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## **New Normalcy and Shifting Meanings of the Practice of Veiling in Turkey**

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**Abstract:** *The paradigm of identity politics and the dual analysis of secularism and Islamism are insufficient to contextualize the phenomenon of veiling in Turkey. The practice of veiling needs to be recontextualized considering the patterns of pragmatist consumerism and the influences of the neoliberal market environment on sociocultural milieus of the everyday life. This article attempts to explore the shifting and intermingling meanings of the veiling in its recent circumstances in Turkey. It is argued that the veiling is an indicator of lifestyle, social class and status; however, it also continues to be the discursive practice of Islamic faith.*

### **1. Introduction**

Throughout the world, the New Right movements emerged in socio-political domains as a variant of the neoliberalism project in the late 1970s, especially with the rise of Thatcherism in Britain and Reaganism in US (Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005). In a similar fashion, neoconservatism and neoliberalism intermingled with each other in the political agenda of the Özal in Turkey in the 1980s. Islamist groups, in that period, successfully incorporated into the project of neoliberalism. As the Islamist groups have achieved social mobilization through utilizing the tools of market economy, Islamic identity has been reproduced and reconfigured in public sphere in the last decades (Binark & Kılıçbay, 2002; Navaro-Yashin, 2002). In parallel with this transformation, Islamist paradigm established its hegemony in socio-political domains of everyday life (Yavuz, 2005). There emerged new normalcy for the visibility of Islam in public, and the discursive practice of veiling obtained some kind of everydayness in this context. To put it another way, the increasing visibility of Islam in everyday life provides new normalcy for the Islamic discursive practices, like veiling. Hence, the context that I try

to explore in this article is the Islamization of society<sup>1</sup> which goes hand in hand with the extension of market ideology. The meanings that the practice of veiling obtain in this [normalized, daily] context are needed be scrutinized. My aim, therefore, is to reinterpret the practice of veiling from the perspective of everydayness and also within the [micro] power relations in Turkey.

## **2. Recontextualizing the Islamic Identity and the Practice of Veiling**

Since the early 1980s, Islamic identity with its inherent practices has gained visibility in the public sphere in Turkey. This is indeed very parallel with the emergence of, what Saba Mahmood called, the Islamic Revival that has been experienced in majority of the Muslim countries (Mahmood, 2005). Especially, since the Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party gained political dominance in 2002 elections in Turkey, discursive practices of the religion and Islamic symbolism have attained more visibility. Even it has been argued that Kemalist factions of Turkey are marginalized in socio-political domains under the hegemony of the JDP government (Shively, 2008). The growing support for the Islamist party politics and the visibility of Islamic practices are required to be contextualized historically in order to understand the positioning of the Islamic identity and the veiling issue in their current situations in Turkey. In the process of formation of modern Turkey, the orthodoxy and the central position of the Kemalist elites have been argued by many scholars (Yavuz, 2005; Binark & Kılıçbay, 2002). Hence, the local-religious communities have been peripheralized in socio-cultural milieus in the early decades of the Republic. From 1950 onwards, the center-periphery relations have begun to be reconfigured with the augmenting migrations from rural to urban areas. In tandem with this transformation, encounters between various stratas of the society have become more frequent, because the physical as

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1 Islamization, in this article, refers to the increasing visibility of Islam in the everyday life.

well as the psychological proximity between the center and periphery have declined gradually (Binark & Kılıçbay, 2002).

In the 1980s and 1990s, traditional social cleavages between 'rural-conservative-Islamists' and 'urban-westernized-secularists' have become solidified as the tension between these groups have increased. That's why identity politics and political symbolism have gained new momentum, as many scholars pointed out, throughout this period. The headscarf issue is considered as the main axis of the conflict between secular and Islamic divides of the society (Göle, 1991; Secor, 2002; White 2002). Beginning from the early 1980s, headscarf has gained increasing visibility in public sphere, especially in universities. From the modernist perspective, the headscarf has been perceived as the most apparent symbol of Islamization, and therefore, the visibility of headscarf has been considered as a threat to the principle of secularism and the idea of democratic public sphere. In other words, the public use of headscarf is construed as against the premise of secularism which underlines the necessity of privatization of religion and institutional control of state (Secor, 2002). In retrospect, the role of women has been formulated as a marker of the modernization and the progress by Kemalist legacy. The visibility of headscarf, therefore, is interpreted as the sign of the emergence of public-assertive-muslim-womenhood. Nevertheless, it also argued that it is very difficult to discern the religious meanings and political symbolism of headscarf (Göle, 2008). From this perspective, veiling/non-veiling is deciphered as an indicator of the ideological fault line between secularism and Islamism in Turkey (Göle 1991; Saktanber 1994; Secor 2002).

However, the paradigm of identity politics and the dual analysis of secularism and Islamism in opposition are insufficient to contextualize the current situation of Islamic identity and the phenomenon of veiling in Turkey. In specific terms, the paradigm that scrutinizes headscarf within the framework of radical-Muslim womanhood has lost its grip in recent years, because veiling as the representation of Islamic identity have dismissed its previous political ground (White, 2002). That is not so say veiling is not in the relations and the domains of politics anymore. Nevertheless, Islamic identity and veiling need to be recontextualized in their

everydayness, that is, the meanings that they obtain in the normalcy of everyday life.

In the first place, it is necessary to recontextualize the complexity of Islamist social and political mobilization in Turkey. Beginning from early 1980s, Turkey has passed through serious transformations. The conditions of market economy have been properly established, the post-fordist organization methods in production extensively have been utilized, and the dependency to the world markets have increased because of the globalization process (Binark & Kılıçbay, 2002). Due to the neoconservative agenda of Özal, the ideas that govern neoliberalism and Islamism merged with each other. In the second half of the 1980s, Islamists have achieved to accumulate enough capital to acquire new representations in socio-economic spheres. Islamist groups have utilized the tools of democratic environment, which was established after 1980 coup and especially in the second half of the 1980s, and the forces of market economy to gain mobilization in politico-economical arenas (Yavuz, 2005). Keyman (2007) states that, in that period, 'Islamic identity claims' become more politicized economically grounded and culturally loaded with recognition demands. It is argued that Islamist groups have utilized the tools of media and education, for their part, to gain mobility in that period (Yavuz, 2005). They have attempted to expand their capacity of power and establish their own political-economic regime through forming business circles, by publishing newspapers/journals, and by founding community schools. By means of media and publication, Yavuz (2005) states, Islamist groups determine the norms of everyday life, mark the cultural orthodoxy, and set out the agenda of the country after 1980. Bilici (2004) argues that, with the processes of globalization, Kemalism has lost its hegemony, it is because globalization process operates against the model of nation states, in which Kemalist ideology had constructed itself. He states that Islamic identity has been reconfigured in the phase of globalization in the 1980s and 90s. The regime of Turgut Özal is construed as a milestone in this transformation. Through education and the utilization of economic resources, Islamist groups have gained, in Bourdieu's terms, symbolic as well as cultural capital. Bilici (2004) states that the socioeconomic

mobilization has effaced the reactionary/radical stance of Islamic identity. Instead, as he puts forward, two critical dispositions emerged. One of them is consumerist pragmatism, which I will discuss in detail below, and the formation of Islamism as a social project which is reproduced in Gramscian sense. In this context, Islamism has emerged as a disciplining practice/technique which governs the population. Keyman (1999, p. 192) underlines the disciplinary power of Islamism, which is very similar to Kemalism, because both projects induced certain subjectivities, either as a “decent citizen” or as a “faithful muslim.” As a political and economic project, Islamism transformed yet reproduced social hierarchies and redefined but imposed the mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion. In this regard, Islamism brings new hegemony to social sphere by mainly employing the tools of neoliberalism project. *In its current situation, Islamist hegemony, as I have discussed above, brings new normalcy to the visibility of veiling practices.* Therefore, it is necessary to reinterpret veiling in its dailiness in this context. In the following parts, I attempt to grasp new meanings of the veiling not in the opposition between secularism and Islamism, but in the context of the incorporation of Islamic discursive practices to the conditions of neoliberalism [market ideology].

### **3. Veiling in the Market**

First and foremost, it is necessary to conceptualize the practice veiling in free market environment of 1980s and 90s. The habitus of consumption has become the basis of the patterns of everyday life in this period. The headscarf as well as the image of Atatürk has turned into commodities and market symbols (Navaro-Yashin, 2002). That is to say, the commodification of culture has been realized through the forces of capitalism in recent decades in Turkey. It seems highly plausible to claim that commodification has shifted the meaning of headscarf from its political origin to the axis of consumer culture. Therefore, it is significant to interpret the headscarf<sup>1</sup> in the context of the consumer market -

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1 Headscarf and veiling are used synonymously.

influenced by globalization. Binark and Kılıçbay (2002) argue that veiling practices are inseparable from consumption, commodification and even pleasure encouraged by the trends of market economy. One of my informants, Ayşe<sup>1</sup>, emphasizes this point through her observations:

In past, women veiled themselves in simple colors. Maybe it is because they were more conscious of veiling. Now, women choose headscarves which fit their overcoat. Me too. In different colors. Whereas, there was only single headscarf and overcoat in the past. And women always wore them.

Ayşe, then, narrates the various veiling styles that she frequently meets in public recently. The new patterns of consumption of veiled women uncover various social classes and religious communities. My interviewees underline the differences among veiled women several times,

When buying headscarf, I look for the lengthy ones. I prefer dark colors in headscarf. My choice is mild response to ones who wear in light styles...My friends always buy their headscarves from *Armağan*, *Yılmazlar*, and *Pardesü Dünyası*. Needless to say, these brands are high-quality and very expensive.

As it is noticeable in this narration, social class and status are salient features behind women's choice of headscarves in the market. The existence of variety of classes among veiled women is noteworthy, because the binarist approach of identity politics, which constructs secularism and veiling in opposition, treats each side as monolithic, unified, and frozen at a time. However, as it is interpreted, there are several classes and attachments among veiled women. Therefore, as White (2002) points out, class-based as well class-saturated-gender approaches are needed to be reinserted in the interpretations of veiling.

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<sup>1</sup> The actual names of the interviewees are not used, the relevant ones are the nicknames.

Nevertheless, it is significant to note that, class and status distinctions do not merely operate with regard to socio-economic terms among veiled women, but the mechanisms of class and status also functions through the differences in terms of cultural capital, that is, the level of knowledge [sometimes education] and the experience. In a focus group interview, I have noticed that some veiled women have remained silent, while some others were eager to talk to me. When I asked the reason for their silence, they stated that those talking members were more 'conscious' [*şuurlu*]. Then, they explained that those *conscious* members have had an opportunity to access to the knowledge because of their education [secular as well religious education]. Some other silent members, later, have approved that the ones whom were talking are *conscious* because they have passed through 'hard times' in their university education, as veiled women were not allowed to enter university campuses with their headscarves in 1990s. In parallel with my experiences among veiled women, White (2002) draws attention the distinction between *conscious veiling* and *everyday veiling*. She claims that *conscious veiling* conveys the knowledgeable form of Islam and to some extent refers to the symbolism in terms of political Islam. However, *everyday veiling* implies cultural and traditional Islamic practice, that is, the sign of folk Islam. White also argues that veiled women occupy multiple positions in terms of their economic and cultural capital. Hence, it is likely to claim that cultural capital, alongside the economic well being, marks the social cleavages among veiled women.

In terms of the relation between veiling practice and consumerism, Binark and Kılıçbay (2002) draw attention to the shifting meanings of veiling in the context of the market economy. They interpret *veiling fashions* through examining representations of the veiling in the market. In their reading of the *fashions of veiling*, they underline the popularization of some colors and models in the market, and they underscore the emphasis put on uniqueness and elegance in the representations of veiling in the media. By their choices of headscarves in the market, the veiled women strive to redefine their position in society and attempt to gain new kind of visibility, while covering their body. Binark and Kılıçbay (2002) argue that *veiling fashions* shed light into the

multiple and intermingling meanings of the veiling. Through various veiling styles, women attempt to show/exhibit their selves and social positions, while concealing their bodies. In this sense, veiling becomes the representation of lifestyle as well as the discursive practice of Islamic faith. Within the framework of *veiling fashions*, headscarf signifies choice, class, status, and cultural image. Therefore, as Binark and Kılıçbay (2002) points out, different meanings intermingle with each other. Fatma, one of my interviewees, gives insights about *veiling fashions* and multiplicity of meanings of the veiling,

Veiling has its own fashion too. When shopping, I pay attention to the brand of the headscarf. Design and style are also significant for me. Recently, the chain model was fashionable. However, the fashionable model and color change frequently. I follow [the veiling fashion] through my veiled friends and [through the catalogues of] famous brands. Now, I wear Vismara, an Italian brand. Sometimes, I also wear Vakko. As you may know, Vakko is Jewish brand. I wear it in anyway. Some veiled women protest McDonalds and CocaCola [and do not buy them], however, they wear Vakko headscarves. As a matter of fact, they cannot save the world like that...When buying headscarf; I look for the brand and harmony of the colors. The accordance between headscarf and overcoat, between headscarf and handbag is significant.

Through the combination of veiling practice and consumer culture, veiling implies diverse and shifting meanings. In Fatma's account, religious, political and commodified meanings of veiling become insuperable with each other, albeit the emphasis put on fashion. Binark and Kılıçbay (2002) argues that the relation between veiling and consumerism is based on two axis: first, differentiating the self from rest of the group, that is, emphasis put on uniqueness, and secondly, sharing cultural as well as political symbols with the other members of the group. In this sense, the *veiling fashions* bring, on the one hand, temporal choices for style, on the other hand, class-based and community-based choices.



Hence, it is also likely to interpret that the symbols of culture have been commodified with the increasing relation between Islamic practice and consumer capitalism. Through the commodification of headscarf, Keenan (1999) argues, veiling diverges from its religious sacra and attains more profane representations. Ayşe narrates this transformation through her observations,

In past, there were a few veiled women, and they lived perfectly [in terms of religion]. Today, there are much more veiled women [in public], however, I am not sure they care *takva* [as the old generation did]. Fifteen years ago, we, the veiled women, have tried to live in accordance with the the age of the Prophet [Asrı Saadet]. Today, it is likely to say that the veiling experience concession.

During the interview, Ayşe reiterates the loss of *takva*, which means the attention paid to the rules of faith in daily life, several times. Although veiling gain more visibility compared to past decades, Ayşe claims, the veiling has passed through the phase of profanization, as she interprets the current representations of the veiling as *taviz* (concession), in her own word. In parallel with this interpretation, Fatma emphasizes this transformation in her narration,

[Today], veiled women are more comfortable individually [with their headscarves]. Maybe, it is because the headscarf has been recognized by society. Yet, there is an idleness [among veiled women towards faith], and this idleness cuts down the practices [of faith]. As the comfort emerges, the faith loses its worth. Perhaps, when the headscarf was on the margin, veiled women attempted to live faith in practice more carefully.

It is plausible to claim that, with the extension of market ideology to the social milieu, Islamic identity has passed through the process of profanization. Yavuz (2005) argues that, in the context of neoliberalism and globalization, Islamic identity has been reproduced and

reconfigured since the beginning of 1980s in Turkey. In a paradoxical manner, he puts, this period has secularized and pluralized discourses within Islamic identity. Thanks to the easy access to the communication devices and increasing schooling among Islamic groups, traditional Islamic discourses have begun to be criticized, and more relative understandings of Islam have become widespread. He also states that, as the publications among Islamic groups increase, Islamic knowledge has been rationalized and commodified in that period. Ayşe implies this transformation in Islamic knowledge through her experience,

Although I did not know too much about Islam fifteen years ago, I believe I have been living Islam more properly. Now, I know too much [compared to past], and I read as much as possible. But I cannot live the faith properly. When I wore the headscarf for the first time, I only had the knowledge of *ahiret*. Recently, I have been reading much more on the worldly affairs. Maybe, I do not recall the hell and heaven enough [in my daily life].

For Yavuz (2005), in the 1990s, the secularization and pluralization of Islamic knowledge have gone hand in hand with multiplication and differentiation of Islamic communities. On the one hand, Islamic communities have fragmented inside and there emerged new communities, on the other hand, these fragmented communities have attempted to extend their capacity of power. Oliver Roy (2004) puts that the Islamic identity has been secularized in that period, however, Islam in its new forms have also imported to the secular arenas in the Muslim countries. Therefore, it seems plausible to claim that secularization of the Islam have gone in parallel with the Islamization of the secular public sphere. The normalcy of headscarf has settled in this background.

#### **4. The Everydayness of Veiling**

In this part, I strive to shed light into the dailiness and normalcy of headscarf through my interviews. Initially, it is necessary to note that veiled women I have interviewed intentionally want to use the term *başörtüsü* instead of *türban*. My interviewees argue the everydayness of the term *başörtüsü* in their accounts, for them, *türban* connotes to the politicized meanings of the veiling,

I prefer to use the term *başörtüsü*. It seems to me that certain political groups use *türban*. As a matter of fact, the term of *türban* is unlikable. However, everybody [can] wear *başörtüsü*, it is more daily.

I refer my cover as *başörtüsü*. Because, in my opinion, [the term] *başörtüsü* is out of [the domain of] politics. The term *türban* seems more radical and more political.

My interviewees attempt to abstain from the political connotations of veiling. They narrate that they do not veil because of their ideological or political inclinations. However, sometimes veiling has turned into political identity in their lives, especially in university years. Fatma states that veiling as a political identity had imposed upon her in university, because of the restriction on the veiling in the campus. She states that, after graduation, she becomes more comfortable with her headscarf in her daily as well as in professional life<sup>1</sup>.

In her narration, Ayşe underlines the increasing visibility of veiling in different styles. She claims that the Turkish society has recognized various styles of veiling, and this brings to some extent comfort/freedom to the veiled women in daily life,

Now every [kind of women] veil themselves, there are various veiled women [i.e. various styles]. Women with bluejeans; women with overcoat; or women who cover all parts of their body. These women can move around more comfortably/freely [compared to past]. Maybe,

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<sup>1</sup> Currently working in one of the Islamic banks in Istanbul, which allows veiling in office.

this freedom is because of the recognition or because of the familiarity.

Fatma, likewise, approves the relative comfort or freedom that veiled women experience today, as she compares her generation with the old ones. She explains the current *easiness* by referring to the struggles of the veiled women in universities in the past. She also relates the current situation to the emergence of Islamic bourgeois,

The society recognize the headscarf [in public] today, it is because of the struggles [for freedom of headscarf] experienced in the past. To some extent, it is true to say now “we are everywhere.” Somehow, people get used to see the veiled women in different domains [of daily life]. However, that is not to say we [the veiled women] are very comfortable or totally free. Anyway, there is easiness because of the current government. The government leads to the emergence of [Islamic] bourgeois. Although I am not part of this class, I can feel the easiness [that the Islamic bourgeois brings].

By narrating an anecdote from her life, Fatma indicates the easiness and tolerance that different veiling styles obtain in the daily life,

When I began to veil, ten years ago, people were more critical [towards headscarf]. They criticized me because I wore headscarf as well as make-up. Once, a boy, who is younger than me, came and criticized me in the street. Although some continue to condemn me, people recognize me as it is now. In past, people, who were not getting used to headscarf, were very much critical of it. Everybody thought they have a right to say about me. They intervened in my life. Recently, these criticisms have lessened.

The veiled women, whom I have listened, point to the shifting meanings of the headscarf and articulate the easiness with their headscarves compared to the circumstances of past generations. The narrations of veiled women suggest the *everydayness* of the headscarf: the

meanings that the veil gains in daily life as well as the daily experiences of veiled women. It is plausible to conclude that, through the narrations of veiled women, the veil has its own normalcy in the *everyday* basis away from its political axis.

## 5. “The Regimes of Veiling”

In this part of the article, I will discuss the power relations behind the practice of veiling and non-veiling. Borrowing the terminology of Anna Secor (2002), I endeavor to discuss the operations of the power relations in terms of “veiling regimes”. Initially, it is necessary to argue and elaborate the theoretical foundations of the *regimes of veiling*. It is argued that *veiling regimes* are the formal and informal rules and norms in terms of veiling and non-veiling that characterize the spaces and determine the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. *The regimes of veiling* signify, in Secor’s words (2002, p.12), “the dress codes that spatialize specific norms or requirements regarding veiling [or non-veiling] arise out of wider power relations within society.” Secor (2002) states that in some urban space of Istanbul, veiling is informal social norm, especially in squatter areas, however, in some areas of the city, vice versa; unveiling is norm of the daily life and imposed upon women. Likewise, Yashin (2002) through her field study in Istanbul points to the spatial configurations of Islamism and secular-Kemalism. She argues that certain informal codes regarding veiling are inherent in urban spaces of Istanbul. She interprets the veiling stores in Eyüp and Fatih as the spatial codes of Islamism, on the other hand, she underlines the secular character of Akmerkez in the 1990s. That is not to say, veiling or unveiling regimes prevent the access of unveiled or veiled women in these urban spaces. However, Islamist or secularist characters are codified in these places and the mechanisms of the veiling *regimes* functions in its dailiness, informally. The *veiling regimes* are restrictive, and therefore limited social mobility of veiled or secular women in the daily life. In other words, the veiling regimes demarcate the spatial and social arenas of inclusion and exclusion. I have realized the existence of the *regimes of veiling* during

my research experience. When I proposed Ayşe to meet in modern cafe district of Eskişehir for interview, she declined my offer, because she said these places are “not comfortable” for her to meet. I have noticed that the *regimes of veiling* are invisible, spatial, hegemonic norms, which bring the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion for both veiled and secular women. Fatma's life experience provides insight for the operation of these regimes in daily life,

Before I veiled myself, I was studying in an Anatolian high school. But I did not continue there. If I continued, I would probably feel oppressed. Because of this, I changed my school and I was transferred to the college [private school]. Veiled students were more comfortable in the college. When I got into the university, nobody knew that I was veiled. As my instructor and my classmates realized I was veiled, they turned their back on me.

In a similar fashion, Ayşe underlines the *regimes of veiling* in macro level through her experience, by comparing the cities she has lived,

In Kütahya and Konya, people act very moderately towards veiled women. You feel comfortable in streets [of the city]. Unfortunately, the public in Eskişehir is not very moderate.

During our informal conversation, by referring to the popular debates of *mahalle baskısı* (neighbourhood pressure) in Turkey<sup>1</sup>, Fatma express her ideas and feelings about the operations of veiling regimes,

In my opinion, both conservatisms are extreme. Kemalism as well as Islamism. That is to say, *mahalle baskısı* functions reciprocally. In different places, *mahalle baskısı* operates alternately. I admit that in religious, community-based environments, secular women feel oppressed. However, such women who

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<sup>1</sup> Basically, psychological pressure relationships between veiled and unveiled women

cover all parts of the body also put pressure on me. I do not feel comfortable in such an environment. *Mahalle baskısı* is in everywhere. Modern, *çarşafli*, veiled, secular, all put pressure on each other. I suppose this is related to power [or dominance].

This exposition sheds light into the multiple and alternate mechanisms of the *veiling regimes*. The micropower relations behind veiling and non-veiling govern the daily operations of social inclusion and exclusion. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that not only Islamism or secularism but also gender and class mark out these mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in daily life.

## **6. Conclusion**

Through the incorporation of Islamism and market ideology, the Islamic paradigm has been reproduced in Gramscian sense in the 1980s and 90s in Turkey. The rising hegemony of Islamic identity, in this regard, has established new normalcy for the practice of veiling. In this context, the discursive practice of veiling has attained new meanings. The relation between veiling and consumerism sheds light into the multiple and intermingling meanings of headscarf. Like every other commodity, the headscarf has obtained daily meanings in market environment. That is to say, political, cultural, commodified meanings have become inseparable. Veiled women, whom I have interviewed, narrate the meanings and representations that the veil attains in everyday life. The accounts of the veiled women point to the dailiness of veiling. Also these accounts disclose the intrinsic power relations behind veiling not only in political domains but also in daily life.

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