Nilufer Göle

The Gendered Nature of the Public Sphere[1]

I argue in this paper on the gendered nature of the public sphere in Muslim contexts of modernity. I'll try to illustrate the centrality of women's visibility in their bodies, in their words and agencies, in shaping the boundaries of the public sphere. In other words, in Muslim contexts of modernity, "women's visibility, women's mobility and women's voices"[2] constitute the political stakes around which the public sphere is defined. And more specifically, to study the intricate nature of connections between gender, politics and the public sphere, I highlight two historical moments of change in Turkish history and contemporary experience. One is the projects of modernization in the 1920s, the second is the movements of Islamization in the 1980s. A similar historical classification concerning projects of modernism on the one hand and Islamism on the other, and the centrality of the question of gender in shaping political debates, social transformations and definitions of public and private spheres, can be extended to other Muslim contexts of modernities. Historically, however, since it defined women as public citizens, the Turkish mode of modernization can be considered the most radical engagement among Muslim countries. Equating national progress with women's emancipation defined the backbone of Kemalist feminism. On the other hand, during the last two decades, Turkey, like other Muslim countries, has witnessed the advent of contemporary Islamism[3], whose

---

[1] Lecture held at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin on January 30, 1997 (Forthcoming in *Public Culture,* 1997)

[2] Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers,* Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1992, p. 238.

[3] I refer to Islamism as a contemporary social movement that takes varying political forms in varying national contexts; it can take the form of revolution in Iran, of a legal political party in Turkey, or of clandestine oppositional movements, as in Tunesia, Egypt, and Algeria. The common feature among them is the urban nature of the phenomenon, the participation of the young urban-educated youth (both male and female), and, at the ideological level, the criticism of traditional interpretations of Islam and the quest for an Islamic alternative to modernity. It is a social movement (following Alain Touraine's definition) in the sense that it redefines an Islamic identity and enters into a conflict about the orientation of the

most visible and challenging symbol is "the veiling issue"[4], sometimes referred to as the "headscarf dispute", that is the demand by Muslim girls that they should be allowed to cover their heads according to Islamic precepts while attending public schools. Further, an Islamist party (Refah Partisi) has been the senior member of a coalition government since July 1996, rendering the Islamization of the public debate and its relation to gender issues more manifest and experiential in Turkish politics. Last but not least, the privatization of television and radio has brought Turkey lively public debate. Especially during the post-1983 period, the round-tables, panels and talk shows have provided a very popular medium for intellectuals, political actors and citizens debating on the issues of identity, secularism, ethnicity and democracy. In other words, the public sphere is freeing itself from state control as it gains relative autonomy.

Women's issues are central in this paper and pivotal in the shaping of modern political debate and the public sphere in Muslim countries. Two broader implicit preoccupations underlie this emphasis on the connections between gender and the public sphere. The first is related to the phenomenon of contemporary Islamism and the related questions of democracy. Political scientists explained Islamist movements as a political

cultural model. On social movements, see Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movement* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981). For an approach to Islamism as a social movement, see Nilufer Göle, "L'émergence du sujet Islamique", *Penser le Sujet* (Autour d'Alain Touraine), edited by François Dubet and Michel Wieviorka (Paris, édition Fayard, 1995).

[4] Veiling, covering, and headscarf are used interchangeably to designate the Islamic principle of "hijab", i.e. the necessity for women to cover their hair, their shoulders, and the shapes of their bodies to preserve their virtue and avoid being a source of "fitne", i.e. disorder. The contemporary Islamic outfit is generally a headscarf that completely covers the hair and falls upon the shoulders (quite distinct from the traditional use of a headscarf) and a sort of long gown that hides the feminine shape. Since the 1980s, the demands by female students to be allowed to attend public schools with a headscarf became the most debated and divisive issue in Turkey's public debate between secularists and Islamists. For a detailed discussion on this dispute see Olson Emelie, "Muslim Identity and Secularism in Contemporary Turkey: The Headscarf Dispute", *Anthropological Quarterly,* 1985, no.58 (4), pp.161-171. The same debate also exists in Western contexts. For instance, France is experienceing a juridicial, political and quasi-philosophical dispute about the rights of Muslim girl students to cover their heads in French high schools. The media often refer to the issue as "l'affaire du foulard". Cf. Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Le Foulard et la République,* Paris, éd. la Découverte, 1995.

strategy for the implementation of a state governed by Islamic law, that is as fundamentalist movements trying to implement the Sharia again. For political scientists working on Islamist movements, the question of women is secondary or at best instrumental in relation to the strategies of Islamists to seize political power. In such approaches, the question of women appeared only as an epiphenomenon of Islamism, or at best as a subordinate issue of human rights. At the other extreme, the feminist and anthropological approaches focus on questions of identity and community, leaving aside the decisiveness of the women's issue on power and politics and on the choices of social projects.[5] This paper attempts to refocus analysis at the crossroads of politics, gender power relations and the public sphere. It further claims that only in recentring the question of women can we gain a better grasp of the nature of the discord between Islamists and secularists. The predominance of economic and political explanations (economic deprivations and social frustrations leading to Islamic radicalism) obscures the importance of social (that is, indigenous power relations between social classes) and cultural (meaning self-definitional) categories underpinning contemporary Islamism. And questions of identity encompass problematic relations to gender on the one hand and to Western modernity on the other hand, revealing the social relations of power between the modernist-Westernist elites and those who challenge them from the Islamist perspective. In other words, gender issues, such as communitarian morality, woman's modesty, and the social encounter between men and women, are central to the desire of Islamist politics to differentiate itself from modernist liberal projects and its endeavor to control the public sphere. Consequently, I argue that, in Islamist politics, the stakes of democracy are inseparable from the (shrinking) boundaries of the public sphere, which in turn are determined foremost by categories of morality, identity and thus gender issues. In short, Islamist politics is the (Puritan) politics of controlling public visibilities and intimacies.

The second set of implicit preoccupations in this paper is related to the specific nature of non-Western modernities; that is to say the ways in which modernity is (re)appropriated in Muslim contexts. This requires attention to asymmetrical trajectories in the emergence of the public sphere in different contexts. Whereas in Western European history the public sphere emerged as a liberal-bourgeois sphere, with women (and the working class) initially excluded and thus also excluded from

[5] Diana Singerman shares this interest in linking women and politics, Cf. Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995.

the definition of the universal citizen, in the Turkish mode of modernization, women's visibility and citizenship rights endorsed the existence of the public sphere. But by the same token, the public sphere, as a site of the modernist project, was tightly monitored by the secular elites. Consequently, in Muslim contexts of modernity, the public sphere does not emerge as an outcome of a liberal bourgeois ideology but of authoritarian state modernism. Hence, the gendered and the authoritarian nature of the public sphere in the shaping of secularist elites and modernist projects in Muslim countries both define the particular aspect of non-Western appropriations of modernity.

The Public Sphere as a Secular Way of Life

The Turkish case of secularism is distinguished by its radicality among the Muslim countries. The Turkish Republic was proclaimed in 1923, the Khalifate was abolished in 1924, family law was completely secularized (a unique experience among Muslim countries) by the adoption of the Swiss civil code in 1926 (hence religious marriages and polygamy were forbidden) and, finally, the Turkish Republic was declared a "secular state" by a Constitutional amendment in 1937.

Although Turkish secularism is inspired by the French *laïcité,* which is basically shaped by the gradual separation of state affairs from religion, the neutrality of the state toward various denominational groups and the irreligiousity of the public sphere, it follows a different pattern? First of all, for instance, Turkish secularism does not encourage the separation and autonomy of religion from state power. On the contrary, institutional religion is brought under total state control in order to bring the religious idiom and education in line with the modernist and rationalist ideal. Second, it is hard to speak of the state's equidistance from all denominational groups, because "Sunni" Islam implicitly represents "state religion", which is challenged today by the "Alevites". Only in regard to the third feature, the irreligiousity of the public sphere, can we speak of similarities. The similarity between the two cases, French and

[6] Mary P. Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America" in *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* ed. by Craig Calhoun, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1993, p. 277.

[7] For a comparison of secularism in France and Turkey, see "Laïcité/laiklik: Introduction" Jean-Paul Burdy and Jean Marcou, *Laïcité(s) en France et en Turquie,* in CEMOTI (Cahiers d'études sur la méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien), Paris, No. 19, 1995.

Turkish, is the secularist and universalistic conception of the public sphere; i.e. one enters into public spaces, mainly into the realms of education and politics, leaving behind one's particularistic identities and religious affiliations. Consequently it is the universalistic conception of citizenship, regardless of gender, religion and ethnicity, that underlies the secularism of the public sphere in accordance with the ideals of the Enlightenment[8]. The secularization of the public space, the disappearance of religious symbols and practices (such as the removal of the crucifix from schools and courts) is a significant aspect of French secularism. But this process took place gradually and through political democratization during France's Third Republic.[9] In contrast, in Turkey, as in other Muslim countries, secularism as a prerequisite of Westernism has been implemented by authoritarian political systems.

The secularist project shaped during the single-party period of the Republic meant the expunging of all religious signs and practices from the public sphere in order to install the "modern way of life"; the banning of religious shrines (türbe) and the dervish orders (tarikat) (1925); the prohibition of traditional Ottoman headgear, the red felt cap, the fez and its replacement with the European hat (1925); the adoption of the Western calendar (1926); the replacement of Arabic script with Latin script (1928); imposition of certain types of music at state radio stations and television channels — all testimony to the desire to cut links with the Islamic world and to turn towards the Western, i.e. "civilized" world. Gellner calls Kemalist secularism a "didactic secularism"[10]: it is moralistic and pedagogical, it imposes and teaches secularism as a Western way of living. The secularization of education, politics, and also of everyday life practices and of social spaces is critical to the modernist project. The adoption of the metric system, the Gregorian calendar, the celebration of the New Year, the acceptance of Sunday as the official day of rest,

8 Such a secularist and universalist concept of the public sphere is best elaborated in Habermas's work. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1991). Today, efforts to include cornmunitarian aspects, gender identities, class dimensions, and ethnicity expand the definition of the public sphere as a liberal bourgeois sphere and contribute to our understanding of the contemporary problems of democracy. See Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1992). Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self,* (New York, Routledge, 1992).

9 Jean-Paul Burdy and Jean Marcou, *op.cit.,* p. 13.

10 "Didactic secularism" was coined by Ernest Gellner to describe the Kemalist mode of secularism in Turkey. Cf. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 68.

and the civil ceremony in marriage are all examples of the imposition of Western secularism at the level of organization of time, daily life and social practices. In other words, the public sphere denotes a space for the making of the new republican elites, while it excludes the others, namely those who do not conform to this "new life", that is the non-Westernized Muslim population. The public sphere does not initially appear as democracy providing "equal" access for all citizens to a rational-critical debate on public issues, but emerges as a model of modernist patterns of conduct and living.

Further, in a Muslim context, the existence of a public sphere is attested by women's visibility and social mixing for men and women. It is the construction of women as public citizens and women's rights (even more cherished than the construction of citizenship and civil rights) that are the backbone of Turkish modernism. The removal of the veil, the establishment of compulsory co-education for girls and boys, civil rights for women including eligibility to vote and to hold office, and the abolition of Islamic family law guarantee the public visibility and citizenship of women. In other words, women's bodily, social and political visibility define the modernist public sphere in the Kemalist project.

Hence Turkish Kemalist modernism can not be grasped without understanding the centrality of women, both as agents and symbols of secular modernism. Each revolution redefines the attributes of an "ideal man"; yet Kemalist revolution represents and idealizes new women figures in their social roles, public visibility, Western appearances and ways of life.

The celebration and acquisition of women's visibility both in their corporeality and in their public roles as models for emulation furthered the secularization of public life. Photographs of women unveiled, women in athletic competitions, women pilots, women professionals, and photographs of men and women living European life-styles depicted the new modernist representations of a "prestigious" life.[11] Novels of the Republic would base their cast on this new "civilized" way of life, take its decor, goods and clothing as their backdrop, celebrate the ideal attributes and rituals of a "progressive and civilized" Republican individual: tea salons, dinners, balls, and streets would be the public spaces for the socializing of sexes; husband and wife walking hand in hand, man and woman shaking hands, dancing at balls, and dining together would characterize the European style of male-female encounter. Among the cast of characters would appear serious, working women

11 Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: the Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.

devoted to national progress — these to be distinguished from "superficial" and mannered claims to Europeanness.[12] Against Ottoman cosmopolitanism, Kemalist women characters, affirming seriousness, modesty and devotion, would accommodate the presumed pre-Islamic Anatolian culture and thereby incarnate the nationalist project.

Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu's novel, *Ankara* (1934) is among the best examples trying to overcome the tensions between Western cosmopolitanism and nationalist modernism by accommodating woman's public participation with the values of modesty. The leading female character in the novel, originally from Istanbul, is depicted positively as a "Westernized" woman who is alienated from her people and can find fulfillment only in being closer to people. Consequently, she moves from Istanbul to Ankara, the new capital (1924) of the Republic, searching for "authentic" Anatolian roots for the nationalist project, in distinction to Istanbul, the site of Ottoman cosmopolitanism. Selma is portrayed with sympathy as having high esteem among the vigorous neighborhood women, as a "boyish person" without salient "hips and breasts" (physical traits considered European), and leading a "modern" way of life, that is as eating at the same table with men and riding horses in their company. Nonetheless, the Western way of life, especially the one promulgated by the cosmopolitan Istanbul elites and symbolized by the gramophone, Swiss governess, white gloves, dancing and bridge parties, are criticized by the novelist as a source of the leading female character's alienation not only from her own people but also from herself. Yakup Kadri calls on his characters to turn back to the "plain, intimate and strongly personal, sincere life" experienced during the period of the struggle for national independence. "Turkish women have forsaken their charshafs and veils to be able to work with more ease and comfort... Yes, a Turkish woman has claimed her freedom and used it not to dance, and to polish her nails... to be a puppet, but to undertake a demanding and serious role in the constitution and development of a new Turkey".[13] Hence, women were paramount to the project of nationalist modernism and Westernized secularism. Republican men called on women to be active agents in the building of a modern nation. Thus the emancipation of women from traditional and religious roles was desirable to the extent that women acquired public roles, public visibility for

12 For criticism of superficial Westernization and of male characters in Turkish novels, see Serif Mardin, "Super Westernization in the Ottoman Empire in the Last Quarter of the Nineteenth Century", in P. Benedict et al. eds., *Turkey: Geographic and Social Perspectives,* Leiden, 1974.

13 Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu, *Ankara,* p. 129.

the "national cause", which in turn implied collective consciousness and modesty rather than individualism.[14]

Women's participation in public life as citizens and as civil servants, their visibility in urban spaces, and their socialization with men all defined the modern secular way of life and indicated a radical shift from the social organization and gender roles framed by Islamic religion. In other words, in a Muslim context, secularism denotes a modern way of life, calling for the "emancipation" of women from religion, signified by veiling and the segregation of the sexes. Women as placemarkers of social organization, interior and exterior definitions, private and public spheres, relate to the making of the modern individual, to the modern way of being.

Images of Kemalist women carry modernist aspirations for the public as well as for the domestic sphere. Women as public servants (at the service of the interests of the republican state), teachers (educating role), participating in beauty contests and sports festivals (emancipated in their bodies), performing on the stage (not fettered with religious prohibitions), going to restaurants, driving cars (occupying urban spaces) — all these new roles calling for public visibility were endorsed by the feminine elites and encouraged by the "paternalizing males"[15] of the young republic with a shared nationalist pride in creating a new part of the "civilized" Western world. Domestic life and ideals were also under the influence of Western values, with a new emphasis on the conjugal couple and a new interest in health and hygiene[16]. New periodicals, advertisements, novels brought domestic life under the public gaze or, in other words, modern domestic life was "publicized". Women as modern housemakers, consumers of new hygienic products, and in the upbringing of children embodied the pedagogical civilizing mission in matters of modern living. The house and the domestic interior followed the West-

14 Later, from the 1980s on, feminist scholars and writers in Turkey would criticize women's identity defined within and by a nationalist project, thus paving the way for a new feminist consciousness. Works by Sirin Tekeli have pioneered the critical evaluation of the Kemalist reforms regarding women. Cf. Sinn Tekeli, *Kadinlar ve Siyasal Toplumsal Hayat,* (Women and Political Social Life), Ankara, Birikim yay., 1982. Shin Tekeli, "Emergence of the New Feminist Movement in Turkey", in Drude Dahlerup, ed., *The New Women's Movement: Feminism and Political Power in the USA,* London, Sage, 1986.

15 Yesim Arat, *The Patriarchal Paradox,* (Women Politicians in Turkey), London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1989.

16 Cern Behar and Alain Duben, *Istanbul Households: Marriage, Family and Fertility 1880-1940,* Cambridge University Press, 1991.

ernized aspirations for the nuclear family and found their expression in the "comfortable, simple and plain cubic" architecture (Le Corbusier's ideas were a source of inspiration for a whole generation of Turkish architects throughout the 1930s).[17] The modernist project aimed to constitute a new way of being and living, transmitted primarily by women and their changing intimacies with men in a newly-constituted public sphere.

Hence, in a modernizing project, the public sphere is closely monitored by the state: rigidly in the early republican years, especially during the single-party period from 1923 to 1946, softening gradually from the 1950s on with the transition to pluralistic democracy (a process interrupted by the military interventions of 1960, 1971, and 1980). During the post-1983 period, the public sphere gained more autonomy from the state and became the locus of all the competing movements of civil society (such as Islamist, Kurdish, Alevite, liberal) challenging the national, secularist and homogeneous character of the republican project of the public sphere. The demand by female Muslim students to be allowed to attend university classes in their Islamic outfit constitutes the most visible assault on this project and is perceived by the secular elites as an invasion of "their" public sphere (university classes, parliament, television, concert halls, streets etc.).

Veiling between Public Visibility and Communitarian Morality

Ironically, in a similar way but from the opposite direction, women also play a central role in contemporary Islamist movements of the post-1980 period; the veiling of women becomes the most visible emblem and indicator of the Islamization of politics, male and female relations, urban spaces, and daily practices. Between modernism and Islamism, the stakes remain the same, that is the battleground remains self-definitions, gendered spatial divisions and practices, and civilizational affiliations. Women's agency and public visibility characterize contemporary Islamism as well as constituting a challenge to traditional precepts of Islam calling for the seclusion and segregation of women. New female actors of Islamism make their way to public university education, to political life, to the urban hetero-social spaces of modernity. Hence Islamist

[17] Sibel Bozdogan, "Living Modem: The Cubic House in Early Republican Culture", in *Rethinking the Project of Modernity in Turkey,* eds by S. Bozdogan and R. Kasaba, University of Washington, 1997 (forthcoming).

women represent a kind of continuation and at the same time a reversal of modernist women's mode of participation in public life. In both cases, new public roles of women are acquired by access to education and justified by political society-building projects; both modernism and Islamism value women as educators and missionaries. Furthermore, women, in their differing semiologies of body, symbolize and publicly endorse the civilizational choices. Thus women are not secondary, auxiliary actors, but on the contrary significant signifiers for both, the movement of modernism as well as of Islamism. But on the other hand, women's identities, whether seen in individual aspirations or collective feminist consciousness, are confined within the broader boundaries of political projects. Both images of women, the modernist and the Islamist, subordinate female identities, whether relating to individual or collective consciousness, to values of modesty demanded by the "populist" nature of both ideologies. Yet there is a shift in the image of the ideal woman from "modern yet modest" to "Islamic thus modest".[18] Islamist veiling expresses the unapologetic assertion of modesty and religiosity in new self-definitions of Muslim women.

It is this unapologetic stand toward modernity that distinguishes the identity politics of contemporary Islamism[19]. Definitions of self, disputes on life-styles and artistic expression, in short body politics and more specifically gender politics become a central stake in the public debate in which secularists oppose Islamists.

The coming to power of the Islamist Refah Party at the municipal level (on March 27, 1994) and as the senior partner of a coalition government (since July 1996) has brought to the surface these issues on the Turkish political agenda problematizing the existing boundaries between the public and the private. Islamist politics aims for the moral control of the public sphere through such well known actions as control over women's modesty by veiling, limiting the public encounter between the sexes, the prohibition of alcohol consumption, and censorship of the arts. Almost mirroring the stance of modernism, Islamic faith posits itself as reference point for the re-ideologization of seemingly trivial social issues of ways of living, speaking, relating to each other. All its expressions criticize the secular way of life and exhibit a desire to control

[18] The terms are taken from Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran", in *Women, Islam and the State,* ed. by D. Kandiyoti, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991, pp. 48-76.

19 Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam,* New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 50-82.

the public sphere according to the requirements of an Islamic way of life. Control over women's sexuality and the regulation of social encounters between man and female relatives constitute a central issue in the moralization of the public sphere. Consequently, in a Muslim context, the dispute over life-styles, far from being a trivial issue of individual choices or changing trends, defines the shrinkage or expansion of the boundaries of the public sphere, which in turn defines the stakes of democracy.

In other words, contemporary actors of Islamism have access to modern education, to urban life, and to politics and they gain public visibility but refuse assimilation to the values of secularism and modernist elites. The reasons for Islamist radicalism are thus related to this quest for authenticity, to the class relations of domination and exclusion, and more precisely to conflictual relations with modernist elites and their civilizational affiliations. In other words, the alteration in life-styles and in esthetic and ethical values which generated a civilizational shift from the Islamic to the Western is not independent of class relations of power. Western taste as a social indicator of "distinction" established new social divisions and created new social status groups (in the Weberian sense referring to life-styles) and thus changed the terms of social stratification. Thus there emerges a domain of power struggle, "habitus" in Bourdieu's terms, a realm beyond our language and will, encompassing habits of eating, body language, taste etc.[20] Contemporary Islamic radicalism problematizes the Westernized habitus as a legitimation for elites and reveals this power struggle in an aggravated form[21] It criticizes the equation of the "civilized" with the "Westernized". As an alternative, it advances the Islamization of life and life-style.

In other words, the politicization of Islam empowers and promotes the return of Muslim actors, ethics, and esthetics to the historical scene. In this respect, Islamist movements share with other contemporary Western social movements the same critical sensitivity regarding Enlightenment modernity. They are thus similar to feminist as well as civil rights, environmental, and ethnic movements in that all display the force of the repressed (gender, nature, ethnicity and religion respectively) and all recapitulate lost memories and identity-politics. Like feminism, which questions the universalistic and egalitarian claims of the category of "human being" and asserts instead the difference of women, Islamism problematizes the universalistic claims of "Western civilization",

---

20 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction,* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984.

21 Nilufer Göle, "Secularism and Islamism in Turkey: The Making of Elites and Counter-Elites", *The Middle East Journal,* Vol. 51, no.1 (Winter 1997).

which excludes Islamic difference. In other words, just as radical feminism refuses strategies to assimilate women in the category of "human beings" equated with attributes of "male being" and forges instead women's identity in terms of its difference, Islamism refuses strategies of assimilation in a "modern civilization" equated with "Western culture" and forges instead its own difference. In both cases, it is the refusal of assimilation and the unapologetic attitude toward egalitarian, monistic and global forces of modernity that underpins the exacerbation of differences and identities. The motto "black is beautiful" is endemic for all new protest movements, since they all reject assimilation to "men", "white", and "Western"; and on the contrary all define their identity, their source of empowerment and identity-politics in terms of "difference" as women, blacks, and Muslims. Similarly, the motto "Islam is beautiful" gains credence in Islamic contexts. The Islamic way of dressing, way of living, and faith — all considered signs of "backwardness", "uncivilized ways", the "dark side of modernity", "forces of obscurantism", and thus taken to be signs responsible for Muslim oppression and exclusion — are all reappropriated and accentuated by Islamist actors. Hence, through the political radicalization of Islam, Muslim identity makes itself apparent and seeks to acquire legitimacy in the modern political idiom. Islamism is the exacerbation of Muslim identity and its reconstruction in and by the modern world. In other words, Islamism renders Muslim actors visible in the public sphere by their exacerbated differences. And once again, the covering of women conveys the equivocal meanings and tensions between limitations of the self (modesty) and collective empowerment (difference), between public visibility and private intimacies.

The similarities to and contrasts with the Western feminist movement can provide us with some further clues for the understanding of these paradoxes engendered by contemporary Islamism in relation to democracy and the public sphere. Both feminism and Islamism introduce the intimate, private realm, be it religion or sexuality, into politics. The motto of the feminist movement "the personal is political" contributed to the enlargement of politics toward issues of self-definition and male-female relations of domination. In a way, the feminist movement followed the drive of modern societies, which according to Michel Foucault, is to search for "truth" and (stemming from earlier Christian religious practices) to "confess" the most intimate experiences, desires, illnesses, uneasiness, and guilt in public.[22] This explains how everything considered

22 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol.I* (translated from the French by Robert Hurley), New York, Vintage Books, 1990, p. 61.

to be the most difficult to say, everything forbidden, rooted in the personal, private sphere, becomes, once confessed, public, political and knowable. Feminism (as shown by the novelty of its labels: abortion rights, sexual harassment and date rape) contributes to this movement of exposure to and transparency in the public sphere, but equally to the broadening of democracy, which transforms intimate relations of domination into political relations of power.

With the advent of Islamist movements, faith, self-definitions and male-female relations — all of which are aspects of the domain concerning intimate, private relations — are also brought to public light, into politics. But at the same time, this realm reappears as a site of religious identity's resistance against the assimilative power of Western secularism and modernity. In other terms, Islamism makes an issue of the interior-intimate gendered space, but by the same token calls for political interventionism to enforce woman's modesty and its own models of male-female relations. Islamism tends to reinforce communitarian morality by redefining the public order in conformity with Islamic prohibitions.

We can suggest that Islamism finds an echo in non-Western contexts, due to the awakening of the latent communitarian morality common to the recently urbanized social groups that feel insecure and threatened by the globalization of modernist values as transmitted by tourism, satellite TV, and consumer goods. Communitarian morality can be said to be a trait of societies in which modern individualism, individual conscience, confession and public exposure of the self have not taken the dominant role in the structuring of individual and society relations. In the West, one can recall that the modern individual emerges with the basic presupposition that absolute truth is a matter of individual conscience (implying "private thoughts", "self-accusation", "self-awareness")[23] and not of collectivity. The Muslim context directs one to give oneself up to God and let the community (cemaat) guide one through life[24]. Thus, communitarian guidance in moral affairs is legitimated by religion and by daily life practices, which can in turn articulate themselves in forms of authoritarianism from below. Contemporary Islamism reactivates communitarian morality in legitimizing and reshaping it with

23 Turner draws our attention to the dearth of attempts to spell out the differences between the Christian and Islamic notions of conscience. Bryan S. Turner, *Orientalism, Post-Modernism and Globalism,* Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 62.

24 C.A.O Van Nieuwenhuijze, *The Lifestyles of Islam,* Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1985, p. 144.

a political-religious idiom and agency. In this respect, the Salman Rushdie case — in which Muslim "outrage" went beyond the political manipulation "from above" of the death-fatwa of the Ayatollah Khomeini, swelling up "from below" as well — exemplifies the connections between communitarian values of morality and the conflict with the West over identity, as revived by contemporary radical Islamism. In a similar way, the interdependence between the Muslim community's fabric and religiosity and woman's morality is further revealed by an Egyptian case of blasphemy, less globally publicized than the Rushdie affair, yet more significant.[25] Dr. Nasr Abou Zeid, a professor of the University of Cairo working on the interpretation of the Koran, was accused of opposing the religious law, the Sharia, and was consequently declared an apostate. In May 1993, Islamist lawyers arguing that a Muslim woman does not have the right to remain married with a non-Muslim, sued for Professor Zeid's divorce based on a religious law "hisba" (last applied in the 1950s, it gives every Muslim the right to bring charges against someone if he or she considers the overriding interests of the community to be threatened). This case reveals that the Islamization of public debate and the public sphere is not independent of women's role, women's modesty, chastity, and religiosity, all considered pillars of the integrity of the (lost) Muslim community. In a sense, contemporary Islamism can be read as an endeavor to recuperate the lost community. The restoration of certain signs, especially the (re)veiling of women, symbolizes this "imagined political community" in the sense that it reinforces the social ties among individuals who do not know each other but dream of broad and profound attachment 2[6] Even more than as a political ideology, Islamism appears as an imagined community forged and reinforced by and within the realm of the sacred 2[7]

On the one hand, the current veiling movement carries images of educated, urban, and militant Muslim women to the public sphere and renders them visible in their political agency, while on the other hand recalling women's modesty and role as guardians of the communitarian morality, reinforcing the idea of the forbidden sphere.

---

[25] For an elaborate discussion of these cases of blasphemy, cf. Mohamed Kerrou, "Blasphème et apostasie en Islam", *Monothéismes et Modernités,* (Tunis: OROC (Orient-Occident) and Friedrich-Nauman Stiftung, 1996).

[26] Here, I follow Anderson's analysis of nationalism, applying it to Islamism. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* (Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism), Thetford Press, Thetford, 1983.

[27] Emile Durkheim long ago pointed out the two distinct realms, sacred and profane, each indispensable for the establishment and reproduction of the social tie.

Women thus acquire legitimacy and visibility through their participation in higher education and Islamic politics. Yet there is a covert tension, a paradox in this mode of empowerment through Islamism. On the one hand, they quit traditional "life-cycles", thus making their personal life a matter of choice (for professional and/or political career). But by the same token, they acquiesce in incarnating the Islamic way of life, Islamic morality, and Islamic community. Thus Islamism unintentionally engenders the individuation of women while simultaneously restraining it. Islamism allows women access to public life, but this is an access limited to the purported good of the community, to the missionary goal. The politicization of the "Islamic way of life" can be a hindrance for individual choices of "life-styles". And once again, the monitoring of the public sphere depends on the monitoring of women.

Yet human agency always has unintended consequences; the dynamics of action elude the intentions and wills of the actors themselves. Islamism is no exception to this rule. Its visibility in the public sphere is endemic with new Muslim subjectivities. As it makes its way to the public sphere, it engenders new Muslim subjectivities, which in turn challenge the Islamist ideal of a homogeneous public order legitimated by the "conscience communautaire".

The Homogeneity of the Public Sphere and the Emergence of Muslim Subjectivities

In the last two decades, especially with the advent of contemporary Islamist movements, the homogeneity of the secular public sphere in Turkey is undergoing a radical challenge. Islamist movements aim politically for the moral control of the public sphere, thereby restricting democracy; on the other hand, they occupy and expand the public sphere, creating new Islamic public visibilities and new Islamic public spaces. The bastions of modernity, such as the university, the media, and politics, until recently exclusive domains of the secular elites in Turkey, are increasingly witnessing the intrusion of Islamist actors. A new figure, that of the Islamist public intellectual, whose modern university education provides access to secular as well as to Islamic sources of knowledge, and who can be a journalist, politician, or academician, a man or a woman, competes with secular elites for cultural, political, and media power. Not without difficulty, friction, and hostility, secular elites are sharing university classes, academic conferences, public round-tables, talk shows, the ranks of the parliament, municipalities, concert halls, and

boat trips on the Bosphorus with new Muslim public faces. The latter compete for an audience in electoral politics but also for a share of the commercial market, for media ratings, and for followers in literate culture.

Therefore, the emergence of the Islamic public sphere enters into a very complex, competitive, equivocal relationship with modernity; it can not be reduced to the identity politics of resistance to modernism and consumerism. The relationship between "markets and freedom, commodity and identity, property and pleasure" are far more complex and decisive in the construction of the public spheres.[28] For instance, the Black public sphere in the United States "uses performativity to capture audiences..." calling on the "black community" to buy this or read that "because it is authentically Black" 2[9] In a similar way, Islamism carves a space for itself, ranging from products of cultural criticism such as Islamic novels, films, music, and newspapers through alternative consumption patterns, such as Islamic outfit and fashion shows, to the Islamization of urban ways of living, such as restaurants and hotels respecting Islamic rules demanding non-alcoholic beverages and the observance of prayer hours.

The recently acquired visibility of "Islam" in the public sphere competes and conflicts with the secularist points of view but also provokes tensions within Islamist politics. The politicization of Islam renders publicly "visible" new issues and new actors, but radical Islamism calls for modesty and censorship in the public presentation of self. It carries new actors to public visibility, providing them with a new realm of opportunities ranging from cultural mediation through professional politics and journalism to consumption, yet it tries to constrain and confine this realm within ideological boundaries. Hence, there is an inbred tension between individuation strategies, self-definitions, and subjectivities of Islamist actors and the prerequisites of Islamist politics that tries to contain them within the limits of collective action and communitarian good. Once again, women's issues are decisive in the unfolding dynamics of these tensions. The forbidden boundaries of the public sphere are drawn by the obstruction of women's visibility. But as women give voice to their aspirations and occupy new professional, political and urban spaces, they engender a subversive process, independent of their intentions and will.

---

[28] For such an approach to the Black public sphere, cf. "Editorial Comment: On Thinking the Black Public Sphere", in *Public Culture,* 1994, 7, p. xii, xiii.

[29] Ibid.

Islamist women appear at the crossroads of these puzzles because the more they gain public visibility and find a realm of opportunities for their educational and professional ambitions, the more they find themselves in conflict with the traditions or interpretations that prescribe maternal and marital duties as their foremost moral obligations; this forces them to develop new definitions of self. In their own words, they say "no to femininity, yes to personality", thus maintaining their acquiescence to values of modesty on the one hand and, on the other, consequently opening up an autonomous sphere for their individual aspirations and life-strategies independent of their roles as wives, as mothers, and even as militants of a collective movement.[30] Feminism[31] serves as an intellectual resource in the building of a distinct consciousness of women's identity within the Islamic movement. It has become the source of a demarcation line between varying interpretations of men and women, but also between women themselves; between those who acquiesce to the prescribed traditional gender roles and Islamic militancy without question and those who develop a criticism of these roles from within, forging new self-definitions. A hybrid Islamic and feminist consciousness initially emerged from below and limited to the internal discussions of the movement, leading in the 1990s to a more overt expression in public debate, either through publications (magazines on woman's identity) or through non-governmental woman's organizations.[32]

Every step toward increasing the public visibility of women via Islamist movements triggers a new issue of public debate setting secularists and Islamists in opposition, but also among the Islamists themselves.

30 Nilufer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling,* Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1996.

31 The emergence of a secular feminist movement in Turkey during the 1980s contributed to the proliferation of feminist writings. For a study of the radical feminist movement in Turkey, cf. Yesim Arat, "Women's Movement of the 1980s in Turkey: Radical Outcome of Liberal Kemalism?" in *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle-East.* Nukhet Sirman, "Feminism in Turkey: A Short History", in *New Perspectives on Turkey,* 3 1989.

32 Some of these new forms of Islamic public visibilities, characterizing especially the 1990s, were studied by my students at Bogaziçi University within the framework of my seminar on Islamist movements during the academic year 1995-1996. I refer to the works of Kenan Cayir on non-governmental Islamic women's associations (Woman's Rainbow Platform), to Umut Azak on veiled women journalists in Islamic radio stations, Mucahit Bilici on the example of an Islamic vacation hotel, Ugur Komecoglu on the movement of Fetullah. These works are in progress in view of a collective publication in Turkish.

For instance, with the end of the state monopoly on broadcasting, commercial broadcasting has rendered Islam visible and ubiquitous on Turkish television.[33] Yet the presence of women, the image of uncovered or covered women on Islamic television channels, continues to be the line of demarcation separating different trajectories of the Islamic public sphere and the ideological positions of Islamism. Similarly, the proliferation of private Islamic radio stations opens up a new realm of job opportunities for Islamic women journalists. But the issue of "women's voices," considered by some a "provocation" and thus as "illicit", renders women's professional presence precarious and questions its legitimacy.

Another example of these paradoxes of Islamic public visibility can be found in tourism and the changing consumption patterns of the newly-formed Islamic middle classes. The popularity of a new luxurious hotel ("Caprice Hotel") that offers summer vacations in conformity with "Islamic" rules, i.e. prayer hours, non-alcoholic beverages, separate beaches and swimming pools for men and women, Islamic swimwear for both sexes, etc. testify well to the degree to which Islamist identity difference is inseparable from consumption, commodity, property, and even pleasure patterns dictated by global and local trends of the market economy. Islamist intellectuals advocating resistance and authenticity criticize such integrative and conformist strategies as an attempt to strengthen the Islamist movement by means of the Western life-style of consumption and vacation. Yet for many members of the newly-formed middle classes, "vacation" is as natural as "working"; neither can be given up merely because they are allegedly "Western".

An Autobiographical Novel by a Young Islamist

A novel written by a young Islamist writer is an example of a more self-reflexive mode of changing Muslim subjectivities as an unfolding process of political Islamism. The novel by Mehmet Efe can be considered an autobiographical novel bearing witnessing to his own and his generation's Islamism.[34] The writer, in his twenties, tells a story of the Islamist generation during the post-1980 period. His narrative of an "Islamist" male student of his own age provides us with additional clues, images that can help clarify our definitions of an Islamist and of radical

---

33 Ayse Oncti, "Packaging Islam: Cultural Politics on the Landscape of Turkish Commercial Television", in *Public Culture,* 1995, 8: 51-71.

34 Mehmet Efe, *Mizraksiz Ilmihal,* Istanbul, Yerli Yayinlar, 1993.

Islamism. Irfan (a name meaning "knowledge", which is described as the pillar of the civilizations of the East) is a student at the history department of the Istanbul University. He defines himself as part of the general Islamist movement; that is he is "Muslim, religious, Islamist, radical revolutionary, fundamentalist, pro-Iranian, Sufi, etc... somebody belonging among all these".[35] He is a typical representative of the students in the Islamist movements of the post-1980s; coming from a provincial town, originally from the lower middle class, with a traditional religious family background and becoming an Islamist at the university when he arrives in a large city like Istanbul. His life exhibits upward social mobility, since he is the first of his family to gain access to high education and urban life. He depicts his student life as a political Islamist and an activist: collective prayers in a mosque, followed by political demonstrations against Israel and the United States, participation in panels, visits to Islamic bookstores, and also trials are the activities and spaces that he is familiar with. In the corridors of the university and on the streets of Istanbul, he acts as an Islamist revolutionary: "We were actors, heron of the images in our dreams incited by the Iranian revolution".[36] Acquiring political consciousness empowers him in his relations with girls as well: "Before, when a girl asked me a question, I was so perplexed, not knowing what to do... afterwards, that is after acquiring political consciousness... finding myself among the people who believe in liberation, salvation through Islam, girls didn't appear to me important enough to be taken seriously... and those who were covered (read Islamist), were my sisters ("bacim"). They were the pioneers, mothers of the society that I was dreaming of and struggling for" 3[7]

This narrative of an Islamist student is almost the exact mirror image of a revolutionary leftist student in the 1970s in Turkey. Each has a dream of an ideal society, a utopia for liberation and salvation; and for each this implies a radical, that is a complete revolutionary change of the society. In both cases, the life of a revolutionary necessitates giving up the pleasures or necessities of daily life as a male and as a student, pleasures now considered trivial. As militants and missionaries, they commit to and project themselves into the future ideal society. In other words, for the sake of public ideals and political revolution, private, intimate identities and relations are given up. Ironically, male actors of leftism and Islamism both empower themselves politically in repressing their male identities and thus reproducing the dominant values of a

35 Ibid., p. 78.

36 Ibid., p. 16.

[37] Ibid., p. 15.

communitarian morality that tolerates male-female socialization only within the accepted boundaries of sisters, mothers, or comrades.

The young Islamist character of the novel was not able to radically change his society, but he did go through a radical change when he fell in love with an Islamist co-ed. The girl, as a new image of Muslim woman, and the love he deeply develops for her present a constant challenge to his political convictions and collective commitments. Being in love with her triggers a catharsis in his personal change and emerging new Muslim self.

The girl represents those female actors of contemporary Islamism who are self-assertive and yearning for educational success. Boy meets girl on registration day at the university: Islamists are protesting the prohibition of Islamic veiling and he asks her to participate in the boycott. She retorts with feminist irony and criticism, advancing her individual identity (and her preference for registering). She does not accept that men speak and act on behalf of women: "Did you ask my opinion of the action? You men make speeches, satisfy yourself exhibiting heroic actions, and we should be the decoration, ha?"[38] Furthermore, she mocks the male activists of Islamism: "Protesting became a fixation for you... You feel an inferiority complex in relation to leftists? Is that why you impatiently jumped on our headscarves?"[39]

The female character, Nurcan, is a typical representative of Islamist female actors of the 1980s and 1990s; self-affirming, educated, urban, and critical. Her role in the novel exemplifies well Islamist women as generators of change and not merely ascquiescing to the logic of the movement. She is a duplicate of the Islamist women characters changing the movement from within as described in my book *The Forbidden Modern* — but with a significant difference. The novel follows but also exceeds the latent dynamics depicted in *The Forbidden Modern* and renders them manifest from the point of view of a male protagonist of Islamism.

Falling in love with one of those new kind of Islamic girls ("it would have been so much simpler with a traditional, docile girl from a village", he complains) plays a cathartic role in his questioning of revolutionary political Islamism. She is an intellectual pioneer in this criticism. We read in her words, taken from her diary: "Such an absurdity! The majority of us start taking seriously the roles we want to play... They are walking in the corridors as if they were going to realize the revolution tomorrow. ... Some among us even say things such as Muslim men are

[38] Ibid., p.17.

[39] Ibid., p. 32.

too passive. Everyone is rapidly on the way to "masculinization" (erkeksilesiyor)[40]... "They also put into my hands books. Books with phrases that put on my shoulders the obligation to be a warrior, a guerrilla, to take the responsability for a war that would change everything and the world fundamentally... I am small. I am weak. I am a girl. I am a girl... GIRL.."[41] Hence, as she reappropriates her identity as a young girl, she resists the political and collective roles ascribed to her. Ironically, her "weakness", her withdrawal to the intimate, private life and the boundaries of identity constitutes a new source of power to criticize the Islamic ambitions of radical change.

At the end of his journey for change, Irfan, the male character, echoes her words, writing of his desire to distance himself from political militant Islamism: "I want to take off this militant uniform [parka]... I want to exist not with my enmities but with my friendships... I want to satisfy myself with small things. I can no longer carry any universal things."[42] Rediscovering the private "small" life provides an anchor to limit the totalizing nature of the Islamist project. Love reintroduces desire, intimacy, and privacy. "Falling in love" with a woman is already problematic for an Islamist. Because, in the words of Irfan, "a Muslim does not fall in love with a woman, but only with Allah" 4[3] For the first time, and to his own surprise, he starts to share with his friends a "personal" subject, his love for this woman. At the end of the novel, he starts searching for a job and dreams of their life as a happily married couple, imagining himself buying her a colorful dress and a silk headscarf, sharing daily life, cooking together, reading, etc.

To consider this novel, which became quite popular among Islamic youth, to be a criticism of Islamism from within, as many Islamic radicals do, is an oversimplification. The themes of falling in love and looking for a job can both be considered as evidence that the protagonist is giving up his commitment to Islamism. But I would argue that the novel testifies to and contributes to the development from collective political Islamism toward the emergence of Muslim subjectivities. The writer, using a modern tool of self-reflexivity - the novel, a literary genre - gives voice to and subjectivises the "Muslim". To do this, he needs to overcome the repressiveness of the collective definitions of Islamic identity. This is the site of the paradox. On the one hand, political Islamism empowers Muslim actors and identity, but on the other hand it hin-

40 Ibid., p. 49.

41 Ibid., p. 50-51.

42 Ibid., pp. 170-173.

43 Ibid., p. 19.

ders them in expressing themselves in their subjectivities. The novel takes a step forward in the Islamic movement's story, in that the author narrates the emerging Muslim subject, who initially owes his existence to the collective political movement, but who no longer needs confrontational politics for his identity. It can be read as the "normalization" of Muslim identity. The novel tells us the story of a young Islamist transformed by the relationship of love with a member of the "other" sex. The revolutionary role of love in the construction of the subject is decisive. As Alain Touraine writes "it is because self-consciousness cannot reveal the subject that the emergence of the subject within an individual is so closely bound up with relations with the other... The love relationship does away with social determinisms and gives the individual a desire to be an actor, to invent a situation, rather than to conform to one... It is thanks to the relationship with the other as subject that individuals cease to be functional elements of the social system and become their own creators and the producers of society" 4[4] Hence, when our male character criticizes political Islamism and gives up anti-systemic resistance, he is not simply conforming to given values of modernity, but, on the contrary, is reappropriating, blending, and composing between self and modernity.

Both as an expression of self-reflexivity as and exposure of the self in public, the genre of the novel is inseparable from the birth of the modern individual. Self-reflexivity and self-exposure in public are not a trait of societies where communitarian values of modesty prevail. Hence Farzaneh Milani argues that the absence of autobiography as a genre in Persian (but also read Turkish) literature demonstrates the "reluctance to talk publicly and freely about the self", a condition found not only in women, who are "privatized" but also in men who, are expected to be "self-contained".[45] This autobiographical novel testifies to the newly emerging Muslim male-female subjectivities in the public sphere, which in turn constitutes a challenge to the Islamist movement 4[6] Against the totalizing ideal of Islamism, the novel carves out a space for intimacy

44 Alain Touraine, *Critique of Modernity,* (translated by David Macey), Blackwell, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA, 1995, pp. 226–227.

45 Farzaneh Milani, *op.cit.,* pp. 201-202.

46 On how to read, analyze, and interpret contemporary "autobiographical voices" as ethnographical material, as constructions of self and community, as revelations of traditions, re-collections of disseminated identities, and cultural criticism, see Michael M.J. Fischer, "Autobiographical Voices (1,2,3) and Mosaic Memory: Experimental Sondages in the (Post) Modern World", in *Autobiography and Postmodernism,* edited by Kathleen Ashley, U. Mass., 1994.

and privacy that resists the monitoring of the personal by the public. It thus expresses the "self-limiting radicalism"[47] of Islamism and thereby counters the totalitarian tendencies embedded in Islamist politics. In other terms, the frontiers of the forbidden Islamic public sphere are challenged from within by the intrusion of Muslim male-female intimacies. Love constitutes a resistance to the suppression of male-female subjectivities and the puritanization of the public sphere.

[47] Cohen and Arato use the term "self-limiting radicalism" to define the pluralistic aspect of new Western social movements. Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory,* Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1992, p. 493.