

# Constructing Islam, Gender and Class: Everyday Experiences of Veiled Muslim Women in the Public Sphere of Istanbul

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## **Abstract**

This study, which summarises part of my doctoral research, examines how veiled women, who with their various class-based activities are recently becoming more visible in the public sphere of Istanbul, are represented within the recent urban transformations of the city according to their religiosity. My main goal is to demonstrate the relationship between the embodied practices of women and the constructed religious subjectivities in a city that goes through spatial change in time. This relationship is significant because it offers the possibility of re-examining the ‘classless’ representation of women, while challenging the tendency of studying ‘Muslim women’ as a homogenous category. The study also creates a productive area in terms of creating new conceptualisations and subjectivities about class, gender and Islam. Gender and class are historical constructions with experiences and practices varying depending on historical, social, cultural and economic contexts of the subjects being studied. The history of exclusion for Muslim women wearing headscarves in Turkey, at least from some specific spheres such as workplaces and universities, is in tension with ‘secular’ rules; and the rise in public visibility raises questions about inclusion and exclusion strategies and an ‘Islamic’ movement. I will illustrate the everyday practices and experiences of Muslim women through their represented class subjectivities, which are vital mediators in the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere in Turkey. Using an ethnographic approach, I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation in four spaces in Istanbul: ‘conservative’ women Journals; ‘Islamic’ gated community; the Women’s Branch of the Government Party; and a university. According to my findings, this study shows how these women are recently constructed as neoliberal subjects through differential gender relations, Islamic practices and class habits, and how they are ambivalent enjoying, but also morally criticising, the new transformations.

**Key Words:** Class, gender, ‘Islamic Bourgeoisie,’ middle class, Muslim woman, representation through body, subjectivity formation.

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## **1. Introduction**

Imagine a café in Istanbul, located on the green hills of the Bosphorus coast, with a modern architectural design and known as an establishment of ‘Islamic’ enterprise, offering a proper and luxurious environment for its ‘pious’ guests. Imagine a group of women arriving at the café in their luxury cars, fancy dresses and expensive

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headscarves in order to enjoy their gourmet breakfasts, not forgetting to share their pictures on social media. Imagine photographs and articles in newspapers and journals presenting the moments of women wearing headscarves in their daily life practices with their new dressing styles, consumption patterns and lifestyles; articles that carry titles such as ‘New Lifestyles of Islamic Bourgeoisie.’ Imagine a journal dedicated to ‘conservative’ female life, one that focuses on providing information about dressing, eating, shopping, traveling and attending cultural activities. I have described, here, some of the elements of a recent public transformation in Turkey, to establish how I use these spaces to examine the production of cultural, social and political practices in the form of lifestyles that are the systematic products of ‘habitus.’<sup>1</sup> In describing these different scenarios, I maintain that class, gender and Islam – agents in these narratives – are represented in particular forms. What we see in this crisis of representation is very productive in the sense that we have class, gender and Islam as emptied things, with their various conceptualisations through space and time. This study is concerned with the construction of these conceptualisations and subjectivities through the embodied experiences and practices of Muslim women with headscarves, within the specific context and recent transformations of Turkey in four significant spaces of Istanbul: the conservative women’s journals *Ala* and *Aysha*; an Islamic gated community ‘Yeşil Vadi’; the Women’s Branch of the AK Party (Development and Justice Party) Government; and Sehir University which has recently been positioned as a conservative university model with a relationship with the government.

One of the conundrums of the interactions between gender, class and being a Muslim is that many studies have something to say about Muslim women, but the class positions and experiences of women remain largely unexamined. Nonetheless, these interactions are essential to consider because they allow a re-examination of apparently classless representations of women in literature and could challenge the tendency of studying Muslim women by assuming they are a homogenous group. It is also crucial to show the integration of religious beliefs and practices into public spheres and the results of these interactions. In this way, we can follow the transformation of public spheres such as social places, public offices, universities and various workplaces through religious and spiritual codes. Consideration of these spaces as fields of relational practices has the benefit of allowing an analysis of how the forms of capital emerge in different states and come together.

The major studies of Muslim women with headscarves in Turkey begin, here, with a discussion of the public sphere and modernity, since public visibility is a major issue for Muslim women with headscarves who are seen as the antithesis of modernity in Turkey. Nilüfer Göle has argued that the veiling styles and clothes of women, as well as the daily practices of women, are not independent from modern, capitalist and liberal ideologies.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, entering into the public sphere

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is considered a strategy for these women to become legitimate in public; however, in entering this space they reconstruct the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> In general, the studies of women with headscarves focus on three categories: 1) consumption practices of women;<sup>4</sup> 2) educational and professional lives of women;<sup>5</sup> and 3) the political actions of women.<sup>6</sup> In this study, one of my aims is to bring these categories together to facilitate an examination of them within the fields of social groups.

In this sense, the class positions of these women and their subjectivities cannot be understood without showing their engagement with these structures and discourses. Of particular importance is how their bodily engagements come from their practices, which are shaped by habitus and also shape the 'habitus' itself by internalising it as an embodied form of existence. This means that every detail in the daily lives of these women is related to their accumulated, and accumulating, capital, coming from certain habitus and the social field, which makes these practices possible. It is these details that also show the objectified, embodied and institutionalised state of cultural capital.<sup>7</sup> The very materiality of their practice of Islam with cultural goods, in relation to other bodies and in connection with the material existence of the world, reproduce Muslim women with different subject positions that highlight the importance of 'micro level of religious world making.'<sup>8</sup> This indicates that the practices of these women in every level of life, including consumption patterns, praying activities, physical relationships with certain urban places and their social spheres are crucial to the construction of Islam, class and gender in this space.

Post-1980s Turkey is considered to be experiencing a period of integration with global and liberal policies that are said to be the cause of the emergence of an 'Islamic bourgeoisie' and a middle class that has taken advantage of the opportunities of financial liberalisation.<sup>9</sup> Even if some practices of these emerging classes are not seen as compatible with Islam, the veiled women within them have become, with their various social practices, the public face of the rise of these groups. Recently, women with headscarves have become increasingly visible in workplaces, political arenas, social relations and cultural activities. There are a lot of university students in the best universities of Turkey with headscarves: many are professionals including doctors, lawyers, architects, journalists and dress designers. These women are also increasingly visible as activist politicians in the political arena. Most of the women I mention here in the context of the 'Islamic Bourgeoisie' and middle class, and who are beginning to create a new Muslim woman, are not necessarily in tension with capitalism, modernism and consumption regarding their economic power and self-representation in various public spaces.

## **2. Constructing Class: Classification through Representation**

As a result of the emerging global and liberal transformations in Turkey, the 1980s witnessed an Islamic rise in participation in governments that has been

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discussed mainly as an economic uprising. This uprising has affected the fields of social production and led to the emergence of an ‘Islamic bourgeoisie’ and a middle class. Born out of opportunities generated by financial liberalisation, it has used these to influence social spheres.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is said that the rise of urbanisation and education of Turkish society and the emergence of an Islamic banking system have facilitated the development of the Islamic bourgeoisie. Moreover, this economic development, in relation to the public visibility of Muslim lifestyles, is described as an Islamic movement against the secularists as a reaction to the history of exclusion, which has depended on ideas about Islam and Muslims as uneducated, underdeveloped and traditionalist, among other stereotyping labels.<sup>11</sup> Actually, these exclusions and the idea of the ‘otherness’ of Muslim people are attributed to conservative, pious Muslims traditionally identified as such through their appearance in the public sphere: an appearance that includes headscarves for women and beards for men, daily activities such as praying in mosques and certain other structured codes.

However, for the purposes of this chapter, the argument around the emergence of an Islamic class also includes a gendered aspect through the bodies and the public visibility of Muslim women with headscarves, representations of them highlighting the class positions of these women. Gender is significant here because it facilitates another layer of meaning, one superimposed upon religious and class structures. As Pierre Bourdieu highlights, the habitus of individuals is gendered and gendering. At the same time, in practice, gender dispositions play key roles as mechanisms of distinction – mechanisms that are based on gender.<sup>12</sup>

This transformation process, concerning the daily lives of veiled women in Turkey, must also be analysed historically in relation to the establishment of modern Turkey after the collapse of Ottoman Empire, a period that saw the creation of a secular state and society.<sup>13</sup> Referring to Jürgen Habermas’ early writings on the public sphere and the bourgeoisie, the sphere – in this context – is a space that is secularised by the rationalisation of society.<sup>14</sup> This means that the urbanisation process is also a secular process in which the status of religion is reduced while it is shaped according to the conditions of secularism. Nonetheless, the newly argued class construction shows a strong counter argument to this theory. Contrary to the newly presented Islamic bourgeoisie, a Kemalist (secular) bourgeoisie has formed in Turkey, which can be seen as an example of Habermas’ argument. This bourgeoisie is powered by state mechanisms within a plan of producing a secular nation state for every level of society.<sup>15</sup> In this construction, the educated, noble Kemalist bourgeoisie has been encouraged by the state and by certain economic investments and is now presented as ‘the bourgeoisie’ with cultural, political and social characteristics. This class-making project was also gendered, much like the Islamic bourgeoisie, with the representation of modern secular Western-style women as demonstrated through their clothing, consumption habits, cultural and political activities.

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The emergence of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) in Turkey in the 1990s, after the AK Party's rise as the political representative of Islamic communities, has triggered a secularist versus Islamic debate across the country. Thus, during the last two decades, the role of Islam in Turkey has changed considerably, and there are now many key Islamic figures with significant political and economic power.<sup>16</sup> Urban places have begun to include religious scenes and connotations. Early on, the middle class began to expand as a new community, and a new Islamic bourgeoisie is now considered a distinct class group that is formed and powered by the state mechanisms as has been argued for the rise of the Kemalist bourgeoisie.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, the clash between secularist and Islamic groups in Turkey gains utmost significance in political struggles. This confrontation is also visible in cultural and social relations.<sup>18</sup> The public visibility of Muslim women participating in urban and modern activities is very much related to the social and cultural levels of daily life. I argue there that this is supported by the state at all economic and political levels. Comparing this idea to the Kemalist bourgeoisie can be very helpful in terms of understanding the construction process of a class. This new case cannot be understood as a state-building process in a historical context, but a new form of government, which tries to combine liberal and religious norms, has been introduced. According to Bourdieu, social class is not an objective homogeneity of conditions or based in social reality, but rather it is a position in social space that depends on perception.<sup>19</sup> The social field gives the opportunity to show the nuances in the practices, perceptions and representations that give rise to the perception of being in a class. I argue that for the Islamic bourgeoisie, as well as for the emergence of the Kemalist Bourgeoisie, the experiences and practices vary and create different subject positions which lead to controversies and clashes even within the same group.

### **3. Creating Selves: Becoming Pious Neoliberal Subjects**

There has been much recent debate and reaction in Turkey to laws banning the wearing of headscarves in public places such as schools, universities and public offices. From the 1990s onwards, women with headscarves have been visible faces of transformation, with their wearing styles and daily life experiences discussed and represented in visual and written media, as well as by academics, as products of economic transformation that enable Muslim communities to be both more active and more visible in public life.<sup>20</sup> This rise in the visibility of women with headscarves in the public sphere is argued, here, to be part of an Islamic movement situated against Kemalist ideology and secularism, which has defined women in a certain way within the discourses of Westernisation and modernisation by the establishment of the Republic of Turkey: a regime that excluded women with headscarves.<sup>21</sup> However, even if there is a movement against the image of the modern woman supported by the Kemalist state, the newly emerged Islamic groups do not necessarily contradict modernist and capitalist life patterns; rather they seem

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to be in negotiation with secular groups.<sup>22</sup> Göle argues that these transformations provide the necessary empowerment for Muslim women to grow through education and economic support. In this way, the new faces of Islam, according to Göle, are not the illiterate, poor and underdeveloped.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, with the historical changes in, and representations of, women's veiling style, the headscarf can be seen as a political symbol for creating a class and supporting a religious movement. Contrary to Göle's approach, I argue that in the construction of a subject, which is influenced by fear, thought, perception and desire, the very materiality of a piece of cloth might have different meanings related to the embodied practices in social spaces. Indeed, these women experience a modern, Western mode of change in their social lives at every level so, in relation to this process, a headscarf may be a political symbol and more. At the same time, this public rise cannot be presented as a collective movement initiated by professionalised, educated and successful Muslims because this approach tends to exclude other individuals without modern, liberal lifestyles from this public rise through a modernist and even elitist perspective: they are not part of a collective movement. Göle's argument reproduces the 'other' Muslims as if they were underdeveloped, traditionalist and poor before praising the current modern and Western development

As Yael Navaro Yashin argues, the rise in public visibility of Islamic groups (like the women with headscarves, praying practices and Islamic commodities or companies with Islamic entrepreneurs) begins to be seen as a 'nightmare' in the public realm by secularists and Kemalists.<sup>24</sup> In opposition to the increased visibility of conservative Islamic societies and practices in the public realm, the secular communities attempt to make Kemalism secularism publicly visible as a symbol of modernism and development.<sup>25</sup> Even if it is valuable to show the reciprocal relations and reconstruction of discourses between secular and Islamic groups through the materiality of things, I do not agree with referring to a headscarf or a religious activity as a commodity as in the case of the other symbols of Kemalism.<sup>26</sup> Rather, I argue that the material and ideological transformations caused by the new form of religious experience may create new forms of piety, understandings of Islam, strategies for being a Muslim and spiritual meanings for these women in the form of their new subjectivities.

I propose that subject formation may explain the nuances and exceptions, which cannot be explained by structure alone, since subjectivation is a paradox in which individuals are subordinated by certain conditions but, at the same time, find ways to become a self-conscious subject.<sup>27</sup> The work of Foucault and Butler states that subjectivity is the sum of the following: modes of perception, affect, thought, desire and fear in an individual manner. However, it is also social formation that shapes, organises and advocates these modes in a collective manner.<sup>28</sup> I argue that an individual's active participation in his/her subject formation can provide a place for these subjects to manage the discourses and structures in which they exist.

In reference to my own findings in four spaces in Istanbul, the subjectivities of these devout women are constructed in an ambivalent way. Besides the public contestations with the power of ideological discourses, they are also in constant negotiation with being part of secular life in Turkey. On one hand, these women enjoy the new transformations in terms of the outcome of a neoliberal lifestyle but, on the other hand, they are also uncomfortable in being detached from their religion because of the normalisation of this lifestyle. Referring to these two points, the subject is constructed in such a paradoxical manner that even if he/she criticises and acts against rules imposed by power – through practices and experiences – he/she can reinforce them at the same time. Operation of the self, in this paradoxical process, supports the idea that subject formation can be read as a neoliberal self-governing project in which the individual creates and recreates the discourses and which, in turn, creates the individual through new truth regimes. As in the case of Istanbul, women produce and reproduce new norms about being a Muslim woman in a modern Western world and establish certain groups, activities and journals that reinforce their new lifestyles. As the control of bodies – biopower operated through the self – fosters the technologies of self and self-governing techniques, it assists in the construction of a liberal and capitalist hegemony and the neoliberal subjects within it.<sup>29</sup> However, the embodied performances of these Muslim women also offer an opportunity to create new conceptualisations of Islam, gender and class which make them unique, contrary to the public discourses and mainstream representations of devout Muslim women.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of the Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 172.

<sup>2</sup> Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> See Nilüfer Göle, *İslamın Kamusal Yüzleri: İslam ve Kamusal Alan Üzerine Bir Atölye Çalışması* (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2000); Craig Calhoun, 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere,' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 1992), 1-50; Anna Secor, 'The Veil and Urban Space in Istanbul: Women's Dress, Mobility and Islamic Knowledge,' *Gender, Place and Culture* 9.1 (2002): 5-22.

<sup>4</sup> Özlem Sandıkçı and Güliz Ger, 'Constructing and Representing the Islamic Consumer in Turkey,' *Fashion Theory* 11.2-3 (2007): 189-210; Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Dilek Cindođlu, *Headscarved Women in Professional Jobs: Revisiting Discrimination in 2010* (Istanbul: TESEV Publications, 2011); Fatma Sündal, 'The Logic of Tesettür: Engendering Everyday Lives of Educate Islamist Women in Turkey' (PhD diss., Middle East Technical University, 2002); Neşe Öztimur, *Professional Veiled Women: The Everyday Life Strategies of Professional Islamic Women in 1990's* (PhD diss., Bilkent University Institute of Economics and Social Sciences, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Nilüfer Narlı, 'Pro-Islamic Parties, Gender and Social Class in Turkey,' *Women in the Mediterranean Mirror - Les femmes dans le miroir méditerranéen*, quaderns de la mediterrània 7 (2006): 111-18.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital,' *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (New York, Greenwood, 1986), 241-258.

<sup>8</sup> Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion* (Utrecht: University of Utrecht, 2012), 30.

<sup>9</sup> See Fatih Varol, 'The Emergence and Consequences of the Turkish Islamic Bourgeoisie under the Impact of Globalization' (MA Thesis, The University of Utah, 2010); and Hakan Yılmaz, 'Türkiye'de Burjuva Reformasyonu: Fırsatlar ve Tehditler' (Unpublished draft paper, Bosphorus University International Relations and Political Science) for Islamic Bourgeoisie discussions.

<sup>10</sup> See Fatih Varol, 'The Emergence and Consequences of the Turkish Islamic Bourgeoisie under the Impact of Globalization' (MA Thesis, The University of Utah, 2010); Hakan Yılmaz, 'Türkiye'de Burjuva Reformasyonu: Fırsatlar ve Tehditler' (Unpublished draft paper, Bosphorus University International Relations and Political Science) for Islamic Bourgeoisie discussions.

<sup>11</sup> Varol, 'The Emergence and Consequences of the Turkish Islamic Bourgeoisie under the Impact of Globalization'; Yılmaz, 'Türkiye'de Burjuva Reformasyonu: Fırsatlar ve Tehditler'; Nilüfer Göle, *Toplumun Merkezine Yolculuk* (Istanbul: Ufuk Kitapları, 2002); Cihan Ziya Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital.'

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> See Korkut Borotav, *Türkiye İktisat Tarihi: 1908-2006* (Ankara: İmge Yayınevi, 2006); Çağlar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey* (London: Verso, 1987) and ed. *Istanbul: Between the Global and Local* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Göle, *İslamın Kamusal Yüzleri: İslam ve Kamusal Alan Üzerine Bir Atölye Çalışması*.

- <sup>17</sup> Borotav, *Türkiye İktisat Tarihi: 1908-2006*; Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey and Istanbul: Between the Global and Local*.
- <sup>18</sup> Göle, *İslamın Kamusal Yüzleri: İslam ve Kamusal Alan Üzerine Bir Atölye Çalışması*; Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*.
- <sup>19</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'What Makes Social Class?' *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32 (1987): 17.
- <sup>20</sup> Göle, *İslamın Kamusal Yüzleri: İslam ve Kamusal Alan Üzerine Bir Atölye Çalışması*; and Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*.
- <sup>21</sup> Göle, *İslamın Kamusal Yüzleri: İslam ve Kamusal Alan Üzerine Bir Atölye Çalışması*; Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*.
- <sup>22</sup> Göle, *İslamın Kamusal Yüzleri: İslam ve Kamusal Alan Üzerine Bir Atölye Çalışması*; Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*.
- <sup>23</sup> Göle, *İslamın Kamusal Yüzleri: İslam ve Kamusal Alan Üzerine Bir Atölye Çalışması*.
- <sup>24</sup> Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*, 22.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 83.
- <sup>28</sup> Sherry Ortner, 'Subjectivity and Cultural Critique,' *Anthropological Theory* 5.1 (2005): 31.
- <sup>29</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Technologies of Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Thomas Lemke, 'The Birth of Bio-Politics: Michel Foucault's Lecture at Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality,' *Economy and Society* 30.2 (2001): 190-207; Thomas Lemke 'Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique,' *Rethinking Marxism* 14.3 (2002), 49-64; Nicolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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