come out of the will to resist the existing social order. In such cases women are not agents, they are merely a means of communicating the message towards the majority. Therefore, the headscarf in these cases is not a performative of head-covered women, but a performative of their communities. Notwithstanding, women might sometimes assume agency even in those cases in which Islamic garments are imposed on them. Namely, by conforming to the expectations of their communities that live in a non-Islamic social setting (thus earning respect), they may begin working on the negotiation of their overall position within the community.

A number of headscarf strategies therefore exist, and many of them are about either internal or external *subversion*. On the following pages, the different head-covering practices and their meanings will be presented and discussed together with *pro* and *contra* views from both Muslim and non-Muslim women.

How did it all start?

In 1989, three Muslim girls from Creil in France were sent home because they came to school wearing the headscarf. School authorities decided not to let these girls in because they wore something that was seen as out of line with the official *laïcité* of the French state. The headscarf was considered to be a religious symbol that did not fit into the secularism of the French school system. At the time *l'affaire du foulard* sparked hot debates all over France, and mobilized both the secularists and those who supported the women wearing the scarf (be they religious Muslims or headscarf pro-choice advocates). Fifteen years later, the French government formally banned the wearing of religious symbols in public schools, and in 2010 finally banned wearing the *burqa* on French streets altogether. Thus, twenty years later the headscarf is still a hot political issue, not only in France but all across Europe.

Debates on the mere covering of the head are accompanied with the discussion on the *niqab*, the garment that covers a woman's entire face. Meanwhile, Europe has experienced a wide variety of headscarf-opposing strategies. For instance, France went so far as to adopt a special law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols. In half of the German states, the headscarf as a religious symbol is banned from public institutions, whereas some Christian symbols are exempt from the ban. In the UK, the headscarf has not been treated legally the way it was treated in France and some parts of Germany, but a heated debate over the issue occurs from time to time nonetheless. In 2006, the then Foreign Affairs Secretary Jack Straw wrote in a newspaper column that he would prefer it if women wearing the *niqab* removed it when speaking to him. This statement triggered UK-wide discussions with many noted intellectuals supporting Mr. Straw. Nevertheless, there were also many of those who strongly criticized his view. The secularism card (seen as the

freedom from religion) was on the table in Germany and the UK, just as it had been in France. Issues such as oppression of women and security were also widely discussed. Some discussions revealed the ongoing existence of the fear of the Islamization of Europe, and the notion that the banning of the headscarf (*niqab*, *burqa* etc.) is being seen as a struggle against the deterioration of European secular values, and as a struggle against political Islam understood as an oppressive religious ideology.

Christian Joppke summarized the headscarf controversies in France, Germany, and Britain in the following manner: the national idiom in France was about republicanism and the values of *laïcité*; in the UK the idiom was about liberal multiculturalism (recently questioned by British politicians, though), and in Germany about 'open neutrality and Christian occidental self-definition'.[13] Joppke also argues that in Europe "the Islamic headscarf functions as a mirror of identity which forces Europeans to see who they are and to rethink the kinds of public institutions and societies they wish to have".[14] I would here add that head-covering in certain political contexts provokes the feeling of insecurity, both societal and political, and that harsh reactions on the part of certain governments, media, academics, and public intellectuals arise from their feeling of moral panic. Of course, it is not the headscarf itself that causes this panic, but rather anxiety about the 'forces' (no matter whether real or imagined) that stand behind the veiling (socially conservative illiberal and violent forces that allegedly wish 'to take over' the society).

Reactions to head-covering expressed by outsiders indicate that something has changed when it comes to Europe feeling at peace with its understanding of the universalism of its values. The feeling of insecurity is incarnated through Eurocentric discourses in dealing

[13] Joppke, 2008, 25.
[14] Ibid., 2.

with head-covering as well as with other cultural practices that are 'not European'. According to Bobby Sayyid, Eurocentrism is a process, i.e. a discourse that emerges in the context of the *decentring* of the West; that is, a context in which the relationship between western enterprise and universalism is open to disarticulation and re-articulation. Eurocentrism is a project to *recentre* the West, "a project that is only possible when the West and the centre are no longer considered to be synonymous".[15] Head-covering hails from the European internal cultural and not territorial periphery, and is seen and understood as subversive to the values that Europeans have fought for throughout their history. Therefore, downplaying head-covering through public speeches, the media and education, as well as imposing bans are just a few of the many measures that some European officials and intellectuals take in order to re-secure Europe as the Centre.

I do argue that, at times, Muslims living in Europe take up subcultural strategies to question hegemonic majoritarian discourses and policies. On the other side, the culture-subculture dynamism may function in a way that leads to either the hybridization or the phasing out of one or both of them.[16] Moral panic in Europe discloses that there is a fear that subculture might either take over or irreversibly change the societal outlook of nation-states and Europe as a whole. It is true that post-WW II immigration has changed the demography of Europe, and it is true that it has brought along cul-

[15] Sayyid, 1997, 128.

[16] "Hybridization involves the melding of cultural lenses or frames such that values and goals that were focused on one context are transposed to a new context. Hybridization has the potential of allowing individuals to express cultural values, even when the original contexts no longer exist, and also may create a bond or connection between individuals and their new contexts by allowing a socially approved forum to express their identities". More at: Oyserman et al, 1998, 1606.

tural practices Europe had not seen on its soil in a long time. On the other hand, immigration to (western) Europe did not start only after WW II, which means that the long history of internal European migrations as well as immigration from outside of Europe has been constantly changing the *appearance* of Europe. In the past, it used to cause moral panic in various parts of Europe. However, the issue of Islam in Europe seems to be somewhat unique since moral panic over Islam, as a cultural reference, which sometimes serves as the forefront ideology of political actions, is transnational, i.e. it is a Europe-wide phenomenon. This has to do with the rise of European political institutions, transnational social movements etc, as well as with the globalization of certain identities, such as global Islam, and the processes of the translation of migrant ethnic identities into a contingent single identity (Muslim). In such a context, the feeling of insecurity over allegedly competing ideologies (Islam allegedly competes with Europe) prompts decision-makers to adopt decisions that, ironically, negate what they themselves believe Europe stands for: the birthplace of the freedom of expression and of human rights.

Head-covering is one of the issues that heat up the debate on the compatibility of 'Islam' with 'Europe' (whatever these concepts may stand for). Politicians, religious leaders, journalists, intellectuals, feminists, and women wearing the headscarf (or *niqab*, *burqa*) are taking part in a tiring debate on whether the covering of the head and the face is compatible with life in a secular social setting, and whether it oppresses women or not – whether it is a choice or is imposed by men. Sometimes these debates are academic, sometimes they are political, and sometimes they turn into protests. From time to time, women wearing headscarves and veils take to the streets and protest, thereby leaving the private domain (to which they are stereotypically circumscribed in the eyes of non-

Muslims), and entering the public space. Women's protests over the veiling issue are subversive *per se* since they both question the hegemony of European universalist discourses and loosen up the traditional Muslim gender roles (by entering politics through protests).

Headscarf agency and types of veiling

The head-covered woman is one of the most common images for representations of Islam in European countries. Irene Donohue Clyne, in her contribution to the book *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images,* writes that "women become the public identity of Islam, at the cost of their individually recognized physical features and become generic 'Muslim women'".[17] Popular media discourses reinforce the image of Islam as a religion and a cultural reference that is hostile towards female freedom and sexuality. The media frequently feature stories of Muslim women who removed the veil, left their husbands, rebelled against their families. The point always seems to be that they are from Muslim families, of Muslim background, and that they did something they were not supposed to do, i.e. succeeded in getting rid of the domestication imposed by their communities.

However, headscarf-wearing women often challenge the view of being domesticated and confined within the private arena by going out into the streets and claiming their rights. For example, when the controversial French law on the banning of religious symbols in public institutions came into force, headscarf-wearing protesters waved the French flag, marched the streets of France singing the Marseillaise, and rebelliously manifested their discontent with the Law. Therefore, they went beyond the private domain and entered the public arena where they spoke for themselves. The protests in

[17] Clyne, 2003, 30.

France and elsewhere in Europe reveal that a change has been taking place in the male-female dynamism in Muslim communities. Women are assuming agency and act in an attempt to shape policies that concern them. In the French case, Michela Ardizzoni argues that there is a "need to acknowledge the existence of a hybrid identity that is neither completely French nor North-African and to re-create a space for the female body to express this identity",[18] and I would argue that this is true for the rest of (western) Europe as well. For instance, Dutch ethnographic research in the Netherlands revealed that those Moroccan girls who wear the headscarf are often the most outspoken in claiming their independence.[19]

The case of how some converts to Islam view the headscarf is particularly interesting. An ethnographic research among the so-called new British Muslims revealed that female converts to Islam embrace the headscarf in large numbers, and that for some of them head-covering serves as a line of separation between them and the majority society. Findings of Kate Zebiri's research published in her book *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* discloses that "some female converts comment explicitly on the way wearing the headscarf strengthened their Islamic identity or heightened their sense of self-confidence". One of them said that: "It's part of me, it's part of my identity, that's who I am. If I took it off nobody would know I'm Muslim and I'm proud to be Muslim".[20] The headscarf is also explicitly regarded as a marker of separation. For example, one of Zebiri's interviewees commented that "it separates you from the non-Muslims... It doesn't mean those non-Muslims are horrible, but the fact that you wear it separates you from them".[21]

[18] Ardizzoni, 2004, 45.
[19] Duits, van Zoonen, 2008, 113.
[20] Zebiri, 2008, 106.
[21] Ibid., 107.

Emma Tarlo, of the Goldsmiths College, in her text on the headscarf in London argues that the adoption of the headscarf by Muslim middle class women is more a product of the trans-cultural encounters they experience in a cosmopolitan urban environment than of their cultural backgrounds.[22] Tarlo interviewed headscarf-wearing women of different ethnic backgrounds living in London, and found out that there exists a so-called positive resonance[23] of the headscarf felt by many women she interviewed, most of which came from Muslim families in which the headscarf was not practiced. These women testify that they feel excited when they see other women wearing the headscarf, that they feel a sense of community; that "they are able to greet complete strangers when they travel abroad, marking their collective recognition of belonging to a global Islamic community or Umma, and contributing towards the creation of such a community in the process".[24] Tarlo argues that for the headscarf-wearing women she encountered, the veil is lived as a form of resistance to the Western media which produce body images that pressurize young girls and make them do anything to conform to the imagery of the sexy body. Women wearing the headscarf resist such pressures even though, as Tarlo writes, "they willingly submit to another set of discourses and disciplinary regimes concerning the female body".[25] In the conclusion to her text that resulted from ethnographic research in London, Tarlo says that the headscarf cannot be fully explained without giving weight

[22] Tarlo, 2007, 154.

[23] Tarlo borrows the term 'resonance' from Stephen Greenblatt's understanding, namely that 'By *resonance* I mean the power of the displayed object to reach beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand'. Ibid., 154.

[24] Ibid., 142.

[25] Ibid., 153.

to the details of personal experience and the particularities of living in a trans-cultural city. Tarlo concludes that "falling in love with someone from another faith, surviving illness, meeting a convert on an Arabic course, working with immigrants from different countries are all part of the texture of life of *being Muslim* in London".[26] Tarlo's insights and conclusions are true for many multicultural metropolitan cities in Europe.

As I noted already, there are many backgrounds to embracing the headscarf. Personal biographies are a good read in order to examine potential paths people might take in order to make decisions to start living a way of life that is different from what they were used to, or to reclaim abandoned practices of their communities of origin. In most of the cases Tarlo presented in her paper, we see the so-called 'autonomous veiling' (which will be further discussed below), since most of the interviewed women started wearing the headscarf on their own accord. Notwithstanding, negotiating one's way of expressing oneself certainly has to do with one's social environment and the communal setting a woman has either chosen to belong to, or in which she was born. As I noted above, decisions are sometimes made out of personal convictions; sometimes they are made with a mere aim to please others, sometimes in order to get recognized by others, and sometimes to perform a view *contra* or *pro* some political agenda. Tarlo writes about a woman who felt an extraordinary sense of respect when she began wearing the headscarf on the streets because other scarf-wearing women she did not know began greeting her with 'salaam',[27] which tells us that people do recognize and appreciate each other through their choices that give them a sense of community. There is a personal gain when someone decides to start doing something that other

[26] Ibid., 154.
[27] Ibid., 142.

people will approve of and cherish. Therefore, 'autonomous veiling' is not in itself free of the cost and benefit scrutiny against the backdrop of communal, spousal, family expectations, even though there are women who cover their heads without the intention of pleasing anyone, i.e. who wear headscarves out of their own conviction, and without any intention to say anything to the outer world.

However, if the headscarf is practiced within the minoritarian habitus, it is then exposed to the gaze of the outsiders and thus takes on an additional meaning. So, even though in such cases there is no initial intention to publicize one's bodily expression, it is actually publicized by the gaze of the others, be they people who also practice head-covering or those which perceive it as a strange, non-modern and outdated cultural practice. Therefore, the headscarf nowadays does have a resonance since it reaches beyond the boundaries of mere expression of one's religion, even if it is only an expression of a religious identity. It has become a cultural force since it is exposed to the gaze and scrutiny of the outsiders as well as, as Tarlo's accounts show, becoming a marker of recognition and belonging to a non-territorial community of believers. Whether intentional or unintentional, the headscarf is a performative of *difference*, of a world view that pokes the eyes of the spectators who direct their gaze toward those whose bodily expressions are noticed as a visible challenger to the dominant bodily expressions.

Having examined the multiple meanings people attach to the covering of women's heads, Gaspard and Khosrokhavar provided a classification that differentiates between three meanings of the headscarf: *'veil of the immigrant'* which testifies 'the permanence of the identity of origin'; *'veil of the adolescence'* imposed by parents as a controlling strategy; and *'autonomous veil'* as a freely chosen expression of Islamic identity. What all three meanings have in common is that all three are performatives, which means that all

three reflect a certain standpoint and a political attitude behind the mere covering of the head.[28]

'Veil of the immigrant' is the veil through which memories and attachments to the places and communities of origin reflect on the politics of preserving one's identity in a new environment. 'Veil of the adolescence' is the veil of secluding the female sexuality. However, even though it might not be necessarily imposed by parents, it can also represent a communal rite of passage within the process of the coming of age. I will here amend Gaspard and Khosrokhavar's classification with something that is best called the *'veil of expectations'* which refers to the processes of political socialization into a family, peer group, neighbourhood, diaspora community, homeland, within the frame of geopolitical and global changes and the processes of *othering* one's community is exposed to. The veil of expectations is similar to the veil of adolescence, from which it differs in the 'quantitative and qualitative' level of social pressure that someone may be exposed to. Namely, the veil of expectations is not something that is imposed on women; it is more akin to an expectation seen as a logical response to the politics of exclusion that come from the outside. Therefore, women and men are softly interpellated by their communities to provide such responses.

'Autonomous veil' is labelled by Gaspard and Khosrokhavar as a freely chosen expression of Islamic identity. It is a performative that expresses a world view set by prescriptions of a religion. This performative is circumscribed by the bodily and ideological expressions of women who on their own accord decided to wear a garment that will visibly mark them as followers of a wide variety of teachings and social doctrines of Islam. However, no matter how diverse Islam may be, in the gaze of the outsider this diversity is not recognized. Furthermore, the autonomous veil is not limited to the free

[28] Gaspard, Khosrokhavar, 1995, 12-14.

expressions of a religious identity; it may also be a free expression of a political, ideological or social identity. The autonomous veil may encompass both the veil of the immigrant as well as the veil of the adolescent by one's free gesture to visibly express one's belonging to a specific group of people, or to visibly express compliance with the world views of the family. The autonomous veil is a stand, an expression of one choice within a whole plethora of possible choices, and, what is also important; it is a choice visible to both the insiders and the outsiders.

The wide variety of autonomous ways of expressing identity and personal convictions as well as family traditions through embracing a cultural habit, which is by many considered patriarchal and oppressive, puts forth a question: to what extent can we claim that our decisions are truly autonomous and not a result of upbringing and societal pressures, family and spousal expectations? As social beings, we make our choices based on experience, personal scrutiny of options as well as ties with our social environment. Many times when we want to make a decision, we consider the external to see how our decision will reflect on the people we care for or depend on. Many times, we also make decisions that conform to the expectations of others and might result in recognition and respect. Sometimes, we make decisions that intentionally express rebellion against others.

When it comes to head-covering, as we have already seen, there exists a diversity of reasons why a person of the female gender would do something which is not required from male persons. However, there are always backgrounds to what people do, and as regards head covering I would here, in addition to Gaspard and Khosrokhavar's classification, make a distinction between the headcover that is intimately personal and one that transcends the intimate world of the person wearing it and goes beyond, into the

public and the political (I will refer to it here as the *public headcover*, or the headcover meant to be seen). Moreover, both the intimately personal and the political headcover can be results of autonomous personal decisions or of peer, communal, parental or spousal pressure and expectations.[29]

Donning the intimately personal headcover may be a decision a woman makes in order to please God and circumscribe her body within the religion she cares for, without necessarily expressing any interest in the world around her or without the intention of conforming to the expectations of anyone in particular. On the other hand, the intimately personal headcover can be a consequence of societal expectation in which one decides to act in line with one's immediate social environment, so as not to stir up the communal dynamics. In such cases the headcover is about the personal and intimate sensations of not wishing to challenge the community one belongs to, without any reference to the outer world i.e. without any political agenda behind. Even when pressures from the community are not merely societal expectations but social forces with real consequences (ostracism, violence, segregation, separation, social marginalization etc) this mode of head-covering remains personal since the woman or girl forced into such customs does not politicize them. Instead, she just sees it as a fate beyond her choice, and may

[29] In her aforementioned article on practices of the headscarf in London, Emma Tarlo tells a story about a young Indian Muslim couple who moved to London from Delhi, and who "find themselves frequently questioned by their neighbours about why they do not visually display their religious identity. The woman, who had never seriously contemplated wearing a headscarf when she lived in Old Delhi, now finds herself constantly having to justify her decision not to wear one, not only to other women in the area but also to her six-year-old son, Ahmed. He sees his mother dressed differently from the other Muslim mothers he encounters in the area and wishes that she would conform to the type". More at: Tarlo, 2007, 131-156.

or may not be at peace with it.

The public headcover, unlike the strictly intimately personal headcover, is there to be noticed. It may also be an autonomous decision and, as we have already seen, a stand against those who scorn it. However, it may be a result of either communal expectations or (and) pressures. In the former case it is a performative of those who challenge a variety of political dogmas held by the outsiders, be it racism, Islamophobia, a Eurocentric view of female liberation etc. In the latter case, it might express obedience to the world view of the community of one's origin. It could also be a game played by those who use the headcover as a culturally imagined territorial marker. In this case, actually, the headcover can be a strategy of earning respect through bodily activism or mere proactive obedience to the community one fits into most easily.

The manifold backgrounds of the headscarf and the diversity of its meanings feed the long lasting debates throughout Europe that revolve around the issue of the position of women in Islam, i.e. around the question whether the headscarf is really a woman's choice or something imposed on her by political conservatives, families that wish to control female sexuality, or religious authorities. On the following pages, several different (*pro et contra*) views will be presented. The views offered here come mostly from the part of observant Muslims, ex-Muslims, secular Muslims, and ex-converts to Islam.

Pro Headscarf

Non-Muslim political conservatives preach that the headscarf is a project of the Islamists. An author of the conservative Weekly Standard writes that "some French Muslim families, for instance, are paid 500 euro per quarter by extremist Muslim organizations just to have their daughters wear the *hijab*", and tells the story of the

Syrian-American psychiatrist Wafa Sultan who told the Jerusalem Post that "after she moved to the United States in 1991, Saudis offered her $1,500 a month to cover her head and attend a mosque".[30] Although it may be true that some religious conservatives within their political agenda do financially support the wearing of the headscarf in diaspora communities, it is extremely unlikely that the thousands of women who wear one actually do so for money.

Salma Yaqoob, the leader of the Respect Party from Birmingham, argues that Muslim women "are caught between those who claim to protect us – the many Muslim men who act to restrict our movement and freedoms – and those who claim to liberate us – killing us with their bombs and allowing us no voice unless it mirrors exactly their own".[31] For Yaqoob, the headscarf is an expression of the Islamic notions of female empowerment. Yaqoob's standpoint reflects a resistance to the restrictions imposed on Muslim women by both the Muslims (men) and those who believe that a world view informed by religion and female subjectivity performed by following the prescriptions of religion is automatically a restriction imposed on a woman's freedom. Yaqoob challenges this view through her own political activism as well as through the way she presents her body.

Yaqoob herself is a politician, an activist, and a practicing Muslim who claims that many Muslim men look to curb women within their communities by restricting their freedoms and movements, thus controlling their bodies and minds. She admits that there is a patriarchal agenda behind those who claim that they wish to protect 'their' women. At the same time, Yaqoob challenges those who claim to speak for discriminated Muslim women through exclusivist and culturally biased strategies of 'female liberation'. Salma

[30] Guitta, 2006.
[31] Yaqoob, 2004.

Yaqoob wears the headscarf and yet engages in the public arena of the city of Birmingham, using the available recourses in politics to gain the attention of the citizenry and those involved in politics.

Alia Al-Saji, of McGill University, claims that western representations of veiled Muslim women are not about Muslim women themselves; they actually carry out a different purpose: "they provide the foil or negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively reflected".[32] Saji also writes that the racialization of Muslim women does more than represent veiled women as passive victims; in her opinion the racializations put into effect a space that imaginatively and often practically excludes their multiple subjectivities, reducing the complex meanings and enactments of their veiling to Islamic oppression.[33]

Nilüfer Göle, a Turkish scholar, claims that religion provides an autonomous and alternative space for the collective self-definition of Muslims in their critical encounter with modernity. In Göle's view religion is a cognitive framework for both the personal self-fashioning and collective orientation, whereas "religious symbols and performances inform the public of the radical transformation that is taking place, from the concealment of Muslim identity and its cultural attributes to the collective and public disclosures of Islam".[34] As for the veiling practices, Göle maintains that they are, *inter alia*, imagined as a source of collective empowerment for those who transform this attribute of potential public discredit into a subaltern advantage that turns the sense of humiliation into a search for prestige and power. Claiming this, Göle goes further and establishes a view that states that although the practice of veiling is not in conformity with liberal gender presentations, it on the other hand also

[32] Al-Saji, 2010, 875.
[33] Ibid., 891.
[34] Göle, 2008.

transgresses the Muslim communitarian values of morality because "the young girls who adopt, improvise, and negotiate the headscarf in the public sphere are at the same time, albeit unintentionally, altering the symbol of the headscarf and images of Muslim women".[35] From the protests in France and other (western) European countries we see that the headscarf is not only a religious symbol, i.e. there are additional 'social' meanings that are attached to it by those who embrace or defend it. The meanings and performatives of the headscarf go beyond Islam and enter the sphere of social communication between different world views and political stances. Hence, wearing the headscarf is not only about believing in something, but also about saying something; it is often about the intention of building a common sociality with those who feel that they are going through similar experiences, and about challenging the dominant world view perceived as hegemonic structural violence against the marginalized.

The headscarf has many proponents and defenders in Europe, however the current state of affairs shows that it also has many opponents who see it as the legacy of an oppressive gender regime, imposed on women and aiming to 'disqualify' and 'threaten' the image and the being of the liberated 'collective', i.e. of the woman in the 'West'. Just like proponents or defenders of the headscarf, the opponents claim that the headscarf is not only about Islam but also about defining the social imagery of an imagined collective called 'Muslims'. On the following pages I will look into the stories of those who practiced it and at some point in their lives abandoned the practice, and present the views of women of Muslim origin who oppose the headscarf and consider it a political tool for the discrimination of women and societal control.

[35] Ibid.

Contra Headscarf

Banning the headscarf from institutions in some European countries provoked an outcry from Muslims and non-Muslim human rights advocates, as well as certain leftist politicians and public intellectuals. On the other side, the ban (most notably the *burqa* ban) was welcomed by a number of secular individuals and ex-Muslims as well as by some public intellectuals that claim to be leaning towards the political left. Pro-ban arguments were expressed both by non-Muslims and ex-Muslims. They ranged from claims that head-covering was a symbol of male domination to views of the headscarf as something that separates communities and enforces communalism. For example, self proclaimed 'gender jihadist' Asra Nomani says that:

> "Women should not be the preserving jars of honour and purity. They should not be punished for their sexuality, by crouching in the backrooms and corners of mosques. Women should not be gagged just because they bring men into temptation. These are all just control mechanisms to treat us as second-class citizens. If you cover the face of a woman, it de-personifies her. The removal of the veil is a crucial element of gender jihad, because by doing this we dispel ignorance."[36]

Marnia Lazreg, an Algerian born American scholar, views head-covering in a similar vein. She claims that "the retreat into a remote past is unabashedly framed as a defence of religion as well as retrieval of a lost identity", and argues that "the West is no longer imagined as a horizon on which one could gauge the degree to which development or 'rights' or 'democracy' are attainable. It is the quintessential otherness that reflects the unsurpassable otherness that Islam also represents for the West".[37]

[36] Nomani, 2009.

[37] Lazreg, 2009, 113.

Fadela Amara, French feminist activist of Algerian origin, believes that the headscarf is a symbol of submission to male dominance. She claims that, in the French context, the veiled woman says 'I am not available', and through the act of veiling 'buys herself some peace'. Amara is one of the founders of the activist group called *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither Whores nor Submissive), that emerged after Sohane Benziane, a seventeen-year-old girl of Muslim origin, was burned alive by a suburban gang leader in Paris for refusing to obey him.[38]

Necla Kelek, a German sociologist of Turkish descent, claims that the headscarf is not a Quran-based prescription but rather a legacy of tradition. She makes a distinction between traditional Islamic and liberal views of male sexuality, claiming that in the Islamic view people are not able to control their urges, whereas "our society demands that men exercise self-control and wants women to be able to appear in public on equal terms".[39] To Kelek, women who wear the headscarf on their own accord are sending an explicit message to others, namely that they are chaste women who succumb to their husbands. She also claims that through the headscarf a political message is being sent to the German society:

> "The headscarf has now become a political symbol, that of a Muslim identity which separates itself from the majority community

[38] Fadela Amara and *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* received criticism by some prominent French leftists for being supportive of Islamophobia. French sociologist Sylvie Tissot in her text *Bilan d'un féminisme d'État* labeled Amara's organization as a movement whose roots were in the state sphere rather than the civil society, and which failed to detect structural sexism in French society by focusing only on sexism in the suburbs. Tissot claims that the state feminism of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* reduces Arab boys to an essentialized identity, and argues that the *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* way of struggle against racism in the suburbs turned into a struggle against the racialized culture. More at: Tissot, 2008.

[39] Kelek, 2009.

> out of religious, traditional, patriarchal motives. When I see the veiled young import brides walking behind their veiled mothers-in-law in Berlin-Wedding, Cologne or Paderborn, I doubt that they have chosen this veiled life of their own free will."[40]

Seyran Ates, another German-Turkish public intellectual, is also critical of the headscarf. Just like Kelek, Ates reiterates that the problem lies in the fact that only women and girls are forced to cover their heads, claiming that even though many Muslim women willingly wear a headscarf, many of them are actually afraid of raising the issue of removing it in their families and communities. Ates argues that "silence cannot be understood as assent", and that "closing one's eyes to such realities in the name of minority protection cannot be in the spirit of a modern democracy".[41] Ates is also critical of some European feminists who:

> "rally against the Catholic Church and its rigid sexual morals, but insist that we tolerate Turkish women wearing the headscarf because they believe this enables the women to preserve their culture. As far as I'm concerned, the headscarf is nothing but an expression of oppression and inhibition, and of the fact that the men would prefer to hide their women".[42]

On the other hand, both Ates and Kelek were criticized for their support of the reproduction of Islamophobic discourses. Authors of the text named "Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the 'War on Terror'" criticized Kelek for advocating that the perpetrator of domestic violence should expect negative consequences for their immigration status, whereas Kelek received crit-

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ates, 2005.
[42] Ates, 2008.

icism for being the consultant who helped the regional government in Baden-Wurttemberg devise the 'Muslim Test', a naturalization questionnaire focusing on gender violence. Authors of the text claim that even though Kelek's and Ates' stances are constructed as exceptions; they actually confirm "the rule of a victimized Oriental femininity".[43]

Alongside Kelek and Ates there are those Muslim women who once wore the headscarf and later removed it without downplaying those who continue to wear one. Emel Algan, daughter of the founder of the Islamic organization *Milli Görüs* and former activist herself, removed her headscarf after having worn one for 30 years. Having decided to step beyond the public domain reserved for activist Muslim women in her community, her marriage underwent a crisis and finally collapsed. Her husband could not agree with the new choices made by his wife, and they decided to separate. To Algan, the decision to remove her headscarf was a decision to leave Islamism. She did not leave Islam; she did not consider herself a feminist. However, she believes that the headscarf is nowadays a practice of separation imposed by religious conservatives aimed at controlling the female body and sending a message to the outsiders. Algan claims that:

> "A belief that religion consists of God's so-called laws and religious duties which should never be questioned, instead of godly wisdom and recommendations, only prevents open communication with people of other beliefs and hampers the desire to contemplate the meaning of one's actions... it cannot be the will of God for us to pursue in the name of Islam a fanatical politics that separates believers from unbelievers, sees the devil as the competition to the creator and reduces people to drive-ridden bodies."[44]

[43] Haritaworn et al, 2008, 73.
[44] Algan, 2006.

Algan's performative of the public removal of the headscarf is a personal publicized testimony and practice of questioning the hegemony of the dominant patriarchal and separatist discourses reiterated by a group of people who themselves question and criticize the dominant society. Algan's performative takes the form of a subcultural revolt within the community, which at times assumes subcultural modes of being. Therefore, just as her headscarf once used to send messages to the public, the removal of her veil is an act that sends a message to the world on what her headscarf meant and why she gave up on it.

The cases presented above tell stories of the headscarf seen as a tool of control with a purpose. The purpose, should we trust these women, is to send messages to others by using the woman's performative potential. Veiling is understood as the medium of different kinds of resistance practices directed towards the majority society, which is being performed at the expense of women. In this context, removing the veil is also a performative that sends a message to both the majority society and to the community of 'origin'. Therefore, it seems that we cannot speak about head-covering that does not include those who are outside the veil. Whether the veil-bearer has the intention to draw the attention of others or not, the *Others* see the message, and understand it in multiple manners depending on the person who wears the veil and the political and social context in which the 'veiled' woman performs her social existence. Therefore, even when it is not meant to be a mark of separation, the headscarf (*niqab, burqa*) is often read as a demarcation line between *Us* and *Them*.

Conclusion: Beyond Pro and Contra

Drawing on the French case, Bronwyn Winter writes that whatever reasons women and girls have for wearing the headscarf, it is a mod-

ern politicized uniform, which signifies adherence to "conservative religious values and, increasingly, Islamism".[45] Winter also claims that the headscarf denotes the machinations of Islamist wedge politics, and speaks about a French Muslim woman named Nadia Chaabane, who denounced what she saw as hypocrisy of the pro-headscarf movement arguing that this movement "under the pretext of fighting discrimination … defends a discrimination of which women are the victims".[46] The headscarf is a political issue in France and elsewhere in Europe, and at times it does stand for a modern politicized uniform through which some people recognize each other in a contingent cognitive region that emerges from transnational networking. However, Winter is not right when she claims the headscarf signifies adherence to Islamism only, since it usually does not have to do with religion *per se* exclusively. The headscarf is often a dressing code of common sociality that does not necessarily stand for common religiosity (in terms of religious doctrine).

We witnessed a variety of headscarf rationales and vast disapprovals of head-covering, coming from both the Left and the Right, from the media, academia, politics etc. On one side, the headscarf is understood as a source of collective empowerment for those who turn its attribute of potential public discredit into a subaltern advantage that further transforms the sense of humiliation into a search for prestige and power.[47] One the other side, the headscarf is seen as a political symbol of Muslim identity which distinguishes itself from the majority society out of religious, traditional, patriarchal, political motives.

The common denominator of both *pro* and *contra* headscarf discourses is that they go beyond Islam as a religion and enter the

[45] Winter, 2006, 295.
[46] Ibid., 291.
[47] Göle, 2006.

realm of social communication, i.e. they discuss the headscarf as a practice of communicating the message towards the outsiders. My point throughout this paper has been that this social communication aspect of veiling within the strategies of exercising citizenship is what makes the headscarf controversial in some European countries. The messages that are being sent, or that are being read from the practices of head-covering, prompt reactions that lead towards the labelling of the headscarf as a practice that looks to challenge the 'achievements' of secularity. The trans-nationality of the headscarf practice only stirs up the controversy further, framed as a turbulent exchange between the norm and the fact, between imagined shared culture and its *Other* that is seen and represented from within the culture-subculture dichotomy.

No matter what lies behind individual headscarf wearing practices, the garment itself has become a demarcation line, a tool for both internal and external social categorizations. The headscarf assumed the role of proclaiming who is with *Us*, and who is with *Them*. Finally, the headscarf has also become an aspect of agency since its subversivity functions among *Us* and is at the same time meant and seen as an intention to 'disturb' *Them*. As such, the headscarf at times forms a space where collective imagery is repositioned, by simultaneously challenging the norms of the majority society and transcending the traditional role of women in society by prompting them to assume a public role and start speaking for themselves.

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