

Higab and the Education of the Self

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Abstract

When female adherents of Islamic movements advocate the higab – the headscarf or veil – they simultaneously rework the concept of higab and the category of the Muslim woman. This can be seen as part of a wider objectification of the Muslim consciousness following the dissemination of mass education in the modern Middle East. This paper analyzes the discourse of female Islamists as expressed in a recent publication in which the higab and Islamic activism are described as matters of self-education. The Muslim woman and her level of education are represented as pivotal to the integrity of the society, and the higab is subsequently rewritten to signal an ethical and responsible woman serving this purpose. The paper argues that this discourse promotes a modern approach to education.

Introduction

Among Western observers and Islamic scholars, the most common interpretation of the higab is that of a headscarf or veil worn by Muslim women that is collectively sanctioned to preserve modesty and regulate desire in society. Subsequently, the adoption of the higab by female adherents of Islamist movements is perceived as a submission to prevalent notions of modesty. Committed female Islamists in Cairo, however, promote the higab as an individual choice. Thus, female Islamists' commitment to Islamic activism, in their choice to adopt the higab, may be understood as a process of ameliorating and educating themselves. To these activists, there is: "... no more obvious way of reforming oneself than putting on the Islamic dress" (Shahrazad al-`Arabi, 1989: 98).

Conceptual Framework

A salient feature of modernity in the Middle East is the objectification of the Muslim perception, which is "...the process by which basic questions come to the fore in the consciousness of large numbers of believers: 'What is my religion?', 'Why is it important to my life?', and 'How do my beliefs guide my conduct?'" (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 38). These modern queries concern Muslims of all classes.

In his analysis of the process of objectification in the development of modernity in Western Europe Michel Foucault identified a mode of objectification that he called subjectification : the way a human being turns him or herself into a modern subject (1983: 208) [1]. When Foucault first addressed the question of subjectification, he formulated the notion of "the self-policing subject", i.e. a subject internalizing control that was formerly collectively organized and sanctioned. This evolved into a theory of "bio-power", i.e. power invested and partly masked in the bodies of modern subjects. At this stage the modern subject was understood as having little agency and influence on his or her own life. In the later work of Foucault, the internalization of control comes about through the individual's active participation in the objectification of him or

herself; eventually it seems that the modern individual is actively fashioning his or her own identity (1985, 1986).

If female Islamists adapting the higab are submitting to collective regulations of desire, it is reasonable easy to imagine that these women are not in any way adapting modern strategies in the Foucauldian sense. Alternatively, as this article proposes, the adaptation of the higab may take the form of a process of educating and disciplining the self. Female Islamists are subscribing to new interpretations of the Muslim woman and Islam in general and thereby not only objectifying Islam, but simultaneously adopting a new objectifying approach towards themselves. When they present themselves as educated and disciplined individuals capable of educating others, it is a modern technique of subjectification. In turn, this *modus operandi* further promotes the education of women, both formally and, in a wider sense, as a project of reforming oneself and others.

The adaptation by women of what I deem the "Islamism as education technique" has far reaching implications, among them an improvement in the autonomy of women and the furthering of a modern approach to education as a learning process, that, in contrast to a traditional repetitive way of learning, includes reflection, interpretation, and arguing. Ultimately this helps opening the gates to learning institutions for girls and young women who formerly had little access to education.

The Reading and Writing Muslim woman

For the purpose of illuminating a recurrent feature - a "narrative of conversion" - in the discourse of female Islamists, a novel authored by a female Islamist, (Yunis 1993), is textually analysed in this article. In the novel, the author rewrites images and concepts related to Muslim women potentially transforming the understanding of "a Muslim woman". The text corresponds to a similar retelling of the Muslim woman in the practice and discourse of Cairene female Islamists in the 1990s (Rasmussen 1999). [2] The author of the novel, as well as female Islamists at large, put forward a narrative of conversion, in which the adaptation of the higab symbolizes the educational process of a committed woman. Through the narrative of conversion the author links the Muslim woman and her ability to become educated to the integrity of the society as a whole. The narrative is furthermore utilized for urging women to get educated, and in a subtle way to adopt a reflecting and interpretive approach towards themselves, to texts and to the society around them.

In the last decades of the 20 th century a rapidly growing market of new "Islamic books" emerged, with a number of women among the authors. One of them is Mona Yunis, a schoolteacher with a Masters degree in Middle Eastern history. She is the author of the novel *Vagh bala makyadj, A Face Without Make-up*. [3] She is also a dedicated female Islamist for whom the Islamization of society is an important goal in life and a duty of all Muslims regardless of gender. Her novel is a detailed account of the path to take on the higab of a young woman. It is exemplary in summarizing the narrative of conversion that is commonly put forward by committed female Islamists when asked the reason why they wear the higab (Rasmussen 1999). The conversion in question is the transformation of a Muslim of tradition into what by the actors themselves are considered a modern, committed Muslim. The narrative of conversion conjures up a Muslim woman who is educated and capable of educating others.

The story begins with a young female university student having a picnic with her husband, to whom she has been wed recently. While resting at the beach she becomes lost in her thoughts, and at a point she starts weeping. The husband asks her why she is crying, and her reply is the book-length account of a process of self-education, presented as the first-person narrator's path to adopting the higab. The obligation to take on the higab that may at first seem a religious act alone is transformed into an obligation to convert oneself during a process that encompasses both formal and informal education.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part relates a month-long discussion about the higab among a group of female university students. Although all the young women partaking in the discussion are Muslims, the opinions on the higab are varied. Is the higab obligatory for the Muslim woman? The discussion evolves into a critical questioning of the foremost supporter of the higab, Fatima. The second part of the novel consists of meetings between Fatima and the narrator of the story, where the questions raised in part one are debated more profoundly. The third part deals with "the best years of my life" of the narrator, the time when she has overcome her doubts, has put on the higab and engaged herself with Islamic activities at the university together with Fatima and other like-minded female students. The process is completed: in the beginning of the account the narrator is dominated by doubt, in the second part by difficult pondering and in the last part by clarity and conviction. At the end of the novel we are back on the beach where the husband assures his wife that he will do everything possible to support her in her decision.

Throughout the three parts of the novel a number of issues are debated and linked to the higab question. The style is repetitive; the main issues are introduced as questions in the first part, taken up again and scrutinized in the reflections of the narrator in the second, and finally presented in the clear light of understanding in the third part. The form and structure of the novel in itself represent the process of reflection and interpretation, that the readers are urged to engage in and make the strategy of their lives.

The issues raised are, among others, the responsibility of the individual woman to make a choice and the obligation of the Muslim woman to study and obtain knowledge. These issues are presented as major concerns to Muslim women, who want to play an active role in society. I will summarize the argument concerning the responsibility of the individual woman to make a decision. This is the main subject of the novel and sums up well the narrative of conversion and the importance of education in the discourse. The focus on the individual choice sets this account apart from the perception of the higab as a collective submission to prevalent notions of modesty. The argument here is rather that adopting the higab ought to reflect the conversion into a committed Muslim (and not simply stay a Muslim of birth and tradition). In the discourse of the novel this change can come about only by studying and adopting techniques of reflection and interpretation.

The issue is introduced through an objection to the higab raised by another female student in the group discussion. The student regards inward matters, such as the intention of the Muslim woman, as more important than outward ones, i.e. the higab. Another student supports her view by arguing that someone wearing the higab can act

wrongly, too (ibid.: 17-21). Fatima answers that Islam comprises both inward and outward matters, and that human beings will be judged on both. She adds that one will not be rewarded for wearing the higab if the intention is to obtain credit from others. And, as it is repeated again and again throughout the story, in this and other cases related to Islam one has to ignore the views of others (ibid.: 25). The stage is set for a turning of the gaze toward one-self, ones intentions and motives.

So far the group has been discussing the responsibility of the individual. The issue is raised again in the exchange between Fatima and the narrator:

- Please talk to me about the higab, I would like to listen to you, Fatima.
- My sister, the case is much simpler than all this talk. Do you think that the angels will be judged on their deeds?
- No.
- Will the human being be judged?
- Yes.
- Therefore it is our responsibility to take a direction in our lives. What do we want? What would we like to obtain? - God's satisfaction? - or the passing world? Do we follow the devil? - or do we discipline ourselves to reach a higher level, where we can control our greediness, pleasures, lust, and the misguidings of the devil? (ibid.: 78)

Here it is stipulated that it is not enough just to wear the higab to become a committed Muslim woman. The main task seems to be controlling oneself; the mantra is "we discipline ourselves". Beside the content, the exchange above is noteworthy in two ways; in having a woman as the main interpreter of the Islamic message and in Yunis' use of the dialogue to make sense of an Islamic concept, the higab. It seems that not only can a woman interpret Islam, the right interpretation can also be reached through discussion and exchange among women. By breaking away from the traditional ideal of imitating interpretations by Islamic scholars, Yuni's and her protagonist's approach Islam in a modern fashion and by way of the tools of modern education, such as reflection and argumentation.

Eventually the narrator decides to put on the higab.

I thanked God who convinced me in my decision in spite of my father's outbursts of anger and my mother's objections. My father refused to let me go to the university, and I was not allowed to contact my friends. I was totally isolated from the surrounding world. (ibid.: 92-93)

By asserting that one might have to go against the will of ones parents, a contrast is made to the Muslim woman caught in the tradition of the parental generation and "the house of obedience", an Islamic expression of what has been understood as the proper place of women - at home under male control. The alternative to tradition and obedience is described when the narrator is back at university a few days later. This is the time of comprehension and serenity reached after much pondering:

These days were the best of my life. (...) I realized that Islam is not just to perform prayer, to fast, to pay alms, and to go on a pilgrimage. It is much more comprehensive

and more general. I understood, as well, that the higab is just one step on the right path, and that this step has to be followed by other steps. I realized that a lot of women are satisfied by this first step, as if it were a goal in itself.(...) We felt responsible, so we practised da`wa, inviting others to the orders of God in a sensitive and friendly manner. (ibid.: 93-94)

Da`wa is here represented as one of the responsibilities that Muslim women take upon themselves when becoming committed. As with other Islamic concepts, the meaning of da`wa is today transformed in accordance with a changing society. From being a matter of mission, da`wa seems, in this discourse, to have become a matter of educating oneself and others. In the last quote the responsibility of the Muslim woman is specified further:

I will never forget these days, when we learned verses of the Koran by heart and read Koran interpretations and other useful books. In that way I learned the importance of knowledge in our life, and that ignorance is the tragedy of Muslims. I am sorry to say it, but they are ignorant both concerning religious knowledge and secular knowledge. Actually, the first step to obedience to God is knowledge and education. God will pave the way to paradise for the one who takes the path of knowledge. (ibid.: 94)

Here it is clearly asserted that the commitment to Islam is a commitment to knowledge and education.

Like the issue of making your own decision, all the issues of the novel are subject to the creation of a new Muslim woman, who wears the higab, takes part in society, seeks knowledge, and ignores the objections and hostility towards the higab from the surrounding society. Inward matters are emphasized, underscoring that reflection of the individual is crucial. Unlike the traditional understanding of the higab, the rationale for the higab in this text is not that it installs outer limits and collective control. Instead, in *A Face Without Make-up* the higab becomes a sign of self-discipline and the internalization of control. The higab is represented as a symbol of the transformation of a young, confused girl into a responsible woman. The transformation comes about through a commitment to God, yet education seems to be a precondition for this commitment.

The novel strongly advocates an educated Muslim woman who plays an important role in society. This new Muslim woman seems to have earned her right to a new societal position through education, and her main task is to further develop herself and to promote education of other women, too. The message is that a woman can not only read and study but she can serve as an example and as a teacher for others.

The novel, as a whole, is a representation of an educational process. The educational intention is not only reflected in the actual content, but also in the structure of the text, which aims to pull the reader through the same process of doubt-questioning-pondering-conviction. The intention of the author is two-fold: to convince the reader that the Islamic commitment is the result of a process of thorough investigation, reflection and choice, and, secondly, to point out that this path lays open for the reader, too. *A Face Without Make-up* is, so to speak, both a story about education and reformation and an act of mission. A narrative of conversion is presented as a technique

for transforming oneself into a responsible self-controlling subject. The Muslim woman is obligated to go through a transformation via self-education to full commitment.

The narrative of conversion serves the author, as well as female Islamists at large, in constituting herself as an Islamist and, at the same time, in a subtle way, in practising da`wa, inviting others to Islam (Rasmussen 1999). The Islamic concept of da`wa is usually translated into inviting others to Islam or simply mission. In the discourse of female Islamists da`wa has been turned into a matter of education and moreover becomes a major obligation of Muslim women. This is reiterated in the novel and in other articulations of female Islamists. The aim is to establish the Muslim woman as a subject capable of becoming educated and of serving as a good example to follow, therefore capable of educating others.

Different interpretations of the Muslim Woman

The Islamic book market is swamped with books about women, family, and gender relations. The text referred to here is distinctly different from most: a great number of books on "the woman in Islam" consists merely of rules and regulations for women to follow. For instance in fatwa collections by religious authorities, such as *Fatawa al-mara' al-muslima*, *The Fatwas of the Muslim Woman*, (author and year of publication missing) or in more elaborated accounts of the good manners of Muslim women (for instance, a series called *Ila okhti al-muslima*, *For my Muslim Sister* by Jusriyya Mohammad Anwar (1994), with titles such as *Hayatik beina al-rigal*, *Your Life Among Men*, *Zinatik wa tsiyabik likul al-munasabat*, *Your Decoration and Dress for any Occasion*, and *Sulukiyat muhimma fi hayatik*, *Important Manners in Your Life*.)

There are, however, other books on the market that, as well as the novel analysed above, debate the role of the Muslim woman in societal terms. Sheik Muhammed Mutawalli al-Sha`rawi is probably the most widespread author on sale at the street markets in Cairo, and he has published a number of titles concerning women (including *Qadaya al-mara' al-muslima*, *Issues Concerning the Muslim Woman* (1982) (see Stowasser 1987), *Al-mara' wa al-ragul wa khusum al-islam*, *The Woman, the Man, and the Opponents of Islam* (year of publication missing), and *Al-mara' fil-quran al-karim*, *The Woman in the Holy Qur'an* (1990). These books by al-Sha`rawi debate matters of society, and they address women directly. When it comes to the higab question, however, al-Sha`rawi differs from the female Islamists. Like in the following quotation, where al-Sha`rawi praises the women adopting the higab at the time of the prophet:

Not one of them spoke in high-sounding terms about "having to be convinced of the necessity to do this". (...) It sufficed for these women that this commandment had come down from God... (al-Sha`rawi in Stowasser 1987: 275)

According to al-Sha`rawi, there is no need for any process of convincing oneself. Like Yuni's account a direct appeal to women is present, but the message here is different:

Do you, Muslim sister, want to excite even further the adolescent who is already charged with sexual voracity? It is an obligation to veil from him all that may further excite his sexual drive, because he has plenty and more than plenty of that as is. (ibid.:273)

The responsibility of women invoked here is merely one of not provoking sexual voracity. The appeal to involve oneself in a process of transformation, to obtain an education and influence one's surroundings, is absent in this presentation.

The discourse of female Islamists constitutes a break with these and similar textualizations of the Muslim woman. Though these women also advocate the *higab*, their rationale for doing so is quite different from the fear that women's sexuality creates disorder in society. The regulation of desire is not irrelevant to female Islamists, but according to them, self-discipline, rather than the actual *higab*, will serve this purpose. With this challenge of a traditional understanding of the position of women in society, they challenge as well the bulk of *ula`ma*, the Islamic scholars, and their exclusive right to interpret the Islamic texts. Mona Yunis and other female Islamists not only offer an interpretation of the *higab* that differs from the traditional interpretation of *al-Sha`rawi* and other *ula`ma*; their argument of the *higab* as a symbol of an ethical and educated woman in control also creates a position from where women can take part in the interpretation of Islamic texts in other matters as well.

A Face Without Make-up is part of a current literary trend in the Arab world where women write about the life of women, or as put by Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "women increasingly participate in the creation of their literary selves" (Malti-Douglas 1995: 5). Among Western scholars studying Middle Eastern women there has been a great interest in these writings of women, yet the focus has mainly been on the literary contributions of secular-minded feminists (for example, Badran and Cooke 1990). As a textual analyst, I argue that the literary contribution by women advocating Islam has further reaching implications. The female Islamists potentially have a larger audience than the secularised women, who speak for and to a very limited segment of the Egyptian upper middle class. The Islamists regardless of their own class background might more directly talk to a wider audience of girls and young women of the lower middle class. These girls and women are often unacquainted with and sometimes hostile towards ideas that are derived from a Western framework. When female Islamists are advocating modern techniques of education and moreover making the adoption of these techniques a precondition for becoming a committed Muslim woman, they are at the same time adapting modern education to Islam. This in turn opens up the gates of education for women who have formerly been relegated to the periphery of society.

Discussion

When debating and rationalizing the use of the *higab* and other Islamic concepts, female Islamists are taking part in the objectification of the Muslim consciousness. The women involved are simultaneously objectifying themselves or, in the terms of Foucault, adopting techniques of subjectification. Representing Islamism as an educational process is such a technique. When turning Islamic activism into a matter of self-education, the gaze is directed at the intentions, ethics, inner thoughts and responsibilities of the self.

The "Islamism as education" technique is present in the novel: *A Face Without Make-up* in that it is about constituting the committed Muslim woman by way of a narrative of conversion. This narrative is often evoked by female Islamists, and elements of the life-

story of the individual woman fit well with the narrative of conversion that serves to establish one's own devotedness.

The former monopoly of religious knowledge of *uła`ma*, the religious scholars educated in the mosque, and their authority are contested today. The challenge of *uła`ma* is related to the processes of objectification that were brought about mainly by the establishment of mass education in most Middle Eastern settings during the 20th century. Women, along with young people and other lay and autodidact students of Islamic sources, who were formerly relegated from the realm of religious interpretation, are among the new contributors to the Islamic discourse. New voices claim their right and ability to interpret the central texts. At this background, a distinct female Islamist discourse has been shaped promoting the *muhaggaba*, the woman who is wearing the *higab*, as a modern self-policing subject. Nevertheless, some participants in the comprehensive interpretative task, including some of the new male Islamic intellectuals, continuously approve of the *higab* as a necessary curbing regulation of the sexuality of women. Thus, the idea of women's sexuality as a threat to society prevails in part, as does the *higab* as a collectively sanctioned device. To be sure, though articulate and assertive, female Islamists are not free to define the *higab*, the Muslim woman or other parts of Islam as they deem fit.

In Foucault's most pessimistic scenario of modernity, the modern subject is no more emancipated than individuals in previous times, as control has not decreased in modern society, but has simply been transferred from the collective to "the docile body" of the individual. If this approach is applied to the current female Islamist discourse, the internalization of control that is prevalent in the practice of female Islamists does not bring any improvement to the position of women. If a different (and later) Foucauldian approach is applied, however, it can be argued that the transformation of the *muhaggaba* into a modern subject offers women notable improvements. Lois McNay (1992) suggests a reading of the technologies of subjectification as practices through which individuals actively fashion their own identities instead of just being passive subjects to (bio-)power (Foucault 1985, 1986). According to McNay, Foucault hereby reinstalls "autonomy" as a category into his theory of modernity, yet avoiding defining "autonomy in essentialized terms as, for example, the realization of an individual's prediscursive or innate potential, because, in the final instance, these practices are always determined by the social context" (McNay 1992: 4). Autonomy, when so relativized and emptied of normativity, might apply to the case of the female Islamists in Cairo, who actively fashion their own identity through modern techniques of subjectification.

When female Islamists put forward a new image of the Muslim woman as an ethical subject, increased self-esteem and empowerment of women adopting this image are likely to follow. A modern approach to education seems to be a precondition for that to take place. The Islamism-as-education technique urges the committed woman to obtain practical skills, such as reading skills, speaking before a larger audience, applying for a job, initiating a formal education, and so on. The *higab* when signaling self-discipline, might in some cases render superfluous other regulations of the movements and actions of the women who wear it, and thereby make such steps possible. At another level the bending and twisting of Islamic concepts such as *higab* and *da`wa* might, when put

forward by women who claim to be committed Muslim women, become acknowledged in a wider audience and eventually further learning processes based on reflection, interpretation and arguing. The most salient conquest of the discourse of female Islamists is the adaptation of modern education to Islam; if their interpretation of the Muslim woman is acknowledged, women need not choose between commitment to their religion and involvement with modern education.

Notes

1 Other modes of objectification are: science, or "modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences"; and what Foucault has called "dividing practices", i.e. social categorizing of e.g. criminals and the insane (1983: 208).

2 The novel is part of the data for the Ph.D. thesis *Den muslimske kvinde genfortalt. Nye narrativer i kønsdebatten i 1990'ernes Cairo*, (Retelling the Muslim woman: New narratives in the gender debate in the 1990s Cairo), Rasmussen 1999. The data also included other publications and interviews with committed female Islamists contributing to a distinct discourse dealing with a range of societal issues from point of view of female Islamists.

3 All extracts from Yunis 1993 are in my translation.

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