

The Veil: A Flaming Hot Charcoal



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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

*Written and illustrated
By
Soumy Ana*

By Soumy Ana

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Night about to fall.

The sky was glowing dimly, in the afternoon of 1994.

The paved road looked like a ramp to the moon. The white planet rose within the sky at the end of the horizon with a blaze. That road seemed to be glaring in the sky at the bottom of the horizon; it was engulfed to its brim behind the huge buildings.



Photo courtesy: www.noaa.org

I was walking with my friend Asmaa, along the dull streets. All day we had been wandering here and there, looking for books in the public library and breathing the fresh marine wind coming from the Atlantic. We had tried to jump on the cobblestones where it was level, and had laughed like kids. We were a little bit

tired from the worries of the university, from the hardship of our lives; we had already learned that life was an endless fight. Now we wanted a small break, our heads floating above the main buildings as in a wave of dreams.



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I was thinking about Asmaa with the peaceful face, her slow pace, and the slight Arabic accent in her voice. I had met her one day I had lost my way on the streets of the town where I wanted to pursue my college studies. She had accepted me as a sister right away. On Saturdays, we used to go together to the open market like

today, in order to buy fresh mint, one or two wheels of goat cheese and a loaf of crunchy bread. At home, we would prepare mint tea, and would eat Moroccan pastries that her mother had made.

As long as I remember, Asmaa had always been kind to everybody, her door was open for anyone in search of food, of conversation, or of some place to sleep; she was a model of patience. She never rejected anybody because of his or her appearance, and she was well open to dialogue. She taught me to like this town in spite of the problems that arose at that time around the immigration issues. It was a big town with wide docks along an unstable canal leading far into the country. Here cargo ships slowly drifted on the riptides with the sound of a horn. Everywhere, paved roads lead to big plazas where musicians and actors tried to make a living, as in the Middle Ages.

One day, Asmaa and I had wandered into lots of shops. They all seemed upside down due to the hundreds of hands that handled the merchandise throughout the years. The shopkeeper never bothered to mend the lace collars or to wash the silk eaten by moths. Here and there, there lay old dolls dismantled, dusty and shabby, old leather books, and under a pile of wrinkled clothes, suddenly we saw something. I found with Asmaa a nun's outfit with a long starched


navy blue veil. We immediately tried it on and burst out in laughter. We were innocent. We were just young girls.



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We did not yet realize what putting on the veil meant, and that later it would even become an affront. The shopkeeper who did not notice what was going on in the bazaar watched us with suspicious eyes; he slowly approached and told us that the habit was there for decoration; so it wasn't for sale. I did not yet understand what was at

stake, but I kept from this event a vague feeling of uneasiness, something odd. I did not yet possess the words to describe it.



I began to be aware of the differences between the others and me when one freezing day, I noticed an Algerian man staring at me as I had covered my hair because of the cold. A few months later, as I was putting a shawl on my head because of the rain, a man took a seat next to me, and said,

"Do you know Miss that it is forbidden to wear a scarf in France? It is the law!"

This time, I was really angry, why was it his concern anyway? Perhaps I really understood it all a year later when two old women walked on my feet and elbowed me aside to look into a souvenir shop's front window where love dolls were on display. I was so astounded that I stepped back against them until they left. They ignored me completely.

In France, hiding one's head is believed to be impolite, to defy authority.

This fact is ironic, for it was considered evil for a decent woman to uncover her hair outside for centuries. If a man saw a woman's ankle exposed, she would be hurt because she had been violated.

So, what happened in the meantime?

After the French Revolution, people fought for a new freedom abolishing the feudal bounds. This freedom was expressed first by the loss of the faith replaced by the worship of money, power and freedom of expression. The gap has been so broad that nowadays people have forgotten the memory of the past, and with it, their previous values. So the *hijab*, our veil, was for them the sign that we had lost these privileges, and then we had turned our backs on progress.



French women fishing at the beginning of the 21st Century.

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But for us, the *hijab* unified us to a community of faith, and at the same time separated us from it.



We were talking with Asmaa about this issue this Saturday afternoon we walked on the cobblestones of Bordeaux town. Asmaa said,

“In Morocco, girls in high school are forbidden to wear the modest Islamic dress. People are afraid that children would become uncontrollable. But this is slowly changing.”

I said, “Incredible! So this problem is worldwide?”

“Yes, even the most faithful people in Saudi Arabia are kept in prison and schooling restricted for fear of a nation wide awareness. Islam is powerful! The fear of the Muslim brotherhood, originated from Egypt, has for a long time spread around the globe. Now, women in the world began claiming that the *hijab* condemned them to be the slave of the men. They did it for personal reasons, not to be fair. They were only a minority among Muslim women but the medias and books made money from their stories. People like to read about persecuted women. I do not know why! Even the Muslim men, influenced by the Western medias and traditions, refused to

employ any veiled woman in the place of work! They did it to interest Westerners to their countries and businesses! We were lost and confused by all the attacks from outside. It was our way of defending ourselves, of saying: ‘We are good people like you!’ But people did not understand Islam anymore!”

“Yes, there is no real Muslim state, a state where Islamic laws would be followed, good laws, tolerant laws, wise laws, in brief, the best! I heard something last time on the radio. Somebody was comparing the *hijab* to the yellow star that the Jews had to wear during World War II. I am inclined to think that it is what Muslims and non-Muslims have made true a decade ago after the bombings and terrorism attacks upon France.”

“The *hijab* problem is not only a religious problem, *ma soeur*. What about the issue on women? In this country, they fought so much for the acceptance of the abortion laws, the right to vote or to work, equal salary, rights to inheritance, and so on, that when we prefer to stay home, we are seen like opposing reason. When we show respect to our family and ourselves by veiling ourselves, we are thought stupid. When we express tenderness and admiration for our husbands, we are called crazy or submissive. Everything we do differently has become dubious. No wonder, in a world where women have been so abused and still are so wildly abused, they can come to beat their men!”

“Abuses against women unfortunately still exist in France. If it exists sometimes among Muslims, it is not only the fact of the Muslim society, it is also the fact of the Christian society today, and the fact of manhood. In America, a woman is safer outside her home! And even among Muslims only a minority is practicing the true Islam. Some men think women are worth nothing. They sure did not give a good image of us in this country. Think of it: upon four or five millions of Muslims people in this country, about 15% of the Ummah is really orthodox, and in the world half of the Muslims practice the religion, as they should, the other part as they should not.”

“That ‘s because most Arab people feel Muslim only by affiliation.

One day I came to an Arab shop to buy fresh mint and egg rolls before going home. A doubt still lingered in my mind; I wanted to be clear on this point, so I addressed the only possible person who would know: a native Muslim. So to speak, I cautiously ventured, ‘Is it mandatory for the women in Islam to cover their hair?’ He replied, ‘No! Absolutely not! The ones who still do it nowadays are backward, or they just want to be one of the media stars.’ I replied, ‘But I have some friends who just want to be modest.’ He concluded, ‘Those women are always exceptions!’

Old fashioned, eh?! My morale sank for a few minutes. From then on, I believed that even some Arabs do not know about their own religious culture.”

We continued to walk on the streets, chatting about all the burning subjects that haunted us at the time. The disappearance of the sun was a good time to walk in the streets, because nobody looked at us so much. We felt free and unnoticed.



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As I trodded along the street, I recalled to Asmaa the first day when I struggled to put my first hijab on. I was not good at it, making it stay

on with two or four pins. As I walked on the street, a man spit at my feet from a car, shouting at me,

"You dirty Arab! You are just like the Jews: you're everywhere!" Tears had begun to fall from my cheeks, and I rested on a stone. I was ashamed, ashamed of what, exactly - of being the center of attention, on display. But since I could not hide my convictions, I had to face reality with courage. I had no choice, and people had no choice either: they had to accept me as I was! I wanted to be worthy of wearing the *hijab*. The same day, I felt how vulnerable I was in a society I was no longer part of the majority but part of the minority. A group of children had appeared at the end of the street. When they reached me, they crushed into me laughingly, saying, "Why do you have a bandage around your head?" I kept silent, astounded by their boldness, but dignified. What could I do to children? How would they grow up, I thought, if they already were raised racists or intolerant? How was it possible that it had already affected the small ones? Were not children supposed to be innocent and harmless? Not anymore, I thought in disgust and deep sadness!

The open manifestation of racism really began in France from a tiny event. In 1989, at Creil, in the region of Oise, three young Islamic girls were expelled from high school, only because they had chosen to wear the *hijab*, the Muslim headscarf. On October 24, eleven

young girls were expelled from Fedherbe Middle School for the same reason.

"Showing religious convictions is an attack on the constitution!" or so I heard.

And this was not all! In November, twenty-four teenagers from the school Saint-Exupery of Mantes-La-Jolie, in the region of Yvelines, suffered the same fate and protested. People said the girls were manipulated! Since then, cases of verbal aggressions and trials multiplied. Because people were becoming angrier with us, we were becoming the targets of the media, the outlet for frustration caused by problems like unemployment, governmental failings, fears about the future, etc. Immigration was not the major problem in France, but the media still made it headlines in the News; it was to become an obstacle to France's peace. A good scapegoat! But also, the problems with Algeria had been so tense since the independence that people felt increasingly revolted against Arabs and afraid of a direct aggression. The veil then had become a symbol of terror in the world.

The veil was actually associated to a minority who is violent. People did not even realized that about 35, 000 French people had already converted to Islam during the time this all happened. I was one them. We had 'reverted' to Islam because we had learnt with certainty that we could find answers in Islam, and also peace for our heart. We

had found in Islam what our country had lost of his morality. And much more than we expected in manners of beauty and self-respect. I remember a woman who was hired to work in a clinic for lunatics; the staff accused her of being an unwanted distraction for certain patients, leading them to deeper illnesses. She proposed to use a nurse's cap instead, and was taken to court. She won her case, but lost her job. That was typical! I remember feeling full of pride for her, for her courage and boldness. Ya Allah! O My God! Facing a court, here! This happened only in the last resort!



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“Years told me something new, Asmaa,” I continued while talking to my sister of faith, “One never understands what being different stands for until he is himself in trouble. Sometimes, you cannot even imagine that racism exists in the place where you live. It is a reality you do not belong to, so you convince yourself it does not exist. However, the affair of Creil had its own explanation; it was not only a problem focused on Muslims. Indeed, a community of Jewish children had already refused to go the school on Fridays and on Saturdays before the events of 1989. That was in order to respect the weekly religious day of *Sabbath*. The school of Creil had refused to compromise. See, so how was it possible that the school could compromise with Muslim women a few months later, even if not for the same reasons, even for any reason at all? Traditionally, French people follow the principle of secularism.

To make it vivid, a writer even proposed to display in every school's classroom a quote from Montesquieu, which speaks for itself: “If I would know of something which would aid me, and which would be harmful to my family, I would reject it from my soul. If I knew of something which would be useful to my family and which would not be to my country, I would try to forget it. If I knew of something which could be useful to my country and which would be harmful to Europe, and harmful to humanity, I would regard it as a crime.”

It was obvious that the French considered other faiths as harmful. Besides, all the problems with North Africa and Asian terrorism did not smooth things over.

Asmaa and I often felt the fright inside the people we were dealing with, the fear of an aggression, and the fear they could lose their freedom because of us. Sometimes we felt it too.

So this day of 1994, Asmaa and I had had a rest for a day, an illusory rest indeed. The night had completely fallen over the city now, and people had hurried their way home, and we felt on the spot; we had stayed too late outside, talking too much. We had to go back now to the University. I was becoming scary.

Behind the huge buildings, shapes suddenly detached themselves from the walls. They seemed unreal across the beams of moonlight that eventually faded from view. They seemed to form ghostly shadows, slipping with difficulty along the paths. It was now about eight o'clock, people had finished their work and almost everyone had joined their families in the comfort of their homes. But we were there, walking along the cobblestones, our blood running cold.

Suddenly, the shadows took human shapes: three skinheads approached as three or four streams of perspiration ran along my skin. I prepared myself for a confrontation, rolling my keys inside my fist, the sharp edges pointing up. This was not the first time Asmaa and I would be facing angry and harsh people. Sometimes it

was just the look in their eyes staring at us with hate or fear that bothered us. Sometimes they would act upon their feelings. We, ourselves, were ready for anything. I tried to think about something else, tried not to let it become too troubling. The skinheads now stammered slowly towards Asmaa. I saw defiance in her eyes slightly covered by her long eyelashes. A few people who happened to be there as well looked at our group suspiciously, hastening their pace in order to avoid trouble; we knew that nobody would lift a finger to help us. I was understandably afraid, but I pulled myself together. Besides, I was not alone in the dim light. I recited the supplication Muslims use in case of need: "*We place You before them and we take refuge in You from their evil.*" I agreed entirely to everything Allah had prepared for us; I had no feeling of rebellion. But I knew the skinheads were attracted by what was on our head. Now, in the gloomy shade of the town, my thoughts were focused on the *hijab* I was wearing. Why? Because it was not an insignificant piece of cloth, but a burning charcoal, flaming and red-hot. With this veil all covered up, we had helped the vagrants. At the same time, we had lost the opportunity to have an A on our diplomas, and nobody would give us the right to be French anymore; we had given up the ordinary Western life. Anyway, the bold skinheads, painted in green and red, were there. One shabby guy talked to Asmaa. My head was hurting, I could not concentrate on what they were saying,

but I remember she was my sister, like myself, and she now smiled at me. The skinheads had left. She explained everything later:

"They took us for Gypsies; the Gypsies sell drugs in the middle of the town; their women look like us you know. That was it!"

Once again, I had difficulties in comprehending the world. I could not believe it! Skinheads who had the worst reputation would not harm us, while people of our own blood or heritage would fight against us. I suddenly felt angry and sad. This event made things clear for me that in the practice of our religion, we were alone, all alone before Allah, and if we were not able to face our fears, our personal weaknesses, then nothing could spare us from the dangers that lay there, around us, at any time, the dangers that Satan would have the great pleasure to bestow on us.

At the same time, I would think about the Ummah, even if a few people understood what it meant really. All these people who shared the same convictions of Peace and Dignity were my people! And this is what I felt while the Muslim girls from high school held their demonstrations in the streets along with their parents. We all felt the same solidarity. One carried a flag saying, "The *hijab* is our honor!" I still believe it is.

