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Open Forum

Being Seen

Headscarves and the Contestation of Public Space in Turkey

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Despite appearances that the issue of the Islamic headscarf in Turkey is a relatively recent one, it has been a contentious issue since the founding of the Republic if not even before. As Turkey sought to establish itself as a modern, western-looking republic in the early part of the 20th century, it used Islam and one of its most potent symbols, the headscarf for women, to signify what it no longer was. The headscarf came to be seen as a sign of backwardness and the oppressive nature of Islam and Ottoman society towards women (Delaney, 1994: 159; Secor, 2002: 5). As such, women were exhorted to uncover and take up their new and rightful place in the public sphere. As Yeğenoğlu explains: 'the unveiling of women became a convenient instrument for signifying many issues at once, i.e. the construction of modern Turkish identity as opposed to backward Ottoman identity, the civilization and modernization of Turkey and the limitation of Islam to matters of belief and worship' (Yeğenoğlu, 1998: 132). This new Republican woman, educated, socially active, a trained wife and mother and yet feminine in her western dress, would demonstrate Turkey's social progress. With the resurgence of Islam in Turkey in the last 20 years, women's issues and the symbol of the headscarf have once again returned to the forefront of public discussion.

The revival of Islam also challenges the historic construction of modernity in Turkey. Modernity in Turkey has often been equated with westernization as the Kemalist elite viewed 'the top down imposition and the

possible dissemination of Western secular reason and scientific rationality' as necessary for the establishment of a modern state (Keyman, 2007: 220). Secularism was also viewed as key and is a central component of the concept of Turkish modernity (Keyman, 2007: 217). However, in Turkey, secularism does not merely consist of a separation of religion from public affairs but centres on the control by the state of virtually all religious activity. This type of secularism also seeks to remove all signs of religion from public and private life in an attempt to render religion unimportant in the lives of citizens.

Since the 1980s, globalization, economic liberalization, the passage of European Union harmonization legislation and the return to prominence of Islam have transformed Turkey in innumerable ways. Perhaps none more jarring than the changes brought about by the renaissance of Islam. Islam now poses a serious challenge to the long-standing Turkish conception of modernity based on a state-centred strict form of secularism. In fact, Keyman asserts that it is 'one of the defining and constitutive elements of the changing nature and formation of Turkish modernity since the 1980s' (Keyman, 2007: 223). Turkey is, once again, remaking itself and we can see 'the emergence of alternative modernities' comprised of different agents and 'identity claims' (Keyman and Koyuncu, 2005: 109). The young women in this study represent an aspect of the questioning of and attempts to redefine modernity that are currently taking place in Turkey.

Much has been written about the headscarf in recent years both inside and outside Turkey (Ahmed, 1992; El Guindi, 2003; Gemalmaz, 2005; Özdalga, 1998; Saktanber, 2002; Secor, 2002; Yeğenoğlu, 1998). What has become clear is that wearing the headscarf in public places is an enormously important and polarizing debate within Turkey and much of the rest of the world. In Turkey at least, it seems there exists little room for dialogue, one is either for the wearing of the headscarf or against it. Particularly contentious is the issue of public space and the presence of covered women in the public sphere. It seems that as long as one is willing to keep one's religion to oneself then one is welcome to it, headscarf and all. However, if one is insistent on being seen, then the secular establishment and its protagonists will vigorously defend what they see as their space.

I employ the terms public space and the public sphere roughly interchangeably to convey the layered sense of meaning present in both. First, public space consists quite literally of places such as schools, parliament, courts, etc. – spaces defined as public under Turkish law and therefore covered by the ban on the headscarf. These actual places also constitute part of the public sphere which is a space where social relations are produced and limits are demarcated as to who can belong and what is permissible (Göle, 2002: 185–6). The public sphere is contained

within the broader social imaginary that Taylor describes as 'the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (Taylor, 2002: 106). Importantly, the social imaginary is also the shared set of understandings that allow for common customs and a 'shared sense of legitimacy' (Taylor, 2002: 106). In Turkey, the current social imaginary defines the public sphere as one that should be devoid of religious symbols, particularly those associated with Islam.

For defenders of secularism, few public spaces are considered more sacred than schools. Schools are viewed as the frontline in a battle for the hearts and minds of future citizens. Indeed, schools play an enormous part in the production and reproduction of the existing social imaginary, an imaginary that many wish to maintain as strictly secular. Therefore, special reverence is paid to secularism in the schools, at the same time that schools are viewed as an important bulwark against encroaching religiosity.

Currently, there exists a ban on the wearing of the headscarf in public buildings, e.g. schools, courts, parliament. With the institution of the ban in 1925, schools, universities in particular, have become a serious site of contention. On the one hand, are those who defend the ban and seek to keep schools free from those who wear the headscarf. On the other hand, are young women who wear the headscarf and remain on the outside trying to get in. Somewhere in the middle are the young women who remove their headscarves in order to attend university. Little has been written about these young women, their decision to remove their headscarves and their subsequent experiences at the university. This article uses material gathered from interviews with six such women in order to better understand their position and to open a space for dialogue.

PROCEDURE

This article stems from conversations I had with six young women who have chosen to remove their headscarves in order to attend classes at the university. All six women attend private universities in Istanbul and are studying in various departments. This is not a representative sample; nor have I tried to construct any kind of typical headscarved university student. Louise Spence, in a different context, has described such interviews as 'not evidence [but] opportunities for discursive analysis and interpretation' (Spence, 2005: 52). I perceived our discussions as an 'intersubjective dialogue' of which we were all a part, thus refusing any split between

subject and object (Spence, 2005). My intention here is not to provide an explanation but a reading. Nor is my intention to take sides or try to determine who is right or wrong. Rather this article is an attempt to root out the layers of meaning present in this debate and to convey what these young women have to say about their experiences. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which we researchers are also a part of the process of producing a possible reading. The questions asked often structure the answers, while the power and accessibility of the researcher can also deeply affect the outcomes provided. In my case in particular, there were a number of factors to potentially influence our discussions.

First and foremost I am not a Turk, nor a Muslim, although I am a long-time resident of Turkey, a Turkish citizen and married to a Turk. I am a university lecturer, which is a position of power especially given that all of the young women were students at the time the discussions took place. Moreover, the students also made the power differential clear in that they addressed me by the title *Hocam* (teacher), and always with the formal 'you' in Turkish. Certainly, without my being a woman it is difficult to imagine this project coming to fruition. The student who served as an interlocutor and organizer of the group made it clear to me that she had vouched for me and 'explained about me', which served to allay any fears on the part of the other participants.

The primary interview consisted of a group discussion, which took place at a time and place of the group's choosing. Importantly, the women chose as the site for our dialogue a café located in the religiously conservative neighbourhood of Eyüp. This choice of site allowed all of the young women to wear their headscarves. During the course of our talk, it was clear that they were quite comfortable in the setting despite the very public nature of the space. This conversation was tape-recorded and it lasted one-and-a-half hours. All communication was in Turkish. As a follow-up to our major discussion, I also emailed several additional questions to which the young women responded.

I focus on young women who have removed their head coverings in order to attend university in Istanbul largely because such women have been ignored within the debate. Moreover, their unique position of accommodating secularism at times while not completely relinquishing the headscarf, brings to the fore issues that I argue are at the core of this debate. These issues centre on the construction and contours of the public sphere in Turkey. As Göle explains, 'the public sphere [in Turkey] is institutionalized and imagined as a site for the implementation of a secular and progressive way of life' (Göle, 2002: 176). So the presence of women wearing the headscarf and demanding a place in public spaces directly contests such a construction of the public sphere. This is precisely what the young women I spoke to are asking for and yet they also each made the decision to remove their scarves in order to be admitted to the public space that is the university.

In the course of this article, I have used the term headscarf rather than veil because it better captures the actuality of the way in which the young women in this study cover their heads. Headscarf is also the term closest to the Turkish *başörtüsü*, which translates as head covering or *türban*, referring to a particular style of wearing a headscarf. Furthermore, the terms, *başörtüsü*, *türbanlı* and *kapalı* (covered) are the terms that these young women use to describe themselves. The young women who are the subjects of this article all cover their heads in the *türban* style that has become more prominent in recent years in Turkey. It consists of a headscarf, usually bright in colour that fully covers the hair, frames the face tightly and is pinned under the chin. The scarf is also most often wrapped around the neck and tucked into the shirt although one of the young women in this study wore her scarf out over her shoulders. I have also chosen not to employ the term veil because this often implies the covering of the face which is very rare in Istanbul.

Following the work of Secor, this article places the issue of headscarves in the context of dress and the 'spacialized understanding' that the headscarf produces (Secor, 2002: 7). The headscarf, like any other item of clothing or body decoration, relates many different ideas from an individual's social group, gender and social status (El Guindi, 2003: 56–7; Secor, 2002: 7). It can also be a sign of identity and resistance (El Guindi, 2003: 57). Secor importantly points out that the headscarf, or in her terms veiling, is a 'situated, embodied practice' that is at the same time wedded to ideas of space (Secor, 2002: 9). Space, here, must also be seen as relational and embedded in power relations at all levels from the local to the global. Additionally, dress, and all forms of body adornment, including the headscarf, acquires 'its meaning and practice within the historically and socially situated conditions of its production' (Secor, 2002: 7). Given this, dress is not simply an issue of individual choice. At the same time, it is not fully prescribed either.

Dress can both restrict and enable movement. In fact, space and dress interact to construct the meaning of both. A particular space gives meaning to dress while the 'formally or informally enforced norms of dress' shape the experience of a given location (Secor, 2002: 8). In her discussion of Istanbul, Secor argues that it is a city constituted by '*regimes of veiling*, that is, different, spatially realized sets of hegemonic rules and norms regarding women's veiling' (Secor, 2002: 8, emphasis in original). These '*regimes of veiling*', which include not wearing the headscarf, vary in formality and the extent to which they are enforced (Secor, 2002: 8). One place, however, that the regime of veiling is formally applied is the public sphere. Particularly in schools it is strictly administered and this no doubt constitutes a large aspect of the way that the young women in this study experience the space of the university.

The so-called headscarf ban is in actuality not a prohibition at all but an injunction to dress in a 'modern' fashion. This prescription for modern

dress is part of an extensive regulatory scheme that controls individual dress within the public sphere. These regulations have been in place since the early years of the Turkish Republic and apply to persons such as government employees, including school officials, military personnel and radio and television presenters (Gemalmaz, 2005: 28–9). The various regulations that comprise this dress regime at no point specifically ban the headscarf, nor do any of the regulations define what constitutes 'modern' clothing (*kilik kıyafet*), clothing considered appropriate to the revolution and principles of Atatürk,¹ or civilized (*uygar*) apparel (Gemalmaz, 2005: 29). Despite the use of such general terms as 'modern' dress and 'civilized' clothing, the focus of these regulations has been largely on the headscarf. While the interpretation of these terms has been left to various decision-makers, they have consistently viewed the headscarf as outside these categories, continuing the idea that the headscarf is not modern, nor in keeping with the principle of Turkish secularism. With the focus on the headscarf, the burden of these regulations falls almost exclusively on women, something that the young women in this study were acutely aware of. As long as young women insist on wearing an Islamic style headscarf, this regime will bar them from many public spaces, which reveals the extent to which those in power have attempted to naturalize a certain form of dress for public spaces.

THIS IS THE WAY I AM

From virtually the beginning of our discussions, the young women that I spoke to all pronounced that it was their choice to wear the headscarf. Yet their 'choices' are not without difficulties even within their own families. Canan² stated that, 'I consciously chose to be covered not because my mother and father wanted me to be covered, of course they did, but in the end I chose to cover. There was no compulsion, I wanted to cover.'³ This sentiment was echoed by others in the group. At the same time, these women assert that covering was their choice, several of them made it clear that all of the women in their families wear the headscarf. Without doubt, growing up in families where most if not all of the women wear a headscarf must at least lend the appearance that this is the normal, natural way of dressing. While they insist that covering is their 'choice', their comments also reveal the extent to which wearing the headscarf is as natural for them as not wearing it is for others. In this light, Ayşe asserted that, 'if I were to uncover my head right now my father would never say do not do that. He would show me the right road, but he would not insist.' Clearly, here the right road is represented by wearing the headscarf. Moreover, Emine related a story of a friend that further revealed the extent to which the 'choice' these young women have made to cover is, in

fact, structured in various ways. Emine's friend, who does not wear a headscarf, was sorry that she had not been raised in a similar way to Emine, in particular with a mother who covers her head. Moreover, Emine reported that her friend felt that she could not now choose to take up the headscarf. The friend stated, 'it would be very difficult for me to cover because everyone around me is uncovered. . . . I would have my closest friends against me and my mother would be against me.' This story illustrates the extent to which various regimes of covering and not covering are active, naturalized and dictated by different forces.

The insistence of the young women who participated in this study that covering was their choice seems distinct from the past when many women viewed the headscarf as part of tradition. The idea of conscious covering that these young women embrace is actually part of what disturbs many in modern-day Turkey. Göle argues that today:

The headscarf is deliberately appropriated, not passively carried and handed down from generation to generation. It is claimed by a new generation of women who have access to higher education, notwithstanding their modest social origins (many come from the periphery of the big cities and from small towns). Instead of assimilating to the secular regime of women's emancipation, they press for their embodied difference (i.e. Islamic dress) and their public visibility (i.e. in schools, in Parliament) and create disturbances in modern social imaginaries. (Göle, 2002: 181)

These young women and many others like them trouble the assumptions that many Turks have about their society and the route to modernity.

This new generation of young women who 'consciously' adopt the headscarf occupy a position of ambivalence between traditionalism and modernity; they are in many ways both modern and visibly Muslim. Since the founding of the Republic, modernity and religiosity have been posed in opposition to one another. As Turks grew more urban, 'modern' and western, the belief was that they would and should also move away from Islam (Gülalp, 2003: 389). The modernity embodied by these headscarf-donning young women unsettles this belief. Many of these young women have appropriated the 'social signs of modernity, such as language, comportment, politics, public exposure, and being in contact with secular groups without giving up the Islamic difference (marked by the headscarf) – this is the source of the trouble' (Göle, 2002: 180). In Göle's terms, the young women in this study are nothing if not modern. These women are educated, speak more than one language and with little difficulty move between private and public spaces. They bear little resemblance to the observant women of the early Republic who were characterized as backward and in need of rescue.

For these young women and many others like them, the headscarf represents a part of their identity; it is a vital aspect of who they are. It is not

just that 'they are marked in that their choice to veil becomes reinterpreted according to the norms of the particular veiling regime into which they enter' (Secor, 2002: 8), the headscarf is a part of them. Güllalp (2003: 385) relates the story of Aliye, 'she simply says that [wearing the headscarf] is who she is and has been'. This same sentiment is echoed by university student Canan when she states that 'this is the way that I am. This is the way that I am Canan.' While I share concerns about reducing women who cover to the headscarf and thus risk erasing the body, we must also acknowledge the extent to which these women define themselves in terms of their wearing the headscarf (Secor, 2002: 8). A female student who appeared in a video installation titled *Women Who Wear Wigs*, states that, 'when I put on my headscarf, when I am covered my insides open, my spiritual world opens. I am happy. From then on I can speak more comfortably, I can adapt to everything. You come back to yourself' (Ataman, 2001: 72). The identification with the headscarf is so thorough for some of these young women that they view it as 'we [who] are forbidden' rather than the headscarf (Ayşe). While wearing the headscarf is undoubtedly an integral part of who these young women believe they are, I would not say it is how they want to be defined. I believe it is equally important for them to be seen as young women who have desires and ambition; young women who also wear the headscarf.

BEING SEEN FOR WHO THEY ARE

Without doubt, the wearing of the headscarf is viewed differently depending upon the space (Secor, 2002: 8). In Turkey, wearing the headscarf can also mark one as a certain kind of person: backward, ignorant, an object of political manipulation and a threat to the Republic. The young women that I spoke to are aware of the negative perceptions that many have of them. Banu commented how once people learn that she attends university, their behaviour towards her changes dramatically. She asked 'do covered women appear so unknowledgeable to the society at large?' She went on to say that

... when this happens it motivates you more. You tell yourself that you have to show what you know. I am studying at the university and so on. I want to prove myself. I want to clear the names of the covered in our numbers. If I can clear our names then in the future, so many things are possible.

The language that Banu uses here reveals the extent to which she has internalized the negative societal views of those who wear the headscarf. Canan responded to Banu, asking, 'Why do we have to make such an effort? What are we doing? ... Why do I have to make the effort to clear my name? What did I do?' Covered university students undermine the

assumption that women who wear the headscarf are uneducated and lacking in social mobility and this destabilizes modernism's hegemony. These young women possess many of the markers of modernity and still insist on wearing the headscarf. Moreover, their insistence on being present in public challenges the way the public sphere in Turkey has been constituted as a space where signs of religion, particularly those associated with Islam, have no place.

The ambiguous space that these young covered women occupy renders them suspicious and threatening to many in Turkish society. In fact, our dialogue began with them relating the extent to which they feel under suspicion at their schools. Banu explained that each time she approached the front entrance to her university, it seemed that security personnel began to communicate with each other using a particular numerical code. Banu continued stating that, 'it is as if we are thieves. We are going to place a bomb. We are going to do something.' As she continued, several of the other students who attend the same university concurred that they had experienced the same thing. Whether or not this kind of surveillance of covered women students actually takes place is not important. What is important is that these young women feel that they are not trusted. Of course, if there is actually a concern on the part of university officials that these young women will do something, it is that they might try to enter the university wearing their headscarves.

Ayşe related that she and friends did, when they were first at the university, try to push the limits of the strict ban on headscarves in universities. The ban requires that women must completely remove their scarves before entering the university, this includes the campus grounds. Ayşe explained that when returning from prayers she and her friends would enter the building with their headscarves in place and then proceed to the women's restroom to remove them. This was allowed with the complicity of some of the security personnel until someone in charge stopped them and forced them to leave the building and remove their scarves before re-entering. Ayşe said, 'the first time this really breaks a person but in time you get used to it'. Interestingly, none of the students held the university security personnel responsible, despite their enforcement of the ban on headscarves. Banu spoke about the first time she was told that she could not enter the university wearing her headscarf, 'when they first told me my eyes filled and I started to cry. The man said what can we do, my mother is covered, my wife is covered but they give us the orders.' Canan and Ayşe also recognized that those required to enforce this ban are not those that have actually made the decision to forbid the wearing of headscarves. Additionally, in the same schools and public buildings that these young women are forbidden to enter with their headscarves, there are more than likely any number of working women, i.e. cleaners, cooks, etc., who come and go with their heads covered but

'they are tolerated because they are invisible – because of their class position' (Güalp, 2003: 389). As part of an educated and privileged elite, these young women are not invisible, therefore it is difficult to ignore their presence. Their visibility disrupts assumptions that education and wealth will lead people away from Islam. Furthermore, the fact that those who enforce the headscarf ban, along with many others who work in the universities and other public spaces, may not necessarily support it also demonstrates the extent to which there are deep contradictions in Turkey's system of rigid secularism.

This sense of being marked also extends into the classroom for several of the students. They reported that they felt they were treated differently and that often this was reflected in lower grades. Although these women remove their headscarves upon entering their respective schools, it is relatively easy to distinguish young women who cover outside school from their fellow students. Some of them may wear a hat or a wig to cover their hair and all of them tend to wear long skirts, long-sleeved often high-collared shirts, regardless of weather. Despite what they described as their hard work and dedication to their studies, they often felt singled out and discriminated against resulting in missed scholarship opportunities and a general state of demoralization. In one particularly egregious case, Ayşe reported that one teacher would touch her and others in the class, and while she stated 'I don't like it' she also said 'I don't say anything'. She and the other students clearly feel powerless to address what they feel is either inappropriate behaviour or injustice in the classroom. Given the general feeling of being mistreated in school, it is not surprising that they would not want to invite any of the potential difficulties that might arise from confronting the teacher.

Perhaps more than anything, the young women I talked with want to be seen for who they believe they are rather than as a political symbol that signals backwardness, oppression or represents a threat to the Republic of Turkey. Ayşe reveals the following fantasy:

One day I want to put my scarf in my bag and go to the top floor [of the main university building]. On the top floor I will put my scarf on. . . . From those stairs with the whole school at the bottom, I want to go down the stairs with my headscarf on. I want them to see me that way.

Clearly, there is an aspect of spectacle and performance in Ayşe's wish but at its most basic it is a desire to be seen. In a way, these young women spend their university careers with the virtually impossible task of trying to pass, trying to blend in, trying not to be seen for fear of being singled out and punished because they wear the headscarf. These young women want to be seen by others as they see themselves and they want the right to be seen as themselves.

Canan echoed Ayşe's wish to be seen when she stated that:

... when I am wearing something really beautiful, or I think I look really attractive that is the way I want to enter school. I really want this. For example, when others see me they will say today you look really beautiful, your scarf really looks good on you, your outfit really goes well together. What would happen if I entered this way? Others are entering in that way. This is really a source of regret for me.

The concern with beauty and how they look was a theme that occurred several times in the course of our conversation. These young women feel more beautiful when they are wearing their headscarves. One of the women related a story where her mother, attending a military swearing-in ceremony, was asked to remove the pin she used to hold her headscarf in place under her chin. This would supposedly transform her headscarf from the *türban* style to the traditional *başörtüsü* covering, which is perceived as apolitical and therefore less threatening. While the women in this study objected to this on political grounds, they placed almost equal emphasis on aesthetics. Banu stated, 'From an aesthetic perspective, [a headscarf that is tied rather than pinned below the chin] is just not attractive.' More succinctly, Emine added 'it looks disgusting'. To a certain extent, these young women are no different from their uncovered classmates, 20-something university students with all the same concerns about how they look, their clothes, grades, etc.

The headscarf and all that it has come to symbolize in Turkey is the source of much contestation. But, in the course of this dispute, the actual women who wear those headscarves often seem to be overlooked. Little time is spent listening to their dreams and desires and even less consideration is given to the difficulties that wearing the headscarf in Turkey may present for them. What became clear in the course of this study was the sheer difficulty with which the six young women I spoke to removed their headscarves each day in order to attend university. Part of what made it so difficult was what they saw as a lack of fairness. Banu asked, 'Why? Why are we forced to do this? Why don't we have any other opportunity?' Furthermore, these women also recognized the gender inequity present in banning the headscarf from the university and other public spaces but allowing men with the same beliefs to freely enter those same spaces. Canan strongly objected to this discrimination:

You don't accept me in that way [wearing the headscarf], but you accept my brother, who has the same logic, the same thoughts and the same feelings as me, into the military. ... He is serving his country but you are hindering me.

Beards, required by religiously observant Muslim men, are also covered by the same regulations that prohibit the headscarf in many public spaces,

but this aspect of the prohibition is not enforced with the same vigour. These young women are left to bear the burden of their beliefs while like-minded men suffer no similar consequences.

Even more troublesome than the sexism in the ban on headscarves was the amount of pain and guilt these young women feel for appearing in public without their headscarves; something that they consider to be forbidden by their religion. On some days, these students go through the process of removing their scarves four to five times depending on the number of times they attend mosque for prayers. Each time they are affected by it a little more. Although they claimed that they are used to it, it was clear from the emotion with which they spoke that this was not the case. Several of the women likened it to being naked in public. Emine explained, 'removing my scarf is a terrible feeling. It can't be described.' Without their scarves, these young women feel vulnerable and exposed in a way that they do not when covered. These feelings were present from the first day of university. Emine related that when she started university she counted the number of days until graduation, marking off each day upon its completion. In the first days, she became ill with hives from the stress she felt. Others recalled the tears they shed.

While the stress of the first days passed for all of these students, the day-to-day reality of removing their scarves has clearly left its mark on some of them. The distress they feel undermines their ability to function in school and threatens their psychological health. Ayşe explained:

I started with great desire. I want to do a master's degree and a doctorate. I want to go as far as I can, but this kind of thing undermines a person's desire. Now I don't want to come to school. I don't want to study.

So serious is the problem for Ayşe that she says, 'I do not think that my psychology is normal . . . I feel very bad about myself.' A woman simply called 'covered student' in *Women Who Wear Wigs* echoed this sentiment: 'I did not guess that I would feel this sorry. I did not expect it to ruin my emotional balance to this extent.' Banu added to this, hoping that Allah would forgive her for having done something that is prohibited:

Ok, what I did was forbidden . . . let's get educated so that covered women can have access to things. We will be the first maybe. We will rise to a certain place and we will help those who come after us. I think in this way and I am saying to Allah to give me a long life so that I can do good things, so that you can forgive me. I want to finish school and do good things.

The burden of choosing between their religious beliefs and the desire for an education weighs heavily on these young women. Perhaps what struck me most during the course of this project was the extent to which these young women had been demoralized by their experience. But despite the

fact that some of them have had a decidedly negative university experience, none of the young women I interviewed regretted their decision. They all wanted an education and hoped that in receiving their education they could then make things better for themselves as well as others.

CONCLUSIONS

More than anything else, I believe that these young covered women want to be seen for who they believe they are: modern, educated, beautiful, ambitious young women who also wear the Islamic headscarf. They do not want to be punished for what they believe is their choice. This, however, is also precisely the problem. These women occupy a previously undefined space in Turkish society and this proves highly problematic. As Göle explains, 'There is a problem of recognition to the extent that Islamists start sharing the same spaces of modernity, such as the Parliament, university classes, television programs, beaches, opera halls and coffee houses, and yet they fashion a counter-Islamic self' (Göle, 2002: 186). These young women represent a challenge to the way the public sphere has been constituted in Turkey. To this day, much of the public sphere, and in this case universities, continues to be defined as a space that should be free of religious signs, particularly the Islamic headscarf. Although the young women in this study remove their headscarves when inside the university, they still carry the markers of religion in their dress and are easily recognized as women who wear the headscarf. These young women and others like them with their 'performative acts of religious difference in the secular public space defy the limits of recognition and of social bonds and unsettle modern social imaginaries' (Göle, 2002: 186).

The current clothing regime that constructs the university as a headscarf-free space has defined the educational experience of these young women in a decidedly negative way. The inability to wear the headscarf has made the university a hostile place, a place of negativity and vulnerability, a place of lost dreams and hopes. It is a place where they do not feel welcome. While the Islamic headscarf has long been a potent symbol in Turkey, we must not forget that under every headscarf is a real woman: a woman who lives with difference and has dignity, pride and self-respect. Despite the difficulties of this daily struggle, these young women continue to resist the pressure to permanently remove their headscarves. For at least one in the group, the experience of removing her headscarf in order to attend university appears to have rendered the act of wearing the scarf more valuable. Emine describes the pleasure and power of putting on her scarf,

When I am putting on my scarf, I do it very slowly. I should cover my head beautifully. I should rid myself of the pain of having removed my scarf.

Opening up the terms of secular and religious discourse, these young women have reclaimed the headscarf from reactionary to an article of sensuous beauty and affirmation. In the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations – modernity vs traditionalism – we have lost sight of the complexities of the lives of these young women by reducing them to their headscarves. While Ayşe, Emine, Canan, Banu, Didem and Feride do not regret their decisions, they have paid a price and so has the Republic of Turkey for the maintenance of such a rigid system of secularism.

NOTES

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1. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is considered the founder of the modern Turkish Republic.
2. The names of the students who participated in this study have been changed to protect their privacy. This is what we agreed upon but it does not allow me to publicly thank them.
3. All translations are my own.

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