

Two Scenarios. The Faces of Patriarchy

On April 11. France launched the prohibition of wearing a certain feminine clothing, the so called "burka", in public spaces. The reason given by the government for such a legal disposition is that the burka is the cover used by Muslim orthodox women, and in France people seem to have the certainty that those wearing burka are forced to do so by the males of their family.

According to French law makers, this alleged coactions over women come from the intimate sphere (not the public one, since there is not a Muslim majority in France), and reflects a serious subterraneous problem: for the most literal interpretation of Islam, the woman is considered an object, and as an object, each woman belongs to a man (first to a father and/or brothers; later, to a husband; in the case of widowhood and having grown up sons, to a certain extend she will belong to them). For that reason, and in order not to awaken foreign sexual instincts, no woman should exhibit herself outdoors.

According to this perspective, the ban of the burka in public spaces seems to be a clever idea that might guarantee the protection of women. Being convinced of the fact that a subjugated woman lacks the ability to choose freely, a public law is imposed over the domestic norm, so that no male living in France will force a woman to walk the street covered by such claustrophobic clothes. The intention of this law is to protect women even from their own families.

Besides audacity, this law has another advantage because it points towards the roots of the inequality between men and women, and puts them in the fact that the identity of Muslim women is only partial, since they are the property of the men they live with. Nevertheless, the French law is wrong when believing that this problem can be only found in Islamic families. Machismo is so deeply embedded in nowadays society that, as a structural skeleton of contemporary identity, becomes invisible even to its victims and perpetrators.

The Western countries are aware of the problems generated by patriarchy, and for that reason more and more awareness

is shown regarding private excesses over Islamic women, but at the same time nobody is able to detect the fierce, inducted machismo that Western women suffer from the public sphere since they are little girls.

Let us compare two apparently opposed lives: Laura's, an American, non-confessional woman (Scenario A), and Fatma's, a French, Muslim woman (Scenario B).

SCENARIO A (Laura, 35 years old), London. Monday, 7am

7:00-7:25. Wake up-call. Laura gets a shower and then she untangles her hair and spreads specific creams over the different parts of her body.

7:26-7:49. Laura wakes up her husband and her little boy, Jeffrey (16 months old), and the whole family eats the breakfast (Laura is always rushing, and so it is her husband how feeds Jeffrey).

7:50-8:20. Laura brushes her teeth, dries her hair and combs carefully it with the aid of a ceramic iron and dozens of products. She then makes herself up and gets dressed (luckily she choose on Sunday the garments for every day of the week!) In the last half an hour her husband has cleaned up the kitchen after breakfast, has prepared himself and has also prepared Jeffrey.

8:21-8:24. Laura kisses her husband goodbye (he leaves now for work) and later secures her child in the baby-chair inside the car.

8:25-9:00. Already in the car, Laura takes her child to the kindergarten and then drives to her office. (Inside her designer bag, makeup to fix the cracking of the day; in the trunk, the sport bag; in the agenda, two appointments in the cosmetic clinic, one for the review of the last dose of Botox, the other one to get her weekly mesotherapy session (to get rid of the flaccidity of her past pregnancy)).

SCENARIO B (Fatma, 29 years old), Paris. Monday, 8am

8:00-8:05. Fatma wakes up and washes her face (she got a bath last night). She also wakes up her two children, Allaedin (13 years old) and Fatma (11 years old).

8:06-8:20. Fatma prepares breakfast for the three of them, and then they eat it. They try not to be noisy (her husband is still sleeping, today is his day off).

8:21-8:25. Fatma brushes her teeth and dresses herself, not forgetting the burka.

8:26-8:56. Already in the street, she and her children take the bus to go to school. Once they have arrived, they say goodbye until the evening, when Fatma will pick them up.

8:57-9:00. Sat on a bench, Fatma waits until they open the supermarket. She observes the sophisticated French women, walking quickly to their working places on high heels and carrying on heavy, oversized handbags.

9:02-9:37. Fatma shops the groceries for the day. She calls her best friend and her father (who is sick and today has an appointment with the doctor) while she waits for the bus.

9:38-9:57. On the bus, Fatma suffers a sexual harassment by a man who pinches her butt. When she cries out against him, he offends her even more calling her "Black spirit" and telling her to "Go back home" (she has a French passport). By their attitude, the rest of the people on the bus seem to agree with the man instead of defending her.

10:00-10:18. Once in her lobby, Fatma dries out her tears, full of impotence and humiliation. She knows her husband well, and she has decided not to tell him about what has just happened; otherwise, he would go mad.

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SCENARIO A. Tuesday

Everything should have been as smooth as on Monday, but Laura got asleep, since the previous night she forgot to set the alarm. She got up 45 minutes late! Between the options of arriving on time to the important meeting at 9 o'clock, or making herself up and missing the meeting, she chose to rush to her office, with no hair nor make-up work.

But when she entered the office everybody asked if she was sick ("What a terrible dark circles! Are you ok? You look so pale!"); her boss told her to come back home, assuming that she had got the flu from her child ("That happens when you take your child to the kindergarten, that's why my wife quit working.")

Laura was back home at 10am, healthy and worried that the most natural version of herself was so ugly. The worst news, though, came on the afternoon, when a colleague called her to inform her that her account with VIP customers had been given to her rival, a decision taken after she had failed to work on a crucial day. Five years of hard efforts had been lost.

She never, never, will forget to set her alarm clock; nor she will ever dare to leave her house without her face and her hair craftfully done.

SCENARIO B. Tuesday

A nicer day than Monday. Her husband joined them for breakfast and they all laughed at his stories from his working place; that made them arrive 5 minutes late for school, but it was a good day. And nobody insulted her on the bus!

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No Western politician would dare to think about banning the use of cosmetics among women; such an action would be understood as an attack against individual freedom. Cosmetics, though, often turn to become a mask, and the fact that so many Western women make themselves up to a great extent, investing so much time and money on it, demonstrates that they are subjugated to patriarchal aesthetic criteria, inherited from the past. If this wasn't true, men would have always invested similar levels of dedication to their public image.

With the prohibition of April 11. French politicians have said that they prefer seeing uncovered women, better than covered ones, but they have failed in asking the French

women, not regarding how much clothes they wear on, which traces of patriarchy still hurt them and affect their actions and decisions in different moments of their lives.

It will be good news when Western governments realize that inequality between men and women is an ethical problem that by no means can be addressed through aesthetic dispositions.

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