

## Re-negotiating the secular and the religious: young Hamas women in the West Bank

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## **Re-negotiating the secular and the religious: young Hamas women in the West Bank**

In the 2016 Birzeit University elections, Hamas launched a video in which a young girl, unveiled and dressed in western style, called to vote for the party. The video sparked a passionate debate whereas religious forces accused Hamas of being ‘westernised’ and abandoning the Islamic norm of modesty, while secular forces criticised the party for promoting a form of women’s empowerment linked to their success in accommodating religious values with secular ones. The debate mirrors scholarly works on Islamist women which rely on liberal/secular dichotomies (such as religion v secular, freedom v un-freedom etc.) and lacks a clear problematisation of the relationship between Islam and new forms of liberal and secular sensitivity. This has been the topic of my field research in the West Bank in 2017, where I have interviewed 45 young Hamas activists in the main universities. The West Bank is an interesting case to study the intersection between Islamism, neo-liberalism, secularism and nationalism: in recent years significant changes took place such as the introduction of a neo-liberal system by the un-elected Fatah-led government (Khalidi & Samour, 2011); the transformation of Ramallah as an imaginary capital of an imaginary state (Abourahme, 2009); the political and social changes in the Middle East after the Arab Spring (Al-Anani, 2012); and the internal struggle between Hamas and Fatah within the framework of lengthy Israeli occupation. Clearly, given the complex Palestinian context, the subjectivity of young Hamas women cannot be captured through liberal/non-liberal secular/non-secular binary oppositions, but should be analysed through the profound transformation of Islamist movements in the last decade.

My analysis reveals that young Hamas women embody a specific form of feminine piety which is mediated by secular, neo-liberal, nationalist, and Islamic values that are produced and re-produced through their own practices. By incorporating different values, they fashion a new form of hybridised Islamic/secular subjectivity which allows for a reinterpretation of Islamic precepts. In other words, drawing from Latour (2011), for whom the crafting of specific body orientations, dispositions and modes of being, enables an understanding of how hybridisation can generate new modes of experiencing religion, my analysis reveals that Hamas women shape and are shaped by particular religious dispositions and secular/neo-liberal orientations which institute a religious *habits* that crafts a mode of being through which women embody and negotiate different religious and non-religious dispositions. This points to the necessity to

problematise binary western oppositions and to understand the subject as multi-layered and imbricated in heterogenic discourses, whereas the construction of secular and religious notions is contingent on the redefinition of the lines between public and private, rendering those categories unstable (Agrama, 2010).

This is revealed by their understanding of veiling which emerges as a dogma, showing the emergence of a more protestantised understanding of religion located in the internal conscience of the individual; as the manifestation of a new Islamic modernity, which discloses the emergence of a new pious Islamic/Islamist female subject; and as the symbol of Islam, which emphasises nationalist/identitarian and secular understanding of women's body as the national body.

Most of the Hamas women I have interviewed define religion as a personal relationship with God, and the veil as the symbol of submission to God's commandment. Ahia, explained that "in our religion, the Koran says that you have to wear the *hijab*. We wear the veil because it's Allah's order" (Nablus, 2017). Thus veiling, a non-compulsory practice in Islam (Ahmed, 1982; Gabriel & Hannan, 2013; Mernissi, 1991), emerges as a dogma, a duty of every female believer. Religious practices, then, are understood as part of a set of normative duties of conscience, rather than as a lived religious experience, as different anthropological studies on Muslim religiosity affirm (Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2005). In fact, while for many Muslims bodily practices are a tool to achieve a specific moral subject which discloses an affective relation between subject and object, faith and rituals (Mahmood, 2005), in western/liberal/secular thought, religion is defined as a personal belief located in the conscience of the individual and not as linked to the construction of a specific moral/religious subject. Hence, at stake are two different understandings of religion: one locates religion in the private sphere and inevitably defines it as a matter of personal conscience, while the other links religion to morality (Keane, 2015, p. 62), which depends upon a particular discursive formation (Hirschkind, 2006). Hamas women adopt a more logocentric, privatised, and secularised notion of religion as located in the consciousness and expressed through their body. At first, then, it seems that young women shift their understanding of religion and religious practices to a more western/liberal/secular understanding.

However, they also highlight the importance of modesty and morality as essential Islamic values. For Samira, "every Muslim woman should wear the veil, not only because it is a

religious commandment, but also because if a woman is modest and pious, she should wear the *hijab*” (Nablus, 2017). Bissam, added that “you cannot force someone to do what you believe is right. Of course, we are pleased when a woman wears the veil, but we would not force anyone” (Ramallah, 2017). Hence on the one hand they construct their religious agency in non-secular terms, which is highlighted by their insistence on modesty, while on the other, they disclose a liberal secular understanding of their religious practice as non-constrained personal choice, a privatised belief located in the consciousness, linking veiling, free choice and modesty.

But while liberals see in the secular/religious divide the essential condition of modernity, Hamas women see in their religious practices, specifically veiling, a symbol of their modernity. They define modernity as “the capacity to change, to adapt to social development” (Ikram, Nablus, 2017) and they link this notion with veiling. In the past, Hamas women used to wear the typical Islamic veil, usually white with a long black loose dress. Laila, observed that “today we still use the veil but with fashion. We use many colours and many shapes. We have accommodated tradition with modernity by maintaining important Islamic values” (Nablus, 2017).

Modernity, then, is associated with changing tradition, “but not always. There are things that should be changed to make our society a better place and things that should not because they are part of who we are...Modernity is not only to wear a miniskirt.” For Asma, “exactly because the body is yours, you should respect it....I am not saying that a woman should not wear what she wants, but I think that she should know where and when to wear a specific article of clothing. I am quite sure that western women who did not respect and protect their body end up regretting it” (Ramallah, 2017). Hence, their (veiled and/or un-veiled) body and (free and/or un-free) sexuality become the point of fracture between the west and the east, the secular and the religious. For Mariam, “differently than western women, we do not have male friends in order to prevent ‘bad things’ to happen”. Women’s modesty, in this view, emerges as a relational virtue aimed at protecting not only their bodies, but the society at large, whereas veiling is linked to social order and the importance of women’s body in maintaining it. Hence, modernity is linked to both the veiled body, now re-fashioned, and women’s sexuality and gender relations, now placed as the point of fracture between the east and the west.

This has been influenced by nationalist/colonial thought that sees women's body as a monolithic signifier of community identity (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006). In fact, most of Hamas activists I have interviewed see in the veil the intrinsic symbol of Islam and their body as a representational tool. Unlike women of the piety movement, for Hamas women veiling does not change the subject's interiority; rather, it emerges as a tool to invest the body with meanings and (strategic) identitarian political and religious representations. However, by so doing, they distance themselves from a more pious/affective religious experience: this has resulted in the detachment of the subject from the object and extra-worldly experiences in name of a more logocentric and rational understanding of religion.

Through the embodiment of different religious/secular and neo-liberal/colonial discourses, young Hamas women have not only disclosed the cultivation of a more individualist pious subject, but they have also transformed their religious bodily practices into a new form of Islamic modernity linking autonomy, choice, freedom and veiling; veiling and modest behaviour embed a liberal notion of individual autonomy and gender equality while maintaining religious/cultural meaning. Since they engage creatively with the wider heterogenic context, their practices cannot be associated with a singular monolithic tradition or understanding of the secular and the religious sphere; rather, while young Hamas women disclose the inherent contradiction of both religious and secular discourses, they blend opposing norms and values, shaping a subject that goes beyond liberal/secular oppositional categories. By re-conceptualising different categories, they fashion a new hybridized and fluctuating subjectivity that eludes and problematises liberal/western oppositional categories in the study of Islamist women. Their bodily orientations enable them to understand how particular reflexive modes of hybridisation could generate a new religious subjectivity where religious traditions and embodied practices shape and are shaped by both the subject and multiple discourses and traditions: by blending apparently contrasting values, Hamas women craft their thought, feeling, and action at the intersection of specific worldly realities.

The capacity of Hamas women to see their body as object and subject does not entail a separation between different spheres of action but invites us to think beyond western oppositional categories. For instance, while, in western liberal terms, freedom and religion are considered two different spheres where the first is led by choice, individual autonomy and reason, and the latter is governed by self-submission, faith and irrational beliefs that constrain the individual (Asad, 1992; Brown, 2015), Hamas women have reformulated opposite western

categories by linking reason and faith and free choice: “reason as a certain proclamation of faith, as working on and reflecting on faith”(Brown, 2015, p. 327). It is through their body that Hamas women move and re-draw the line between secularism and religion: two spheres that at times melt into each other and at times are constitutive and generative of each other.

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