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**The face and the veil: Between the own and the foreign**

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What is the Islamic veil, the hijab? It separates what you see from what you do not see, it refers to a visual and spatial separation, it is a sort of border. And the border (cum-finis) is what separates and connects, what I have in common with the other, the stranger: the other’s identity is a constant cross-reference to what is your own, to what is personal. But the border is also what pulls together psychoanalysis and geography. They both have as their object what we partially know and need to be represented. They enable us to organize the spaces we live in, avoiding to take the connective and metaphoric function of that representation literally, in order not to run the risk of reducing the open and rich world of life to a fixed and closed set of things and necessary relations between them.

The meeting of psychoanalysts from the Research Group of Psychoanalysis’ Geographies with academics of other disciplines and cultures, by choosing as object “The face and the veil” aims precisely at avoiding the deep complexity, both internal and external, of cultural and psychological geographical territories. By doing so, it moves within the peculiar threshold between the own and what traces the unfamiliarity, when each of the two terms includes the other in its soul.

A face, a face on the veil of the big screen of the great Bergman, gives origin to the cultured, imaginative relation of the psychoanalyst Virginia De Micco. From the very beginning, she uses for the subject the unreachability of the mother’s face, the unbearable image of femininity and the enigmatic nature of both. It is the “face of the mother” extracted by the final scene of ‘Persona’, seen by a child. The face is, according to Bergman, the foreground of an image, the projection of an unattainable desire, seeing is being seen: a face looks at the camera that becomes a mirror and the whole movie is a veiling and unveiling of the individual. From these suggestions, De Micco starts to think about the meaning of the “veiled face of women in the in the Koranic tradition and in Islamic countries”, now that Islam has become an “unknown proximity” and represents the *Unheimlichkeit* aimed at disclosing something from the familiar sphere. Afterward he exhorts us, with Ernesto De Martino, to look at the own through the foreign, suggesting that psychoanalysts for us “is a version of the inner stranger”. With Freud, he shows us how the feminine face, maternal and veiled, leads us to the horror of castration, to the head of Medusa which cannot be looked at although it is still projected on a surface which represents it, through its reflection. But the horror is also the one “of death, of Mother Earth”, the dread for that “fissure” widely open in the unfathomable deepness of a woman’s body. However, tolerating the enigma of the maternal face and body, and therefore of the crevice of thought, is necessary to its own structuring. Then De Micco describes how the “necessity of controlling the ways in which women’s bodies manifest themselves” through “religious edicts on the appropriateness of female clothing appearance” or council orders, shows us the “symbolic violence” (Bordieu). At a collective-social level, this expresses primary violence (Aulagnier) necessary for the self to take place, to then reach “that little margin of individual freedom” the veil “from which we can conceive the world”.

Birth, death and the difference between the two sexes are the more analyzed concepts in every culture and have to “be initiated symbolically to be recognized psychically”. This happens through the different mythical-ritualistic mechanisms of every culture; but for each one of them, the order in which the origins of the world and its enigmas are explained becomes indistinguishable from the world itself, by constituting a specific image of it: “anything that happens beyond that vision cannot be recognized” and returns to a concept of real which cannot be translated into a reality that was symbolically initiated.

In this way every organizing tool saves us from the chaos of psychosis, excluding what cannot be digested, seen or recognized, and that therefore has to be rejected. But, if each culture confirms its own unique and necessary vision of the world, it will reveal “what the other has removed”. Therefore, the actions of culture betray that subconscious element that slips away from the symbolizing transformation, revealing it to those who are not using the same arbitrary cultural glasses. The way in which each culture builds up the feminine figure represents its “corner stone” on which it is not possible to concede; otherwise the whole symbolic structure of that group, with it its own conceivability and existence, will collapse. Here comes the need and the risk of the comparison between two cultures, since one could rediscover in the other “what is still unattainable of oneself”.

What we had to drive away from the shape given to our face, is visible to the other, that same other that, according to Lacan, is the subconscious. That is, the veil, in every one of its cultural forms, is necessary to protect from the vision of that dread that has two different consequences for the two sexes. The young girl sees it and understands “at a glance” and while she is scared by it more than the young boy is, she attempts a thought, “putting herself in the dizzying spot of the fissure”. Quoted Benslama, a step where the veil and the feminine figure show the knowledge about God (unveiling) to which men can only access through the woman’s mediation. Here the veil allows to distinguish between what is true and what is false, between what is good and what is bad, and the veiled woman becomes an element of psychic organization.

The psychoanalyst Lorena Preta reclaims the relationship of co-definition of an individual and its culture through the symbolization/subjectivization process that is never definitely completed.

But this “imperfect” process is not the only element responsible for that irreducible part of one respect to the other: there are “irreducible parts that belong to us and that cannot be transformed but only ‘housed’ as constitutive elements”. This is to say that “one’s own contains the alien inside it”. Borrowing from biology the concept of chimera, that entails the coexistence of genetically distinct cells within the same individual, Preta tells us how sometimes an irreducible otherness can assume either monstrous shapes or a hybrid internal cohabitation. A psychic work, analogically with “immune” operations could guarantee new forms of identity survival or yield dramatic alternatives.

In fact, sometimes what is extraneous comes back unsettling from a traumatic and violent past, assuming horrific and hybridized shapes, such as occurs in the phenomenon of terrorism. A “pure Islamic identity” is affirmed through the sacrifice of the life of young “second generation” men, who refuse the assimilation of western culture that took place in the previous generations, in the name of an islamic culture that is presumed to be completely alien and not absorbable by the hosting context. The “super-muslim” (Benslama) creates a new identity in the direct contact with Allah, through the body’s martyrdom. Past, present and future lose their sequentiality, dislocating themselves in a crazed temporality and in an unconceivable elsewhere. Many contemporary societies are characterized by a “tendency to act the subconscious”, escaping from a distinction between inner and outer world, while identity fragments are evacuated through the manners employed by psychotic thinking.

Today, “subjectivity appears dislocated in a physical extended space that includes the inside and the outside with no solutions of continuity. A present whole, horizontal and simultaneous”. Preta wonders whether the “veil” can be felt by Islamic women alternatively as their own, natural, conflicting, displaying, a graft or “swinging” between these options. By way of a personal experience in Teheran where she wore a veil, she tells us how she had to carry out her ‘own’ inner path to access the meaning the veil had for other people: among different customs and cultures it is inevitable to carry out “a swinging between oneself’ and someone else’s perceptions”. Eventually, she asks herself if the veil, as the chador in Iranian culture, could still be considered symbols full of meaning or if, in an era of “crisis of the ability to symbolize”, they are not at risk of becoming pure “concretizations”.

Professor Gianni Piccinelli, Islamist scholar, shows us the internal complexity of the Islamic world: as such, it does not amount to a monolithic reality, neither from a religious perspective, nor juridical, political, linguistic or cultural point of view. There is, firstly, a virtual and ideological Islam which is historically impossible to validate, an historical Islam on which a process of modernization that generated different types of Islam has been triggered and, lastly, there is a presence of Islam outside of the Islamic world which becomes part of our everyday experience. It is about defining cultural, ethical and spiritual paths which, with strong ideological elements stemming over time from the revealed bases of the Qur’an, Islam undertook. For a Muslim, every action of his life has to comply with God’s will. The legal rules stem from an ethical-religious source contained in the Word of God which binds any believer in every single behavior (the so-called shari’a). It is not, however, a Revelation with cogent juridical elements: the veil (hijab) which has never entailed the face, is not a ‘Koranic’ issue. The text can be interpreted on different levels: there are some extremely misogynous excerpts and others which show “a feminist breath”. When the Virgin Mary, Jesus’ mother, ‘distanced herself from her people, grabbed a veil to protect herself from them’, it meant a symbolic veil in relation to those who have not yet embraced the Revelation.

The term hijab here, for the first and only time, acquires the meaning of an item of clothing. In the other cases, it has the symbolic value of ‘separation’ between the man and the sin or the divine mystery, or between public and private space, but it always expressed the necessity to protect women from unknown eyes through a rule of politeness and respect. There is never a veil symbolizing subjection of the woman to the man, nor any normative obligation to cover the face. But, in a time of deep political crisis in the Islamic world and of chipping of the Ummah, everyone wondered what had happened to the golden age of Islam which had conquered the Mediterranean Sea. The underlying idea is that steps distancing from the will of God had been taken and this triggered, as a consequence, the necessity to rewind history back there and to undertake again the path towards the light. Salafism advocates for a comeback to a pure Islam which is, however, completely reinvented. Even pre-Islamic traditions (Sunna of the Prophet) do not show anything but the necessity of a careful employment of clothes as a testimony of simplicity, moderation and chastity.

The debate revolving around the veil in the Islamic world started in the XX century, due to the interaction with a Western colonial culture which tended to impose a different lifestyle. If we detach ourselves from the punitive vision which Western legal systems have towards the veil, we have to imagine a path on which the imitative strength produced by fashion trends has been introducing, in the past few years, the idea that a veiled woman is a Muslim whereas a woman more covered or completely veiled is a super-Muslim. This conception has led to the annihilation of the person and of the history which produces nothingness.The idea that today movements like IS acquire, is a development of Salafism, i.e. that in the destruction of the history there is not nothingness but a new principle. The impossibility of rewinding history destroys history itself, through for instance, the destruction of the cultural heritage of The Middle East. Piccinelli shifts the subject matter from an ethical-juridical dimension to an ethical-aesthetic one, by highlighting how much fashion and millions of dollars invested by companies producing the Islamic fashion, transform the veil from a hiding tool to one that reveals the face: it is not a separating element anymore but brings the woman back to the focal point.

While the Islamist describes this complexity through the text and the ‘authenticity’ of tradition (the veil is not a Muslim feature), anthropologist Simona Tersigni, Professor at University in Paris has worked on these topics, and leads us in the reality of social interactions and inter-ethnic relations. It is necessary to reason on these issues because the risk that an intercultural misunderstanding may translate into a conflict, is high. The written speech is entitled ‘When the veil becomes a Muslim feature’, according to which the concept of the veil, elaborated by Hobawm, is ‘an invention of the tradition’. It deals with unveiling and revealing policies which had concerned the Islamic areas before migration and which are impossible to disjoint from the colonial matter. We can think of the dynamics of the current migration in Europe as a post-colonial situation. It questions the Western rhetoric of the unveiling and of the feminine emancipation on which colonialism and post colonialism have based their legitimacy for a long time.

His work is focused on the fact that the reality of countries led by the Islamic religion and of our contaminated West, hybridized with Islam, is extraordinarily varied and prone to changes. There is a feminist Muslim movement which, on the one hand, aims at finding an Islamic way to feminine emancipation and, on the other hand, strongly opposes Western feminism and Western discourse on feminist emancipation. The very same individuals who want to be freed through the latter type of unveiling, on the contrary, claim it back, not only on identity terms, but also as an alternative on a political level, by questioning if Western speeches on equality be completely true or another covert mentality of supremacy.4 There is, moreover, an argument over the tension between the legitimate body (that of the law) and the pious body, antagonist ways which, *de facto*, aim at the same objective: the legitimate body that wants to escape the religious imposition would not be free but it would be a body subjected to another legitimacy.

Psychiatrist Antonio d’Angiò, transcultural group-analyst, who translated and edited the text written by Benslama (‘Psychoanalysis and the challenge of Islam), tells us, by way of Kant’s thinking, how the starting point for reaching the unity of knowledge corresponds to an ‘unveiling process’. After an enriching introduction to a geo-psychoanalytical panorama, which employs our city as setting, points out how there are unrestrained rules at the heart of a civilization, and the obligation of wearing the veil is, for Islamic women, one of those. The veil is a ‘device which blinds the female body’. The woman ‘distracts men from their god by unsettling their faith in its signs’, she breaks the relationship between the man and the Koranic text. What is indecent has to be blinded and, since the woman is in herself a radiating sexual eye, she has to be blinded. Moreover, the eye of the woman would have a certain virility able to penetrate the man and to subjugate him. In addition, she would be more powerful than the man in relation to transcendence: she can see God without dying. D’Angiò describes then the scene whereby the veil, in the Islamic tradition, steps in for the first time, and shows how the man (Muhammad), in order to believe in God, has to pass through the faith in a woman (Kadigia) and how she has at her disposal the knowledge about the truth which precedes the same knowledge of the founder. He conveys, lastly, that the imposition of the veil reveals itself as a powerful system of structuring the body of pleasure in the space, time and in its inter-personal relations.

I close the report of the day by quoting Adonis’ words, Syrian poet, author, *inter alia*, of one of the most enchanting poems on Naples (the so-called ‘Concerto per il Cristo velato’ - Concert for the veiled Christ): ‘The veil, on women, is a symbol: the veil, on women, is a veil on the reason, it makes them an abstraction, a mere place of pleasure’.