

## **Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics of the Turkish Headscarf**

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In the last decade, an urban Islamic consumptionscape, in part opposing and in part imitating the secular consumption practices, has emerged in Turkey. Islamic-style clothing stores and fashion shows, fitness and beauty centres targeted specifically at modern Islamist<sup>1</sup> women have become commonplace. In this paper, we focus on one of the most publicly visible insignia of the Islamic consumption culture, the headscarf, and explore fashion, aesthetic and taste dynamics that underlie the practice of head covering. Through an analysis of styles of tying, patterns, colours, fabrics, sizes, shapes, designs, brands and usage of scarves, we aim to not only map out the ‘symbolic potentiality’ of the headscarf ‘through its material properties’ (Schneider and Weiner 1989), but also complicate the relation between religion, fashion and modernity.

Although present in other religions too, the practice of head covering today, whether it is in the form of scarf, veil or chador, has become synonymous with the exoticized and often vilified Islamic identity. Some regard head covering as a signifier of oppression and seclusion of women in Islamic societies, others see it as a symbol of resistance and liberation. However, while much is written on the identity politics of the headscarf, there is almost no attempt to understand its aesthetic and material dimensions (for an exception see Balasescu 2003). The effort put into selection, arrangement and securing of the headscarf and its material properties peculiarly vanish in the discussions of the Islamic headscarf. Focusing only on the political implications of the head covering strips away the material aspects of the scarf, granting it a purely symbolic existence, and, willingly or unwillingly, overlooks the aesthetic tensions embodied in this piece of cloth. We believe that through following these tensions we can map out the relationship between a material object and the self, and understand how the headscarf and head covering practices embody the struggle between remaining faithful to the Koranic principles on religiously appropriate dressing and constructing a fashionable, beautiful and modern appearance.

Turkey is a predominantly Muslim yet secular society and, traditionally, head covering has been associated with mostly rural or elderly religiously observant

women. However, beginning in the mid 1980s, the practice began to transform from a traditional (read as spiritual and rural) to a political act. There were several reasons for the emergence of the headscarf as a symbol of political Islam. Under the neo-liberal Özal government that came into power in 1983, attitudes toward Islam began to change, signalling a departure from the strict secularism that was established by Atatürk in 1924. *Tarikats* (religious orders) became active again and several private Islamic educational institutions and companies backed by substantial funding from abroad were set up. As Islamic actors gained more visibility in the public sphere, the polarization between the secularists<sup>2</sup> and the Islamists intensified. By the 1990s, the distinction between traditional modest religiosity and politically threatening Islam was increasingly focused upon the issue of women's head covering. While many elderly faithful women and peasants covered their heads using *başörtüsü* (a scarf that covers only and loosely the head), it was primarily the young, urban and educated women who wore the *türban* (a large scarf that tightly covers the head, ears, the neck and the bosom). In the early 1990s, the Turkish military, governments and secularist elites perceived the *türban* as an indisputable symbol of religious militancy and a threat to secularism, one of the founding principles of the Turkish Republic. The strict enforcement of the ban on religious-inspired clothing in schools and public offices led to frequent clashes between the turbaned women, protesting in front of the universities and public institutions, and the police, raising political Islam's public presence (Göle 1997).

However, while the 1990s marked the increasing politicization of Islam and the polarization between secularists and Islamists, it also witnessed the emergence of an Islamic consumption culture (Kılıçbay and Binark 2002; Sandıkçı and Ger 2001, 2002). With the accumulation of wealth among certain segments of the politically active religious population, an Islamist bourgeoisie with a taste for conspicuous consumption began to emerge. The initial uniformity of attire, characterized by the large scarf and the accompanying loose-fitting long overcoat, gradually transformed into a heterogeneity of dressing styles, signalling the increasing fashion consciousness especially among the upper-class, urban, well-educated, young Islamist women. Textile companies catering to the Islamists developed rapidly. Several shops, most of which carry Arabic religious names, began to offer a wide array of headscarves, overcoats and other clothing items to their customers. Adopting fashion marketing tools, some of these companies aggressively publicize their clothing lines through fashion shows, catalogues, and television and newspaper advertisements (Navaro-Yashin 2002). Although the *türban* continues to operate as a symbol of political Islam (Mandel 1989), it also circulates as an object of material culture, subject to various consumption and production dynamics.

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With these concerns in mind, our study is an ethnographic investigation of the contemporary urban head covering practices in Turkey, with a focus on the relationship between faith and fashion. Our interest lies on the middle- and upper-middle-class, urban, educated Islamist women covered by their own will, who exhibit, and sometimes openly admit, their interest in fashion and being fashionable. Data collected from several sources since 2000 inform our analysis. These include in-depth interviews with Islamist women living in Ankara and Istanbul, interviews with owners and personnel of Islamic-style clothing stores, observations at various sites that Islamist women attend, such as Islamic fashion shows, shopping centres and hotels, and a visual archive that consists of pictures taken by us as well as pictures circulating in the media, advertisements and company catalogues.

### **Religiously Appropriate Dressing: Subjectivity and Multiplicity**

There are two passages in the Koran that address proper behaviour between men and women who mix outside kinship bonds, including ways of clothing and adornment:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty. This will be most conducive to their purity. Verily, God is aware of what you do.

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and should not display their beauty to any but their husbands, their fathers ... (and certain other members of the household). Let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornments. O believers, turn unto God all of you so that you may succeed. (Koran, 24:30, 31)

Women, in advanced years, who do not hope for marriage, incur no sin if they discard their garments, provided that they do not aim at a showy display of their charm. But, it is better for them to abstain from this. God is All-hearing All-knowing. (Koran, 24:60)

According to the interpretations of Muslim theologians and intellectuals, the modesty emphasized in these passages encompasses all aspects of life and calls for decency, humility and moderation in speech, attitude, dress and total behaviour. Modesty prevents human beings from indulging in indecency, vanity and obscenity, and therefore should be adopted by both males and females.

However, while the Islamic rule of dressing modestly applies to men and women, *tesettür* – religiously appropriate modest dressing – has come to connote especially female clothing. The underlying assumption is that it is easier for women to arouse the sexual feeling of a man than the other way around, and

therefore, women should cover up those parts of their anatomy that can draw the male gaze. As Makhlouf puts it ‘the modesty code rests on two contradictory assumptions: that woman is weak and needs to be protected from threats to her honour, and that she has strong sexual impulses which threaten the honour of males and the integration of the group... The veil is a double shield, protecting the woman against external offences of society and protecting society against the inherent evil of woman’ (1979: 38). Because women are instructed to not appear attractive, sexy and seductive, dress is likened to a ‘house’ that maintains privacy and keeps men and their desires away (ISAV 1991: 36). A woman clothed according to *tesettür* is regarded as keeping her dignity, honour and chastity, safeguarding herself from being the subject of gossip, protecting herself from molestation and harm. Although violating *tesettür* is not one of the ‘great sins,’ it is usually considered to be one of God’s commands (ISAV 1991: 24).

In addition to modesty, there are two other tenets of Islam that pertain to clothing and adornment. First, a Muslim is expected to be well groomed and neat, have a beautiful and pleasant appearance, and dress artfully and aesthetically, using decoration and adornment, including perfume (ISAV 1991). Yet, clothing material and dressing manners that stimulate arrogance and vanity are forbidden. Second, waste, in clothing and other consumption, should be avoided. Luxury and excess are seen to be wasteful, and Muslims are instructed to refrain from showiness and waste. Clothing is expected to be functional (e.g. to protect against weather conditions and be suitable for job conditions) and ensure cleanliness, health and hygiene.

However, while modesty, pleasant appearance and avoidance of waste broadly establish the nature of Islamic dress, different interpretations of proper clothing coexist. Far from being a monolithic practice, head covering in particular and dressing in general are domains that are subject to tensions, contestations and negotiations. Theologians, intellectuals and feminists often engage in heated debates over what constitutes proper female Muslim clothing. Television channels, radio stations and publishing houses, owned by different religious orders, broadcast divergent views. Clothing stores and fashion designers introduce new styles and items that expand the heterogeneity in attire. All of these factors help women negotiate and justify different interpretations and practices of *tesettür*.

Its political connotation notwithstanding, the actual practice of *tesettür* ultimately becomes a subjective experience, shaped by various personal and social factors as well as the scriptural meanings and extensions. While there is a consensus that the main idea behind *tesettür* is to not to attract male attention, what does or does not attract attention remains questionable. While some believe that loose-fitting, long garments that do not reveal body contours are the proper style, others go for pants and tighter and shorter jackets, which are deemed more suitable for the lifestyle of a working woman. Some resist bright colours; others

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pick scarves that best match their skin colour. Some reject putting on make-up to avoid arousing carnal feelings; others adopt it as part of their daily grooming ritual. At the end, as many of our informants' practices suggest, 'everyone shapes their own *tesettür*.'

Meral, for example, a forty-four year old housewife with three children who covered thirteen years ago of her own free will, explained to us how she was influenced by her religious teacher, who thought that everybody had her own interpretation of *tesettür*. Meral believes that women are created as tempting creatures and hence they should dress according to *tesettür* in order to minimize temptation:

When I first began covering, a religious teacher told me that everybody had her own *tesettür*. I liked this a lot. Someone wears bikini, but she cannot flaunt. That's her *tesettür*, she said. She said some couldn't wear bikini. Some cannot wear swimsuit at all. Some can wear short sleeved [tops]; others wear sleeveless [tops]. She said everybody has her own style of *tesettür*. But what is spoken in Islam as *tesettür* is what can normally be exposed like hands, face and feet, and the rest should be covered. More correctly, *tesettür* is in fact not to attract attention... That's what I understand from my readings. I mean *tesettür* is actually not to attract attention. Because woman is a creature that always tempts the man. What is expected of *tesettür* is not to attract his attention even more. Hair is something that makes someone look nicer, more beautiful; *tesettür* is because of this.

Similarly, Ceyda, a twenty-seven year old chemist, married with one child, emphasizes that one covers because of her belief in God and *tesettür* helps her to live modestly as instructed by God. Modesty requires one to refrain from drawing carnal attention. In her mind neither the black chador nor the tight pants worn by many young Islamist women fulfil the requirements of *tesettür*. Although due to different reasons, both dressing styles appear distinctive and, hence, attract attention:

For me this [*tesettür*] is an order of Allah. Like fasting during Ramadan it is an order, not something you want to do. I mean one is not covered because of her husband, her family. She covers because she believes in Allah. *Tesettür* means not to attract attention. I think both black chador and tight pants are noticeable. They attract attention. One should not draw attention of the other sex. *Tesettür* is about being an ordinary person.

Many women who decide to cover go through a process of acquiring information about appropriate religious dressing style. They consult people whom they regard as knowledgeable about Islam, read the Koran, the Hadith (recommendations of the Prophet) and other books, and follow the debates on the media. Their own understandings and practices of *tesettür* form depending on the sources they seek

advice from and their personal interpretation of what they learn. Serap is a fifty-nine year old widow who runs her late husband's company together with her children. She is a highly devoted Muslim who chose to cover at the age of thirty-three after a dream she had. She told us that she read a lot in order to find what the appropriate style of covering is, but could not locate any specific prescription about it. She complains about women who wear very long overcoats or the black chador. Rejecting keenly any single description of *tesettür*, she emphasizes that the only requirement is not to expose the body parts and draw attention:

Actually, in Islam, there is nothing about [covering] style. I examined this a lot. First, there is nothing like chador at all. I don't know who invented this. I have been attending to [Koran] interpretation courses for years, trying to learn the Koran. There is nothing, there is no chador... There is nothing like 'you shall wear this or that.' Everybody is coming up with something. Some are wearing those very long overcoats. There is nothing like that! I mean it says something like you should not wear things that excessively expose body counters and attract attention.

Overall, there is a consensus that *tesettür* refers to modest dressing that does not attract male gaze. However, what is 'modest' and 'not sexually attractive' appears as highly variable and negotiated. As the meaning of *tesettür* pluralizes, aesthetic judgements, taste dispositions, and cultural and financial capital assume greater significance in the actual head covering practices of the Islamist women. On the one hand, the lack of consensus on what is proper *tesettür* provides freedom to women to express their own taste and understanding; on the other hand it creates tension, as they need to juggle between being distinctive yet not wasteful and being beautiful yet not ostentatious. Achieving a beautiful and faithful look requires a creative and resourceful negotiation of the subjective meanings, social influences and the fashion dynamics.

## **Fashion Dynamics and Social Influences**

Up until the mid 1990s, headscarves were produced in small workshops, using serigraphic techniques. With increasing demand, factories utilizing advanced printing and manufacturing technologies gradually replaced the workshops. While the Turkish market is dominated by local production carried under either Turkish brand names or licensed foreign brands, headscarves are also imported from Europe, China and India. As in fashion in general, production of scarves follows a seasonal pattern. Generally, there are two creations per year, one for winter and one for summer. Some companies, however, may offer new collections in shorter periods, every three to four months, increasing the variety of offerings. Apart from seasonal designs, there are also classic models, which are offered throughout the

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year. Consistent with the cyclical pattern of fashion in general, design and colour of scarves change from year to year. Typically, if floral patterns dominate one year, geometrical designs follow the next year. After creating a motif, the designers prepare at least five or six varieties of it and send it to sample production. The samples are then tested and the best ones are chosen for mass production. The manufacturers prepare catalogues of their collections and send them to retailers pre-season. In addition to catalogues, the collections are marketed through fashion shows and design competitions. For example, a local producer Aker awards prizes to designs that win in its annual competitions. They then use its award-winning status as a selling point by marking the scarf with a 'Best Design Award Winner' label.

Fashion increases the variety of the scarves and, inevitably, influences which styles of tying and which colours, shapes and designs become more or less popular at a given time. Our informants stress that they enjoy the availability of numerous colours and patterns while acknowledging that there was a limited variety in the past. They also enjoy that there are now designers catering specifically to their needs. While some informants find it difficult to admit that there are fashions in scarves, trends keep changing:

*Sema:* Scarves vary depending on fashion. Now there are these foulards with intertwined threads, trimmed with long fringes. Last year there were scarves made from thicker fabrics. The year before last, there were these designs, whatever they were called, batik? Now there are these *Asmalı Konak* (foulards fashioned after the scarves worn by the characters of a popular television show). Or the tulles, never existed before. More people use them this year. So, from year to year, from season to season, it changes. Whatever the fashion is, a scarf type is introduced accordingly... We no longer use the large square scarves... Young women prefer the foulards nowadays; older women still wear the large square ones.

In addition to the rectangular shawl-type foulards (Fig. 4.1a,b) that Sema prefers, the small square scarves (Fig. 4.2) are also fashionable. The foulards and the small square scarves create a very different and, according to our informants, modern look. These are distinct both from the classical/traditional style of tying (Fig. 4.3), prominent among rural women and some older urban women who are not affiliated with political Islam, and the once-prevalent large tying style (Fig. 4.4a,b), which covers more of the bosom and the back and is now practised only by older and/or conservative women. Furthermore, while a small scarf tucked into a shirt or a turtle neck sweater, or a foulard compose a sporty look, asymmetric arrangements (Fig. 4.5a,b,c) form fancy looks. Fashion also changes the preferred patterns, colours and materials. We noted that the currently trendy designs are Burberry, chequered, small floral or large almost abstract floral, and leopard.



**Figure 4.1a** Rectangular foulard



**Figure 4.1b** Rectangular foulard



**Figure 4.2** Small square scarf



**Figure 4.3** Traditional scarf

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**Figure 4.4a** Large scarf



**Figure 4.4b** Large scarf.

Fuchsia, brown and camel appear as popular colours, while ‘crinkle’ (crumpled thin fabric), chiffon, and a combination of velvet and tulle are trendy fabrics. For special occasions, elegant looking layered scarves with counter toned transparent tulle or netted outer fabric or the more glamorous glittery or bejewelled materials with fancy brooches (Fig. 4.5a) adorn the heads of many fashionably dressed covered women. While women claim that choice of colours and styles is a personal matter, we see more trendy scarves on the streets, and producers maintain that fashionable colours and patterns sell more; for example, we are told that many women have been asking for fuchsia scarves.

Shop windows, mannequins and sales personnel play important roles in informing women about the fashionable colours, patterns and new trendy ways of tying. Many of the customers visit the stores without an exact idea of what kind of scarf they want to buy, and ask the advice of the sales clerks, hoping that they will have the experience and taste to help them pick the scarf that will look best on them. Once the acceptable price range is determined, sales clerks assess the facial features of the customer, namely the skin colour and the

of the face. Depending on its form and size, the scarf can be tied in different styles, which can make the face look larger or thinner. We observed that the square scarf makes the face look rounder and chubbier and is preferred by women who have elongated and small faces, while the rectangular foulard makes the face look longer, thinner and smaller and is preferred by women who have bigger and rounder



**Figure 4.5a** Foulard with brooch



**Figure 4.5b** Asymmetric style



**Figure 4.5c** Asymmetric style

faces. Advice on the colour of the scarf, on the other hand, depends on the skin complexion. Typically, darker colour scarves are recommended to women with fair complexion, and lighter colour scarves to those with darker complexion:

They ask ‘do you have a scarf that would look pretty on my face’? The most difficult question. . . . Of course dark colours look good on light coloured skin and light colours on darker skin. So we recommend light colours for customers with darker skins and

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dark colours for lighter skins. . . . Then there is also the shape of the face. For example, I don't prefer the rectangular scarves as these cover the sides of the cheeks completely. Since my face is thin, it makes my face appear even thinner.

The sales clerks also provide guidance on the match between the scarf and the colour of the outfit that it will be used with. For example, if the outfit is plain coloured, scarves with striking colours and patterns, which make an attractive contrast, are preferred. Indeed, achieving colour harmony in the overall attire emerges as a common concern for our informants. Surprisingly, in parallel to the fetishism of hair for an uncovered woman, the headscarf assumes almost a fetish status and becomes the focal point of gaze directed toward covered women. If the scarf is intelligently coordinated with the rest of the dress, it increases the beauty and attractiveness of the wearer; if not, however expensive it might be, it fails to create a distinctive look. Given the importance of colour harmony, many women complain about the difficulty of finding scarves that will go with their clothes. They claim that forming a wardrobe of matching clothes and scarves is more costly for covered than uncovered women who can 'go out in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt'. They argue that it takes a lot more time to search for and is more difficult to find *tesettir* clothes that are beautiful and fashionable. Some admit that they spent hours to find the right scarf:

*Sema:* What scarf should I wear to match this outfit? Sometimes I think about this for hours. What colour, what design should I use? What combination can I create? It is more difficult for covered women [than uncovered women] to dress. Especially now. That was not the case in the past when one could put on any skirt, an overcoat, any scarf and walk out.

In addition to the production-side factors, popular culture and the political milieu influence the fashion dynamics. Television series often operate as a source or inspiration for headscarf trends. For example, Sema and many other informants refer to a highly popular television show, *Asmalı Konak*, broadcasted in the 2002–3 season and the headscarves that came to be known as *Asmalı Konak* or as *Sümbül Hanım* scarves (Fig. 4.1b), as they are named after one of the leading characters of the series. These are rectangular scarves with tassel made out of a thin and transparent material, and they are typically worn during summer with a bonnet underneath. The sales clerks we interviewed mentioned that *Asmalı Konak* scarves have become very fashionable and many customers come in asking for them.

Political figures also serve as role models and pioneers of fashion: various politically active Islamist women's scarves and, since 2003, the Prime Minister's wife's scarves have become fashionable. The political milieu influences fashion in a very unexpected way too: the ban on wearing the scarf in public spaces appears

to have led to less conspicuous and what is considered to be more modern styles, such as the smaller scarves that are tucked inside the collar. However, although this tying style may have been initially triggered by the prohibition, it appears that it is being spread by the desire not to appear repelling to the uncovered public. Transmitting an appealing look becomes important given the negative and threatening image of the covered women among the strictly secular sections of the population. Many covered women suffer from ridicule or even insults from non-covered women due their appearance, and become stereotyped as 'ugly' and 'backward'. One of our informants recalls a traumatic experience she had years ago when she was scorned because of her attire:

*Ece:* One day, several years ago, I wore something I liked very much, something I thought was very becoming. But as I was walking on the street a middle-aged woman said something to me, something like 'how comically dressed you are, how you still wear these!' I was at work that day and I looked at the mirror throughout the day. I wondered what the problem in my outfit was, what was crude and ugly, searching for something in my clothes or scarf that was wrong.

A modern and attractive look not only helps the covered woman appear less repelling to the uncovered public, it also serves the Islamists' political aims: by appearing attractive, a covered woman acts as a role model for other Muslim women and inspires them to cover themselves.

While fashion, popular culture and the political milieu shape overall trends, there are also other factors that guide the selection of a particular headscarf. Many covered women socialize in the Islamic public sphere. They attend the all-female recreational clubs run by the municipality<sup>3</sup> and other Islamic resorts. They observe popular designs and colours, and chat about the scarves and tying styles they see. Friends go shopping together, talk about the scarves they see on the shop windows, and help each other choose scarves. Like Balasescu's (2003) observation of upper-class Tehranian women, many of our informants indicate that they talk with each other about the brands of the scarves and whether to leave the brand name visible or hidden in the folds of the scarf.

Such social and political dynamics, embedded within fashion, escalate the attention to aesthetics. While the inescapable significance of fashion and what may seem to be an undue focus on outer appearance disturb some women, many justify fashionable aesthetic practices by resorting to the prevailing discourse that Islam commands people to be clean, well groomed and pleasant looking. Thus, they feel that by paying attention to their appearances, they fulfil one of God's orders. However, in practice achieving a beautiful yet not sexually attractive look is a complex task that requires a lot of beauty work. Substantial thinking, effort and time go into the arrangement of the scarf.

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**Figure 4.6** Inner bonnet

### **Beauty Work**

Once the ‘right’ scarf is selected, which also requires considerable work, the woman faces the intricate process of tying it. Not only the scarf itself but also various accessories figure in the construction of the desired look. Before putting on the scarf, first either an inner bonnet (Fig. 4.6), made from cotton, Lycra or woollen knits, or a cotton muslin kerchief, *tülbent*, is worn. Allegedly, the inner bonnet serves two functions. First, it holds the hair together and provides a base upon which the scarf can be pinned down. This enables the scarf to stay on properly without slipping and losing its shapely position due to movement or wind. Second, when the scarf is made out of a thin and transparent fabric, the inner bonnet conceals the hair. The scarf, then, can be wrapped in different ways depending upon its shape – that is, whether it is a square scarf or a rectangular foulard. After a frontal fixing under the chin, the scarf can be tied in the back, one or both of the edges can remain in the front or be thrown to the back, or the edges can be left hanging or tucked inside the collar of the dress.

Women spend considerable effort and time to have the scarf appear *düzgün* (straight, shapely, smooth, rounded and symmetrical). As a saleswoman remarked

‘while [the customers] try [the scarf] in the store, they pay the greatest attention to having it stay on *düzgün*; they spend hours in front of the mirror checking if it is *düzgün* or not.’ If the scarf is not arranged properly and securely, it can slip during the day and lose its shape. The greatest time is spent on silk and silk chiffon scarves, which slip and require redoing every four to five hours. In order to refrain from the inconvenience of retying the scarf, women pay great attention to arranging it *düzgün* at the beginning:

*Emine*: I don’t undo my scarf during the day, until I go home, even if I go home at midnight. I tie it properly with care in the morning so that it stays that way all day long. If I retie it all the time, that’s not convenient. If you don’t use a pin, scarves are slippery, you have to go to the restroom, find a mirror and straighten it and tie it again all the time. Sometimes you are outside. I use a pin so that it stays put for many hours.

Various accessories are used to have the scarf appear *düzgün* in the front and at the back. Despite their alleged functionality, many women use the inner bonnets or the cotton muslin kerchiefs as a means to make the rear top of the scarf stay raised. Women who have long hair first form a hair bun and then wear the inner bonnet. If the hair is short or thin, a muslin kerchief is wrapped around the head to add volume (instead of tying it like a bandana); or *topuzlu bone* – the bonnet with a bun – is used. These are bonnets with a pad stitched into the rear end. The bun of hair or padding elevates the back of the head, which according to many women makes the head and the face appear beautiful and the scarf fold shapely and smoothly (Fig. 4.5b). For the front top, typically, a scarf band is used. A scarf band is a thin rectangular sheet placed right above the forehead to give to the front of the scarf a raised, rounded and symmetrical appearance. Such paraphernalia can be purchased ready-made or constructed at home, for example, by simply cutting an X-ray film or stitching a cloth band with a thin strip of cardboard or sponge inside. Some women prefer to leave the edge of the inner bonnet or the scarf band visible on the forehead. In this case, depending on aesthetic preferences, either a complementary or a contrasting effect between the colours of the scarf and the colours of the bonnets/bands can be created. Finally, pins are used to secure the sections of the scarf under the chin, at the back, or on top of the head so that the scarf does not slip and keeps its arranged form. These fastening accessories come in a large variety, including simple long pins with a large head, safety pins, as well as more decorative clips, buckles, clasps, or brooches.

In addition to the care given to a *düzgün*-looking scarf, our informants pay attention to the colours and patterns that the folds of a tied scarf reveal. Deciding on which colours and motifs should appear in the front, above the forehead, and on the neck, the side(s) and the back becomes yet another aesthetic challenge. Designers produce scarves with contrasting and complementing plain-coloured

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and patterned parts such that they can be worn interchangeably, revealing different parts of the scarf around different parts of the head to create different effects. For example, the scarf can be folded in such a way that the plain colour section remains on top of the head and the patterns appear on the front of the neck or on one shoulder.

The time and effort spent on arranging the scarf is greatest for women who are 'new to covering'. Using a larger number of accessories, such as the bonnets and the scarf bands, and trying different tying styles increase the preparation time, until one gains experience with a new model. There is a learning process, an acquisition of a cultural capital in learning to tie in different styles. This also enhances the instructive role of fashion and social influences we discussed in the previous section.

Another aspect of the beauty work is the details of taking care of the scarves: washing, choosing a shampoo (which is similar to choosing a hair shampoo), ironing and storing:

*Sema:* Washing the scarf is very important, it requires extra care. You should not wash it in a washing machine. I wash them by hand, using a shampoo, never a detergent, in cold or lukewarm water, gently, without rubbing so that the colours will not fade away or lose their lustre and the scarf will not wrinkle or lose its shape. Soap can leave marks. I lay them flat to dry and then iron them. I keep the scarves I use less frequently in a drawer, but I hang my daily scarves, the ones that I wear more frequently stay on hangers so that they don't crease, thus I don't have to iron them again.

Whether in choosing the right scarf, arranging it in a *düzgün* manner, or caring for it, our informants engage in a complicated task. The time and effort expended on daily head covering practice and the significance of the beautification evoke the 'hair project' that women undertake (Haug et al. 1983). Just like the hair, the scarf conceals parts of the body or emphasizes them. Furthermore, it draws attention to the head. The scarf work not only entails the selection of colour, shape and design but also the general arrangement of the head. The process we described above is similar to choosing the right shampoo, the size, colour and style of hair, as well as the hair grooming rituals that McCracken (1988) discusses. It seems paradoxical that in the attempt to cover the seductive and provocative hair, the scarf and the scarf project come to replace the hair and the hair project, respectively.

## **Juggling over Ethics and Aesthetics**

Overall, our analysis indicates that a major concern for our informants is to be well groomed, adorned and beautiful. Yet, this concern might have been considered as conflicting with two tenets of Islam: avoidance of waste and sexual attention.

The often-heard statement ‘everybody shapes their own *tesettür*’ seems to provide the grounds for heterogeneous head covering practices and the justifications for resolving the tensions between the religious principles and the seemingly contradictory actions.

Islam preaches that one should refrain from waste, luxury and overindulgence in material possessions. In accordance with these messages, many of our informants state that purchasing an expensive scarf is wasteful and contradicts the requirements of being a faithful person. However, while their discourses clearly indicate a negative attitude toward behaving wastefully, their actual practices are often in conflict with this attitude. Our informants state that they own between twelve and sixty headscarves and mention others who own several drawers full. The pursuit of colour harmony with a new outfit, the search for a fancy scarf for a wedding, and changing fashion trends make them buy new scarves, bonnets and brooches. Many admit they are willing to pay high prices<sup>4</sup> for premium brands of scarves and imported Italian clips unless constrained by affordability. The enthusiasm for headscarves, however, does not necessarily connote materialism and waste to them. On the one hand, they believe that covered women suffer from many social and political stigmas; enduring such difficulties provides a moral satisfaction in fulfilling the religious duties and also serves to offset any doubt of being wasteful. On the other hand, they justify the large numbers of scarves and accessories they own, the high amounts of money they pay for the brand name scarves they buy, and their beautification endeavours by referring to the Islamic injunction to have a pleasant appearance.

It is true that Islam commands people to be clean, well groomed and pleasant looking. Yet, the practice of this tenet is laden with tensions. Faithful women are not supposed to attract attention; they are supposed to avoid the male gaze. However, many do appear highly attractive. The debates underlining the contradiction between the principle and the actual practice frequently appear both in the secular and the religious media. While our informants acknowledge that having a pleasant appearance is important, they assert that this is carried out to fulfil God’s orders and not to draw sexual attention. Thus, they justify the attention they pay to their appearance as following one of the principles of Islam. Furthermore, they believe that by appearing nicely a covered woman acts as a role model for other Muslim women and inspires them to dress according to *tesettür*; a behaviour that is perceived as highly respectable and admirable in their social milieu.

The concept of a pleasant appearance, however, is also highly subjective and negotiated. Our informants repeatedly use two terms when they talk about their actual head covering practices. First, they stress that the scarf should look *düzgün*. As we discussed above, although the effort put into arranging the scarf in a *düzgün* way appears to be functionally driven – that is, the scarf remains shapely for a long period of time without the need of retying – in practice, it is motivated

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more by the desire to appear beautiful and fashionable. Second, they mention being *rahat*. The word *rahat* connotes multiple meanings: feeling at ease, safe, secure, convenient, and without anxiety, disturbance, annoyance. The informants all agree that wearing a scarf is comfortable as it protects the head against rain and sun. Furthermore, they imply that being *rahat* is related to a sense of peace as the headscarf helps a woman to fulfil the religious duties and guards her from the male gaze. One interpretation of such peace is that ‘the formal or public aligning of oneself with Islam’ brings an inner ease and resolution, by ‘providing a sense of community ... [and] ... protection from male harassment’ (Ahmed 1992: 223). Each of the women we spoke with feels *rahat* in their own ways – they prefer different colours, designs, sizes, shapes and tying styles. However, even when they claim that head covering is a personal practice, which is not shaped by fashion dynamics and social influences, and that they choose the scarf and the tying style that they feel most *rahat* with, their actual practices suggest the opposite. As we discussed, trendy colours and patterns sell more and the currently popular tying styles and the fashionably coloured and patterned scarves appear more frequently on the streets.

Like Haug et al.’s (1983) discussion of hair, the scarf emerges as a symbol of potency in association with beauty. The scarf parades the political atmosphere, like the tightly gathered hairstyle of German National Socialism or the Afro of the African-American ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement. The politically charged socialization of covering the hair mirrors the life-long socialization of wearing the hair. Hence, like the female hair, the female hair cover, reflects women’s struggle with ethics, politics and aesthetics.

### **Tying the Knot**

If covering the hair and the neck serves only the religious injunction to avoid the sexual gaze of men as the Islamists claim, or signifies a threat to the republic, as the secularists claim, any kerchief should do. But instead, we observe a wide variety of fabrics, shapes, brands and tying styles. Women spent a lot of time, money and effort on choosing scarves and putting them on. They juggle for a chic, comfortable yet religiously proper head covering style. Choosing a scarf to buy or wear on a particular day entails much deliberation and arranging the scarf may involve an intricate and long process. These and other practices that we discuss above manifest the significance of daily beautification and a sense of aesthetics that is not always consistent with what would be expected of a narrowly conceived purely religious or political practice.

A prevailing discourse among the more fashion-conscious covered women is that dressing according to *tesettür* can and should be beautiful. These women are

well aware that physical appearance helps creating a distinction, and in today's society where people are judged more with their material possessions than their personality, one is treated according to how she looks. The emphasis on appearance indicates not only the changes in what religious covering means but at a deeper level the quest for being 'modern'.

The turbaned woman circulates as either the oppressed or the liberated Other, but one who is always excluded from modernity. Encoded in the Islamic dress code, for many who are critical of it, is oppressive hierarchies and male domination (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1991; Yeğenoğlu 1998). In contrast, those who are sympathetic to it, read in the headscarf resistance to Western dominance, materialism and consumerism (El Guindi 1999a,b). The opposition between Islam and Western consumerism remains so strong that Turner confidently claims, 'consumerism offers or promises a range of possible lifestyles which compete with, and in many cases, contradict the uniform lifestyle demanded by Islamic fundamentalism' (1994: 90).

However, the actual head covering practices of urban, upper-class, educated women in Turkey that we observed contest the stereotypical discourses and images about covered women, complicating the tension between Islam and consumerism. Indeed, we argue that, far from being a fixed signifier of oppression or resistance, the headscarf in contemporary Turkey operates as an 'unstable sign' (Nava 1997), a cultural codifier of the tensions and promises of modernity. The headscarf connotes a political posture but also 'rank' and 'identity'. Urban, upper-class covered women are not categorically excluded from the spaces of modernity, as many claim, but rather become the subjects as well as the objects of modernization.

The emergence of fashion as a cultural mode of modernity has been linked with the emergence of the modern individual, progress and a break from traditions (Simmel 1904; Wilson 1985). The absence of even the potential of the headscarf as an aesthetic object rests on an assumption that Balasescu convincingly argues against. An assumption that: 'Since veiling is a practice that does not belong to the 'Western' space, and since fashion ... historically belongs to the West, the veil cannot be fashion' (2003: 47). The headscarf ruptures this linear and structural reading of the relationship between Western fashion and modernity, complicating the notion that there is no space for fashion and modernity in Islam.

Our analysis indicates that for some covered women head covering is anything but a traditional practice and the aesthetics of the headscarf is at least as important as its religious and political dimensions. In fact, the selection and wearing of headscarves entail an elaborate process that requires invocation of cultural and economic capitals. Our informants repeatedly speak of their desire to be and look beautiful, a yearning that underlies their struggle for being individual, distinctive, fashionable and modern, yet faithful. Fashion operates through change and variety,

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and calls for repeat purchase. Islam exhorts believers to refrain from waste. Those who pay high prices for brand name scarves argue that high quality assures lasting usage and, thus, avoidance of waste. Yet, as fashion changes large numbers of scarves remain unused in the drawers. The proliferation of colours, fabrics and patterns, which used to be limited until recently, and the marketing of fashionable headscarves enable taste and individuality operate simultaneously as means of justification and distinction. Fashion depends on exhibition; Muslim theologians assert that Islam defines beautiful as the moral and the graceful without exhibition. But as much as fashion connotes fragmentation, religious covering entails plurality in interpretation, which enables women to adopt different looks that may be admired or condemned.

These tensions indicate that the Islamic headscarf does not categorically make the wearer 'non-modern'. On the contrary, they point towards different expressions of modernity, which are subject to the logic of fashion and capitalist production. Like Balasescu's (2003) observations regarding Iran, we see in the invocation of fashion among the urban covered Turkish women, the claim to modern identity. In addition to fashion, various other dynamics also contribute to this construction of modern identity. Both the actual practices and the discourses of our informants indicate the personalized nature of *tesettür*. This modern emphasis on individuality finds support in Islam. Muslim intellectuals, citing evidence from the Koran, argue that Islam supports a pluralism of the human community (Esposito 2003: 94–6). While fashion proliferates styles, the beauty work establishes the self as a modern subject with free choice. The beauty work around the scarf gives the subject the sense of a self-constructing person, who can take control of her own body and image. Thus, personalization and body work together create a sense of modern agency that is free to choose and shape. As modern self-managing subjects, covered women act in order to feel as an ethical, in this case, a religious person, legitimating their practices using the ethics or ideologies of capitalist modernity as well as religion. That is, they deal with the ethical-aesthetic-political tensions that underlie the practice of head covering as Foucault's (1986, 1988) modern subjects.

Overall, fashion, personalization, beauty work and techniques of the self manifest the existence of a modern identity that is constructed mainly through imagery. Susan Sontag claims that 'a society becomes 'modern' when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images' (1972: 153). If this is true, the relation between the headscarf and modernity does not suggest negation but new possibilities.

However, there are limits on these possibilities. The constraints on the freedom of modern subjects and the context of modern subjectivities as theorized by Foucault (1984) are also present here. Like the hair project (Haug et al. 1983), head covering practice is not merely a subjective matter. The connections to the

domination of market capitalism and its discourses of modernity, individuality and independence, propagated by tools such as marketing, advertising, fashion and media, are noticeable in the accounts of these informants. Head covering is also a politically charged practice: it is shaped by the changing implementation of legal regulations; it is an assertion of difference from the secularists; it is diffusionist, aiming to spread the practice of covering; which many believe still covertly serves the male dominant social order. While the women who cover by choice feel a sense of empowerment provided by the choices and personalization they make, the practice itself reinforces the assumption held by some of the interpreters of Islam that women arouse temptation and threaten male honour. While women view covering as a conscious personal choice in search of a modern Islamic identity of an elite status, male control over female sexuality and presence in the public space has primacy over women's autonomy and control over their bodies (White 2002). This gender politics is not only pertinent to Islam; it is pertinent to fashion in general.

The political symbolism of the headscarf is prevailing and strong. However, its material and aesthetic dimensions are as significant as its symbolism in complicating the relationship between religion, fashion and modernity. The head covering practice of the urban, middle/upper-middle income covered women is characterized by diversity; but it is also characterized by tensions and negotiations. These women spend a lot of time, money and effort to achieve their desired look, and use the headscarf as a means for projecting their aesthetic judgments, religious interpretations, and social positions. What appears initially as a contradiction emerges as a creative and skilful negotiation of the principles of Islam and the ideals of beauty and fashion. Paradoxically, the headscarf offers women possibilities as well as limitations in constructing a modern identity.

## **Notes**

1. We use the term 'Islamist' to refer to those who are politically religious to distinguish it from secular Muslims who are believers without an affiliation to political Islam.
2. Secularists include both practising or non-practising Muslims and non-believers.
3. Many of the municipalities in Ankara and Istanbul are governed by mayors who are the members of the Islamist Party.
4. The up-market brand name scarves can cost up to 85 euros.

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