

Modernity Unveiled : Veiling / Unveiling / Veiling again

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2017

<https://doi.org/10.25595/1548>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Karamustafa, Gülsün: *Modernity Unveiled : Veiling / Unveiling / Veiling again*, in: FKW : Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur (2017) Nr: 63, 27-33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25595/1548>.

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MODERNITY UNVEILED VEILING / UNVEILING / VEILING AGAIN

My contribution to the series of talks *Art – Research – Gender* is certainly about “la/le voile, that piece of flying cloth in the wind” but it is not a research project in the sense of an academic study. I wish to talk about a genuine story taken from my own background, my experiences, and my personal observations in life related to the veiling/unveiling story that I have witnessed within my life span. I also wish to talk about some of my works and will try to convey how I deal with those issues as an artist.

—— To begin with I have to make a simple summary of the history of my country throughout the twentieth century, which is the basis of my talk.

—— The Ottoman Empire gradually began to get smaller by the end of the nineteenth century. Around nine million Turkish Muslims from its former territories in the Caucasus, Crimea, Balkans, and the Mediterranean islands migrated to Anatolia and Eastern Thrace. After the Empire lost the Balkan Wars in 1913, it lost all its Balkan territories except East Thrace, which is European Turkey. Nearly 800,000 Muslims and non-Muslims began to withdraw from the land where they lived along with the retreating Ottoman armies. On the road to Anatolia many died from cholera, malnutrition, and other difficulties. The collapse and end of the Ottoman Empire was a consequence of World War I.

—— My grandmother’s story fits to this moment as her family shared the same fate as those who migrated from Crimea during the same period.

—— The government entered the war on the side of the Central Powers, and the defeat of Germany meant the end for the Ottomans. In 1917–1918 when the British army moved into Iraq and Syria, the Ottoman forces began to fall and by 1918 the Ottomans had lost everything but Anatolia. Then they were forced to sign the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), by which they lost not only the Arab provinces but also a part of Anatolia.

—— Around May 1919, a nationalist movement started under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which carried out armed resistance until 1922. The Sultan was accused of betraying the country and on November 1, 1922 the Ottoman dynasty and the empire came to an end.

—— A year later, on October 29, 1923, the Republic of Turkey was

founded. Atatürk's reforms were a series of political, legal, cultural, social, and economic reforms that were designed to modernize the new republic of Turkey into a democratic secular state. With the founding of the republic in 1923, Kemal Atatürk enacted some reforms that brought severe changes to public life.

— Education was unified in 1924. Girls and boys were to be educated together. The calendar was changed and updated to match the western calendar in 1925. Dress codes and headwear were changed. The fez and the veil were prohibited in the same year. The new penal law, modeled after the Italian penal code, was introduced in 1926. The system of measures was changed to the international system of units in the same year. The new Turkish alphabet in Latin letters was adopted in 1928 among other reforms that built up the new nation.

— After this brief general introduction I would like to continue with my own story: Among these reforms, the one I like most is the one related to dress codes and headwear from 1925. "Traditional dress and headwear is out. You all have to wear hats from now on." This was how Atatürk announced the reform to his nation. Those who did not conform were first reported to the authorities and then punished, as it was a prohibition.

— The word 'unveiling' is related to this strict reform and it always triggers my childhood memories, as I grew up with my grandmother's stories of how they threw away their veils in one night (!) after the decision by the new Turkish Republic. It was a wonderful story for a child to listen to, live from a grandmother. She used to describe vividly the moment they received the invitation for the anniversary ball of the young republic and how she prepared herself with the modern dress code that did not need a veil any more. Her first pretty lavender colored Charleston style ball dress, which barely covered her body and which she wore for that specific ball, was my best playmate. It was produced in Paris and had matching shoes. This small treasure was kept with special care for years, but its box was willingly opened for the first greatly loved granddaughter and permission was given to her to play with it. I loved to put it on and stare at myself as a funny puppet in the mirror. It is still with me though it is very much worn out.

— Whenever that story is mentioned the image of Atatürk dancing with a modern lady on the cover of a monthly magazine comes into my mind, as this is the typical image of the modernist reform imposed by its leader.

— I have two photos of my grandmother that I love to keep together, as they speak clearly of the passageway that the women of her time passed through. One is taken in 1919, the other in 1926 (**fig. 1, 2**). I also love to add the photo of my mother's family taken in front of their house in 1927, in the first years of the young Turkish Republic (**fig. 3**). I love to stare at this confident young woman with three children who is clearly aware of her position within the family.

— Here I have to go back and mention the strong feminist movement and the women activists within the last decades of the falling empire and stress that these reforms did not appear out of the blue, but depended on a struggle that was started by the women from the Ottoman Empire.

— “The history of the women's movement in Turkey goes back to the Ottoman period and in the early 20th century some fundamental rights had already been achieved through the demands of female activists such as the abolition of polygamy and repudiation. [...] At the turn of the century, the battle became more vigorous and women's experience in the Balkan Wars and the First World War politicised the movement. It was during the war years that women obtained some of the rights they fought for: they were admitted to universities in 1914; they were allowed to work in factories and the public service in 1915; and in 1917, the ‘family act’ recognised the right to limit polygamy to Muslim women, as well as women of the other religions of the Empire. Though this act was never applied because of the war conditions, it was very important as it was the first step in the Islamic world.”¹⁾

— Magazine covers for women that were published around 1910/15 are a good source to follow the feminist activities as in many of them women poets and writers insistently bring forth their fight for women's rights. On their front page we mostly encounter a modern image of an uncovered woman, probably of a non-Muslim lady, or an illustration taken from a foreign magazine (mainly French) as if they are being presented as role models for the future of the Muslim women of the Ottoman Empire. As for local women poets or writers, they were represented with moderately covered heads, such as Yaşar Nezihe, a well-known poet, and Halide Edip Adıvar, a novelist well-known for her political ideas.

— I have made two works about the modernization period of Turkey that I wish to mention here: one of them is based on an old book that was published in 1927 in Ottoman letters, just one year before the adoption of the Latin alphabet in 1928 by the

1)
Tekeli, Şirin (2010): *The Turkish Women's Movement: A Brief History of Success*.
Quaderns de la Mediterrània 14, 119–123.



// Figure 1
Gülsün Karamustafa's grandmother
Muveddet Belli in 1919



// Figure 2
Gülsün Karamustafa's grandmother
Muveddet Belli in 1926

government. It only existed for one year as it was withdrawn from bookstores the following year and put into depots, sharing the same fate with the other books that were printed in Arabic letters, since it was prohibited to read anything except in the Latin alphabet.

— The context of the book was directly addressed to the people of the republic in order to give them the hints to adapt themselves to the modernization rules. I will again refer to my grandmother here, since she was very fond of etiquette books throughout her life in order not to make any mistakes with the modern manners.

— I found this book by chance in a second-hand bookstore in Istanbul and it immediately impressed me. It is an adaptation of the French book *Pour bien connaître les usages mondains*, which was printed in Paris in 1910 by Pierre Lafitte et Cie for *Femina Bibliothèque*. The author Abdullah Cevdet, born in 1869, was a doctor who graduated from the Royal School of Medicine of the Ottoman Empire. As a radical character he always felt close to the *Westernization* movement and together with his friends he was the first to systematize those ideas after the administrative and political reforms (Tanzimat) in 1839 in the Empire. Within the context of the adapted book, the author defended the argument of *Westernization* of the East by all means. He took it as a class distinction and within the context of the book he referred to all details of the bourgeois lifestyle, even giving advice about the behavior of the chambermaids and the stablemen. This made the book unique within other examples of books for good manners on keeping up with the West, which were printed in great numbers during those days, when everything was rapidly changing in the history of a nation.

— The outcome of this confrontation was an installation. A big table, around ten meters long, with tableware randomly spread on it as if it were waiting to be prepared for a feast. On each glass, plate, or coffee cup the images of “how to do and not” are printed as



// Figure 3
Belli family photo from 1927

a reminder to obey the western etiquette manners. If you are invited to this specific 'etiquette' table there is no way that you can escape the rules (fig. 4, 5).

My other work related to modernization was produced in 1998. *Le Visage Turc* consisted of three portrait photos from the propaganda magazine *La Turquie Kemalist*, which was published in three languages to introduce modern Turkey to foreigners.

Within each issue there was a file with photo portraits (photographer not mentioned) under the title of *Le Visage Turc*. By bringing three of them together and blowing them up I wanted to emphasize the nation's desire for modernist appreciation. This was very much made visible with this action, but there was something more interesting: the photos are quite reminiscent of German National Socialist images as well as Soviet socialist portraits (fig. 6).

Since the date that my grandmother unveiled herself, the women of my family have never encountered any problems with the way we have dressed. The fashion of my youth was pushing the extremes, since we were the generation of Twiggy and the mini skirt. It was wonderful to experience the freedom of our bodies and the ideas of sexual expression of the '70s. In those days the greatest problem for a girl brought up in a traditional family in rural areas of Turkey was to fight for her rights and to take off the small scarf on her head, which she wore under pressure from her father. Many Turkish films were all about those girls who fought against their family's oppression, running away from their homes to find a decent way of living by earning their income so they could decide on their choices and outlooks.

With the beginning of the twenty-first century things began to work the other way round. In the '80s groups of women argued for the option to cover their heads in government departments, schools, and universities. To keep true to the laws of the republic, precautions were taken against this insistent growing will.



// Figure 4
Gülsün Karamustafa, *Etiquette*, 2011



// Figure 5
Page from Abdullah Cevdet's
Etiquette book, 1926

The government declared a new law that no civil servant, member of parliament, or university student could enter their workspace with heads covered.

— Demonstrations began within the student groups, and girls tried everything not to take away their headwear. Some even wore wigs over their scarfs to find a bizarre solution to enter their classroom. It was argued that it was a great injustice and was against human rights to keep anyone from wearing what they wish. There was great solidarity between the covered and non-covered students, and even academics, writers, artists, and intellectuals supported their demands. With the vast pressure that was created the government had to step back and for the first time women in Turkey could enter government offices or universities with their heads covered.

— I do not wish to comment much on the new preferable dress codes for Turkey in 2017. It is obvious that things have turned the other way round, and covering of the head and body has become a favorable choice for a great number of women. They choose to dress up in a newly created fashion which serves the Islamic demand, which does not have any link at all to tradition.

— After speaking about the pains and aches of a young republic to adapt itself to the modern western world I come to a point that I wish to ask the crucial question: Was it the class distinction that brought back the veil (or whatever you may wish

to call it) like a boomerang, or is what is being practiced today as well as in the past led by domineering political decisions?

— I wish to finish up by mentioning a video I made when debates about women's outlook became so high in 2007. It was more the



// Figure 6
Gülsün Karamustafa, Le Visage
Turc, 1998



// Figure 7
Gülsün Karamustafa, The City and
the Secret Panther Fashion, 2007

male politicians quarreling about the dress codes of women and whether they should be covered or not. I decided to make a fiction film where women would meet in a secret house to decide what to wear on their own.

— Only those who know the secret codes were to enter this underground house decorated elaborately in the “*panther fashion*” they fancy, enjoy the special wardrobe, and spend a friendly and fantastic time. In the house waits Panterella, the fearless housekeeper and her colleague, who would offer them their endless freedom with their hopes and wishes.

— Unfortunately as always the day ends quickly, they leave the house in secret, again with the fear of being caught, and return to their colorless lives to cook for and serve their husbands and children... (fig. 7).

September 2017

// Image credits

Figure 1, 2, 3, 5, 6: Gülsün Karamustafa

Figure 4: Photo credit: Mustafa Hazneci

Figure 7: Photo credit: Serra Gültürk

//About the author

Gülsün Karamustafa, artist, graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts Istanbul, she lives and works in Istanbul. Her solo exhibitions include the comprehensive *Chronographia*, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin (2016–2017); *Mystic Transport* (a duo exhibition with Koen Thys), Centrale for Contemporary Art, and Argos Centre for Art and Media, Brussels (2015–2016); *An Ordinary Love*, Rampa, Istanbul (2014); *A Promised Exhibition*, SALT Ulus, Ankara (2014), SALT Beyoğlu, SALT Galata, Istanbul (2013); *Mobile Stages*, Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg (2008); *Bosphorus 1954*, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn (2008); *Memory of a Square*, 2000–2005 Video Works by Gülsün Karamustafa, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel (2006). She took part in many group exhibitions including *Citizens and States*, Tate Modern, London (2015); *Artists in Their Time*, Istanbul Modern (2015); the 31st São Paulo Biennial (2014); the 3rd and 10th Gwangju Biennials (2000, 2014); *Art Histories*, Museum der Moderne Salzburg (2014); *Artevida Politica*, Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (2014); the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale (2013); the 1st Kiev Biennale (2012); Singapore Biennial (2011), the 3rd Guangzhou Triennial (2008); the 11th Cairo Biennial (2008) – and many others.

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