

What is Veil for Kazakhstan?

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Abstract: *Aim of this research is to understand how people in Kazakhstan conceptualize veil. It is a research to find out how veiled women see herself in public spheres and in family. The main question of the research is how covered women interpret veil and what kind of problems she is faced. Additionally, the research must show the transition of the veil understanding before Communism and after Independence of Kazakhstan. Since, new concept of veiled women in contemporary Kazakhstan has been emerged after independence of nowadays post-communist Kazakhstan.*

Keywords; understanding of veil, concepts of veil, transition of concepts, identity as veiled, problems in public spheres, problems in families, Kazakhstan.(self cultural identification)and veil as Islam approach.

1. INTRODUCTION

Veil becomes more than just practicing religious duties. Veil issue happens to see in discussions, where understanding of veil has different conceptions in fields of politics, sociology, and other fields. For instance, when in Iran veil is obligatory head covering of women then in Turkey veil might become a political tool in women rights' demonstrations. So, veil in Kazakhstan also gets diverse understandings and even clashes of thinking of veil. Today in Kazakhstan, there are two main opposite understanding of veil. One is traditional way of being covered and opposite to it, is a modern and Islamic way of covering. Veil in post-communist Kazakhstan brings new conception such new Islamic way of covering. Since, Kazakh people before Communism were Muslims and women were covered. Now, there are lots of discussions about veil and what it is. It is discussed in families, public places, and governmental spheres, where for one part veil must be a tradition whereas for others it is practicing a duty. How would veil be appeared if it was used by men? Would it be still a problem of society or not is a good question to think? As general theory, there will be used Karl Marx's oppressor and oppressed theory and as specific work and research, Saniya Edelbay's work will be used.

2. KARL MARX'S OPPRESSOR AND OPPRESSED/ SANIYA EDELBAY, TRADITIONAL KAZAKH CULTURE AND ISLAM

Veil issue has similarity with Marx's theory of oppressor and oppressed, where one becomes an oppressor of powerless. In Kazakhstan, veil is also a tool of oppression. Karl Marx mentions in, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletarians," oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another" (Marx and Engels, 1969). Marx persistently told about inequality, where a powerful is oppressing a powerless. The veiled women, is powerless, so she becomes an oppressed one. So, how veil is understood and interpreted in post-communist Kazakhstan is a question of this paper.

Kazakhstan in 1991 got the independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The new age of new born country was not only in terms of release from the Russian dominance but at the same time it was the age to open door for recreation Kazakh identity. It was re-establish the culture that was lost, and new way of life that was going to be different from the original, traditional, and the one that was assimilated in the Soviet period, the social way of life that is not similar to traditional even though there is such attempt of the society and not the same with the life during the Soviet Union, but the new one that is rooted from these previous two. Saniya Edelbay, works on veil issue. She tries in her work show how perspectives of different generation are different and how it makes a conflict. She mentions how after independence, people started to

recreate Kazakh identity (Eren and Renat, 2010). For some people veil became the cultural issue, whereas for others it is external influence but for veiled women to be veiled is the practicing religious duty. The Kazakh identity during the process of reestablishment of identity was faced with the changeability of different periods and social events in Kazakhstan. It leads to diverse understanding and different perspectives, the oppositional views of different generations that comes face to face after 1991. The social change of Kazakhstan was emerged after independence and recreation of identity that was the major fact that leads to different interpretations of people about the Kazakh identity and about the headscarf issue that is the one of the discussion tool of the society. The analysis of this paper is going to reveal the consciousness that appeared after 1991, the time when Kazakh people and institutions started to recreate the Kazakh identity, Kazakh language, lost traditions and culture. The paper is focused on specific issue to understand how Kazakh people during the process of reestablishment of roots, were faced with different problems. The understanding of 'veil' has different conceptions and how after 1991 it changes. The veil is the one of the tool of identity that would explain how Kazakh people have different conceptions about Kazakh identity. Since, the veil has different perspectives, even pre-Soviet time when Kazakh considered themselves as the ones with the original identity. That means that veil had the identity conception in the roots of Kazakh culture, nevertheless the 'veil' conception changes during two centuries when Kazakhstan was in the hand of Soviet Union. After independence the influence of Communist regime and the oppositional thinking of youth generation who thought that the veil is the root of their identity that should come back into their social life, cause the discourse and contradiction between the understanding of veil. The 'veil' understanding before the Communist Regime had the conceptions as the traditional clothing and at the same time religious aspect. Kazakh people before Islam were Shamans (pagans) and after invade of Arabs in the territory of South of Kazakhstan, the Kazakh people were converted into Islam, but still it was not pure Islam practices in which Kazakh people lived. It was considered more the mixture of Shamanism and Islam, because the Kazakh people had the nomadic way of life that prevented them to truly integrate the practices of Islam. They were considered as Muslim but still they have some pagan approaches in the practices and way of life. That was why after the 1991 there was a question of veil who interpreted it as the traditional clothing, whereas some people argue that veil was the religious practice. Actually, traditional clothing of Kazakh culture has the head dress 'kimishek'; it is the white scarf that was the head dress of Kazakh women. They covered their heads with the white scarf that was considered as the traditional cloth and at the same time religious dress, which used after marriage. The most of citizens of Kazakhstan make the criticism about the young girls who are not married, arguing that it is not traditional way of life to cover the head before the marriage. The 'kimishek' (<http://srch.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/jcrees/2013Osaka/23Kovalskaya.pdf>) traditional white scarf was used by all Kazakh women as the symbol of being married and the time of mature that after the marriage women are responsible for covering their heads that was also the religious approach. Nevertheless it was abolished during the Soviet Regime, and Kazakh women could not cover their heads for two centuries. Since, in the Communist Regime the veil was considered as the repression of women rights, in order to make men and women equal there was abolishment of veil (Danielle Kane). After the independence in 1991, Kazakhstan as the post-communist country still had the impression that the scarf was banned. The majority of people, exactly the generation that had been experienced the Communist Regime after the independence still have the interpretation and understanding of 'veil' as the discrimination of women and their rights. The new age was considered as the open door to missionaries who came to Kazakhstan, not only Islam but also Christian missionaries came to the new born country that was going to reconstruct the lost identities. Korean Christians and Arab Muslims came to Kazakhstan in order to integrate the religion for the people who became atheists. Surprisingly, in statistical count the majority of citizens are named themselves as Muslims, "Muslims of 24 nationalities constitute 70% of the population of Kazakhstan (11 million people)" (Saniya, 2012), the Muslims without religious consciousness and knowledge. They interpret the Islam by their own logic on the opposition to the knowledge of Islam. As it is mentioned above Kazakh people never have pure knowledge and practice of Islam because they mixed the Islam with the Shamanism. That was why young students went abroad for religious education. It was not only groups of missionaries who came to Kazakhstan but also students of Kazakhstan who went abroad to the Islamic

countries in order to get religious education, since as it was mentioned Kazakhstan was considered as the land with the nomadic way of life that caused to absence of the religious institutions. The students who wished to educate in order to establish the identity in terms of religion could not realize this in the territory of Kazakhstan because there was nothing related with the Islamic education and the Islam that was in Kazakhstan was more traditional. During the 1991-93 students educated in Egypt and in Arab countries, that was why they had different Islamic approaches. The way of religious practices was little bit diverse from each other. The way of covering heads were little bit different. . As one of the anthropologist (Chokan Valihanov) of Kazakhstan of 19th century mentioned, "Muslimism has not yet become our second nature. It threatens to separate people in the future"(Chokan, 1968), this reference belongs to the Soviet Period. So, the aim of this paper is to show how after 1991 the conception of 'veil' causes the discourse, how people show their reactions and how the covered women have different interpretations about headscarf. The understanding of veil started to construct after independence, when young people started to recreate their identity in terms of religion practice. The veil after 1991 till present days have different perspectives; veil as the extremism and the outside influence that cause the conflict between the Communist generation and young generation, becomes the discourse. The elderly generation criticizes the young women saying that it is the outside Arab influence,' clothes of Kazakh cultural style could reflect individuality of the Kazakh Muslim women and this would express their personalities and encourage self-realization'(Saniya,2012) In this term the veil is considered as the conflict issue between different generations, for instance the conflicts in families. The second issue of the veil understanding is the pressure of women rights, since after the terroristic events in Kazakhstan the headscarf in institutions was banned, young students have no access to education and women could not find jobs. The last understanding of veil is the recreation of the Kazakh identity; most of the young people argue that it is the way to re-establish the Kazakh identity. All these understandings of the veil are affected from the outside and inside social consequences. The analysis is supported by interviews from the people in the public sphere, the questions were designed to explore the interpretations about the veil and asked to the covered women.

3. METHODOLOGY/ DATA-ANALYSIS

20 women were interviewed for this research. They were asked some questions about how they decided to cover their heads, why they are covering, and what kind of problems they are faced with. These 20 women told their stories and these stories are recorded as data collection. It is qualitative analysis, where the descriptive explanations are taking place.

20 covered women were from different age group, different social classes, and different level educations. 3 of them are University students who are between 18-25, 5 of them are working and graduated from university (25-40), 12 of them are housewife and graduated from high school (25-60).All these women are living in Almaty. Some women were interviewed in their houses, some of them in public places, such café or in mosques.

3.1 Self Decision to Cover Head

When these 20 women were asked the reason and decision of their covering, 20 of them answered that they decided to cover because it is religious obligation. None of them replied as cultural reason or social pressure by relatives. All of them decided to be covered by own will and because of religious obligations.

Malika: It is my obligation to be covered. I decided to cover my head before I started to get my education in AGU University. Before, I did not know anything about Islam, since I never got any information about any religion in my family and in school education. So, I never used to think about religion. It is as if questions about God were taken off from mind. Just, when it comes I met with some covered women, I started to ask questions I never was interested in. It is interesting because you feel yourself as child who learns something new for the first time.

Aytolkyn: Allah order women to be covered. People ask me reason I covered my head. I answer them, saying that women should be covered in Islam. One old woman once started to argue with me. She said that in Kazakh culture it is not plausible to cover head in this way. After she asked me, if I am married, then I answered that I am not. She became angrier and replied that before marriage it is not good to cover head but after marriage I should. Since,

how I will find a husband, if I cover my head before marriage.

Latifa: I started to visit Koran lessons in spring when we (students) do not have school. I learnt to read in Arabic. Our Koran teacher, who for that time just came from Cairo, got married. When I thought of his wife, I never thought to see woman in veil. I think it was my first time when I saw woman in hijab (veil). When we were acquainted with her, we asked her the reason she had a scarf on her head. She answered that women in Islam should cover their heads and that it is written in Koran. After, one year of lectures from her, we (me and my friend) decided to cover our heads. Nevertheless, I did not imagine that it would be a struggle with people in public places, who criticized us because of veil. Some old women asked us, why we are covered. We answered that Allah orders women to be covered. So, they replied that they were also Muslims but it is influence of Arabic culture and that we can also cover our heads with kimishek (Kazakh national veil).

In Kazakhstan young covered women have decided to veil their heads because they believe it is religious obligation. On the contrary, the generation of women, who grown up in Communist Regime they interpret the veil as reconstruction of Kazakh identity. Since, it was cultural obligation to cover head after marriage. So, women asked covered women if they are married. On the answer 'no I am not' it becomes that these women oppress them by arguing with them in public places. So, when we see how women decided to cover by her own decision, she is oppressed by people in public place. So, it is oppression of her liberty.

3.2 Oppression of Freedom/ Study without Veil

Aida: I am university student in AGU. It is a governmental university. When I come to university I need to open my head and enter to university without veil. I cannot study in hijab. It is unfair to covered women, there are other students who dress whatever they want. I want to educate without any pressure, since my veil does not bring any danger. I ask myself, why I could not study in veil.

Aisha: Sometimes I want to give up with my education. It is nonsense to come until school's door veiled and after open your head. The aim of education I think is to understand and not prejudice something you do not know. People first of all should learn how to respect. It is our failure because we do not know listen each other, we have very limited perspective. It is not only people who do not respect you veiled, it is also about even me. After few debates with people about my veil, I am also became prejudiced. It is no simpler for me to speak with people. Since, every time I think how a person with whom I speak, look at me.

Latifa: Once, our school's director saw me outside of school. She asked me a reason I am covered. I answered, so she said that she is proud of me. I did not wait such reply, so I became happy. This let me to ask her for permission, to be covered in classes and inside of school. She said that personally she would like to give permission but she could not because it was ban.

There is a split in society. In one side people who have prejudice because of veil and on the other side the covered women, who are also prejudiced. One of the oppression of women in Kazakhstan is to ban veil in educational institutions. The covered women come to doors of school in veil but have to open their heads.

3.3 Hardness to Find Job

Dilyara: I graduated from technical school. I am a haircutter but I cannot find a job because I am covered. For a long time I searched for a job but when an employer see me they reject me because of my appearance. Few times they directly said the reason of not taking me because of my veil. They even suggested me if I open my head they would give me a job. But I rejected.

Guzelya: I graduated from university I am working but never in my field. I need to be a teacher but because of my veil no one permits me to teach in veil. Now, I am typist.

Karina: There are just few positions you can do if you covered. Even though, you are graduated from university. It is better to go abroad. I applied for few positions in different banks but when it comes they saw me, I got rejections. They explained me that in order to work in bank I need to have appropriate appearance and veil spoils it.

Irada: *Every times when it comes to appearance, it becomes problematic to find a job because I am covered. Employers do not give job because you have some materials on your head. Perhaps, they thought that I am stupid they might think so. People in Kazakhstan think that covered women are illiterate and did not got education. Somehow for some covered women they are right because they did not permit her to study in veil, so she prefers to not study. Nevertheless, she cannot be stupid, she finds God by thinking.*

The covered women cannot find job. She is asked to open her head if she wants to get any position in any job. She is oppressed and she does not have many solutions, she is forced to sit at home or open her head. A graduated from university woman is not also welcomed.

3.4 Conflicts in Families

Aliya: *I have problems with my mom, she still does not want me to be covered. We have some problems with my veil. She says me that she will until end of her life against to my veil. She does not want me to be covered because she is afraid that it is terroristic organizations who manipulate my mind. She every time compare me, before me veiled and after. She thinks that I do not have a good future, and I cannot do my carrier. She is afraid that I never can realize myself. I just want her to love me without any predictions about my future.*

Aisha: *My mother does not want me be covered. She knows how I opened my head when I enter to university. She thinks that veil makes my life complicated. She understand that people might marginalize me, and not speak with me. Nevertheless, I have very close friends, who respect me. I have lunch with them. Sometimes, I shop with my friends. It shows that they do not marginalize me because of my veil. They accept me. They even sometimes make a joke that they have a grandma friend. The veiled women are regarded as old women, since in Kazakhstan all old women are covered their heads. They cover heads very differently, if the veiled women cover her head completely, so these old women cover their heads not at all. Sometimes you can see hairs under the veil.*

Dilyara: *My family ask me to open my head. My father asks me, “ when my daughter return to own self? He is saying that he is also Muslim but he does not do anything extreme”.*

Gulmira: *My mother beat me few times because she does not give permission to cover my head. She says that it is Arabs who are covered. I start to open my head when I come near to home. I have some oppression from my family.*

Aryke: *Before my marriage my family does not want me to be veiled. They did not want to hurt me by some rude words about my veil. Nevertheless, it hurt me. Since, I could see how they looked at me, I could read criticism in their minds. I thought that a solution to the conflicts would be my marriage. Unfortunately, parents of my husband forced me to open my head. This lead to the conflicts with my husband. They did not even hesitate to hurt me.*

The young covered women who live with own family, became an issue of conflict in family. Parents of these women do not share the same perspective about the veil. They do not consider the veil as the religious obligation. When women got married, parents of her husband became the oppressors of her liberty to choose and decide her own life. There are different reasons why families are against to veil. Some of them do not accept the obligations of religion. Some think that it is not the way they used to live, whereas some do not want their children be oppressed and limited in society. By doing so, they do not realize that they are also oppressors.

3.5 Abuses in Public Spheres

Karina: *Are you nun? I answered that I am Muslim. She starts to debated with me and argued that covered women in Arabic countries are covered because of culture.*

Latifa: *Once, when I with my cousin who is also covered, were on the way to home. Some men workers who were working on the street, doing some electro-waves. Abused us. Saying, “Girsl, where is your bomb?”*

Aykorkem: *I was upset when once I saw how one woman in book store was afraid of me. She thought that I do not know Russian. She really was in fear, she begged her friend to put me outside of the store. I think she was one of the people who think that covered women are terrorists.*

Madina: *people are afraid of us. I was shocked when I witness how women behind me was*

dissuaded her husband from flight.

The covered women are abused and oppressed in public places. She becomes an issue to discuss. She is misunderstood. She is regarded as a terrorist, a nun, a fanatic of Arabic culture. Nevertheless, she is not named as the person who is practicing religious duty.

4. FINDINGS/RESULT

When these 20 women asked if it is a problem to be covered, 18 of them answered that it is a problem when you are covered. All these women replied some problems such social pressure and misunderstanding, hardness to find a job, ban study in veil, pressure and conflicts with families. 3 from 20 are university students, they have problems with the ban of veil in institutional places. 5 of 20 are women who are working but not pleased with job and are forced to work there because they could not find job somewhere else. 12 of them have problems with families; their families still do not accept them as covered. They have conflicts with family members. 20 of them told how they more than two or three times were abused in public places by people.

5. CONCLUSION

First of all, I want to mention that covered women in Kazakhstan decided to cover heads because of religious obligation, although it is misunderstood. Some people argue that it is Arabic culture and women are influenced, some of them argue that women are covered because it is somehow reconstruction of self-identity and cultural recognition. Since, Kazakh women before Communism were covered. Some people argue that women should cover their head after marriage. So, all covered women said that veil becomes social problem. People debate about why women are covered. Some of them are for and some are against. The main problems with which covered women are faced, they are stigmatization, alienation, misunderstood of reason women are covered, discrimination with job opportunity, freedom of studying in veil, abuses in public spheres, and conflicts in families. So, veiled women are oppressed. She is objectified in society. She is silenced; we can hear her just when you ask her to speak. Otherwise, she has no opportunity to realize herself in career and study in veil. She is oppressed by her family members, family members are under the impact of society. They see how their daughter is oppressed, she could not get education and could not find job. So, family members become oppressors. The debates we can witness in Kazakhstan show the position in which veiled women are, this process is the issue of making veil as the tool of problem. The veiled women in this process are oppressed by family, by society, and by situation that she could not live in freedom.

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