The Anthropology of the Face Mask: Rethinking the History of Face Covering Controversies, Bans and COVID-19 Context

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Abstract

Masks and their multiple forms have figured, and continued to figure at the heart of anthropological and semiotic studies which offer a context to fathom and decipher the meaning, symbolism and the social functions of masks. Specifically, the face coverings and their manifestations in public spheres have always been on the forefront of most of the debates particularly in the Western context. Now, and due the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes almost mandatory in most of the European countries and other parts of the world to use the face mask as a precautionary measure notably in the public spaces. The laws that forbade the face coverings in public places in the name of the secular values and security reasons can no longer hold in the face of the dire current circumstance caused by COVID-19. The aim of this paper —which intends to present an anthropological and theoretical analysis—is to show that throughout human history the face covering has been used, misused or even abused depending on the context and how it is perceived in a particular geography, time and space.

Keywords*: Masks, Face covering, COVID-19, public space, controversy, bans, Anthropology

INTRODUCTION

The piece of cloth that once caused so much aggravations—particularly as a security threat—mainly in European countries seems to be nowadays an essential and a mandatory part of human daily precautions in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Historically, the issue of face covering and its cultural and religious manifestations had been omnipresent in most of the secular states. It started in 1980 in France with what it was called *l'Affair du Foulard* or the *Veil Affair* and expanded to other European countries such as England where the issue of face covering was given much attention particularly in 2006.

In the French case, the core of the issue of the veil must be addressed in relation to Stasi commission[1] and the law that created so much controversy not only in France but, also in some other European countries as a result. The law was designed to protect the public spaces from any religious concerns such as the religious symbols. Hence, it prohibited all the religious symbols in Public schools such as the headscarves and the all types of face coverings. John Wallach Scott, a French sociologist tried to inspect some of the ideas implemented in this law banning the headscarf in the French public schools. She stated that a law that prohibited the headscarf inside the public schools must be seen as a clear manifestation against cultural and religious symbol. (Scott, 2007,)

Now, and due the coronavirus pandemic, it seems that all the laws that forbade the face coverings in public places in the name of the secular values and security reasons can no longer hold in the face of the dire current circumstance. Surprisingly, it becomes almost mandatory in most of the European countries to use the face mask as a precaution notably in the public spaces. Recently, the National Academy of Medicine in France recommended that the face mask should be worn in public places. Surprisingly, the full face covering which France banned in 2011 has become the trend and even entered the fashion shows in the capital city of France, Paris. This was clearly shown when female models were seen wearing facemask at Marine Serre`s Paris Fashion

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[1] **The Stasi Commission**: is a commission done for preserving the principles of the French laïcité or secularism. It is named after the French politician Bernard Stasi. The commission consisted of 20 members and was formed by the French president Jacques Chirac in 2003. In 2003, the commission has introduced the ban on all conspicuous religious symbols in the public schools. The aim behind this commission was the preservation of the secular values and principles.

Week Show. The question that raises itself here is: why the facemask/covering is no longer a security threat? This one of the main questions that this paper will answer in its discussion part.

Consequently, the face mask or covering in relation to coronavirus outbreak is used as a tool for resisting the virus. Here, one can theorize the face covering as a multilayered signifier due to its different functions. In case of the pandemic, what needs to be look at is the fact that the face covering is no longer a security threat; rather it becomes part and parcel of the daily enforced precautions. Thus, the mask is used as a tool to resist the pandemic which is the a reminiscent of the concept of the veil and resistance in postcolonial studies. This idea had been discussed by many scholars in the field of postcolonial studies and Franz Fanon is one of them. Metaphorically, for Fanon the veil became more than a cultural icon; it was conceived as a weapon and a tool of resistance. (Fanon, 1965)

Historically, masks were used for different reasons. They have been used in religion, tradition and rituals. This can be seen in religious and traditional celebrations. The mask was believed to have a deeper role spirituality. (Napier, 1992) But, nowadays the face mask or covering seems to carry new connotations such fear and threat. Many countries are now implementing new regulations to limit the use of face covering in public places notably in Europe where the secular values are preserved. (Nunley & McCarthy, 1999). Additionally, in drama and theatre, masks are an integral part of the performance which allow the actors to perform ample of roles on the stage such as concealing their identities. (Moreland & Cowie, 2007)

This multiplicity has been evoked by many scholars in the field of cultural and feminist studies. Fadwa Al Guindi from her lenses argued that: "One way to organize the many elements of clothing subsumed under the category "veil" is to classify them according to the body parts they conceal. Using this classification, we would have a three-part typology of head cover, face cover, and body cover. Perhaps, to avoid such overlap, a better approach would be to identify veiling behaviors and meaning. In this case, I propose classification by what the veil reveals, what it conceals, and what it communicates. This approach seeks meaning beyond the material quality of the item''. (Al Guindi, 1999, pp. 9-10)

What this paper is intended to add is the fact that the face covering or veil—to use the general terms—is always used and misused to serve certain agendas and purposes. So, those who

used to vote on face covering bans have found themselves covering their faces as a gesture of precautionary measure. Additionally, the face covering which was once a source of oppression and backwardness has dominated the public spaces. Coronavirus pandemic will surely change the way things are interpreted and viewed. More importantly, it will lead some to rethink and reconsider some of the assumptions associated with the dress codes. However, there is no intention to call for a counter discourse based on the coronavirus outbreak in which the face covering becomes very signatory; rather it is an opportunity to rethink all the ban on face covering, the compatibility of these cultural or religious symbols with European values and more significantly their conception of the public and private spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers have dealt with the issue of the veil or face covering and its controversies. For instance, Joan Wallach Scott's *The Politics of the Veil*, which was published in 2007 tried to unveil the issue of the French laws or the French bans on the conspicuous religious signs. Particularly, the book addressed the French law and the idea of the secularization of the public spaces. Hence, Scott examined the veil in relation to the French secular values and their conception of the public and private spaces.

The debate on the issue of the face covering in the public spaces is not a new phenomenon. In secular states such France, the face covering or anything that conceals the face had been an issue of controversy. Many scholars have talked about the religious or cultural symbols inside the public spaces. Talal Asad (2003) who wrote on the idea of face covering in secular states, argued that the headscarf used by Muslim women was conceived to be a threat to the French Republic and French values since it was viewed as an aspect of Islam, and must be taken as a symbol that is diametrically opposed with the French Republic and must be removed. (Asad, 2003)

Additionally, Asad (2006) in another article entitled, "*Reflection on La laïcité and the Public Sphere*", tried to look at Western secularism through the lens of the public sphere. He argued that "the he idea of the public sphere rests on a binary scheme: public vs. private. The public sphere is also thought of as part of a tertiary structure, the space of general communication and information that mediates between the overarching state and the many restricted spaces of

daily life". As it can be clearly seen through this quote, Asad (2006) has tried to theorize the public space through his views on the French model of secularism. (Asad, 2006, p.1)

Additionally, Oliver Roy argued that the issue of secularism, Europe and the face covering worn by Muslim women must be addressed in relationship to the idea of religious identities and the public sphere in contemporary Europe. Roy believed that the debates on Islam and its compatibility with the French version of secularism is an exception, but at the same time he is surprised by the fact that there are some similar debates which are taking place in some European countries such as the debates on the veil that made the issue very complicated. (Roy, 2007)

Furthermore, John Wallach Scott (2007) made similar points to those of Asad (2006) when she discussed the headscarf and Stasi commission which aimed at banning the headscarf inside the French public schools. Scott (2007) linked the issue with the religious identities and their existence in the public sphere. She added: "*Unless individuals could be divided between public (secular) commitments and private (religious) ones, they did not qualify for membership in the republic*". Here, it becomes clear that the ban is very much related to the national identity and the process of forming a secular society based on their division of the public and private spaces. As a result, all individuals have to fit in, so they can be accepted as citizens. Scott believes that the notion of secularism "presupposes new concepts of ''religion'', ''ethics'', ''politics'' and new imperatives associated with them". (Scott, 2007, p. 132)

The idea of religious and cultural symbols is not limited to France; rather similar debates had taken place in other European countries. Christian Joppke in his book *The Veil: The Mirror of Identity* argued that "The Islamic headscarf controversy is no longer a particularity of France, whose classic Foulard Affair dates back to 1989. In fact, there is no country in Western Europe today which does not have its own controversy". (Joppke, 2009, p. 1) Furthermore, secularism and the religious identity in Europe remain on forefront of the national issues and debates in many European countries where the religious symbols are given too much concerns as well as their configuration in the public sphere. Some have condemned the strategies adopted by the secular states as well as their attitudes toward the ostentatious religious symbols.

A very similar story has dominated British mainstream media since 2006. In the case of England, the issue has nothing to do with the secular values, rather the face covering has been seen as a mark of separation. Furthermore, the emergence of the face veil debate in England, as it has been mentioned earlier started with Jack Straw who can be taken as the mouth piece and the real defender of British cultural values. The debate started in his constituency where he adopted colonial paradigms and rhetoric to unveil those women inside his office. Jack Straw claimed that the veil should be taken off, since it does not contribute to the community development and relations. These arguments were stated in an article that he wrote in one of the British newspapers called *Lancashire Telegraph* which appeared in Gholam Khiabany and Mily Williamson`s article *Veiled bodies naked racism: culture, politics and race in the Sun* where he asserted that the veil makes the conversation face to face more difficult and does not help community relations. Khiabany & Williamson, 2008, p. 70)

The above literature review is used to familiar the reader with the source of the controversy that took place in most of the European countries. The debate in most of these countries was fused with the concept of the secularism and its values. The school girls who wear headscarves and niqabi women were the main victims of the laws passed to ban face covering in the public spaces and schools.

RESEACH METHOD

This paper is based on some previous studies that I did on the cultural symbols, face covering and their manifestations. As is a theoretical analysis, the method used in this paper is a qualitative. For example, it includes analyzing and interpreting texts, images and debates on face covering. The approaches used in this paper are the postcolonial approach and anthropological approach. I use both approaches to look at the mask and its meanings which seem to change over time. It is used to be a symbol of oppression and a security threat; however, it is now entering fashion shows and trending. These two approaches offer a context to fathom the meaning, symbolism and functions of the face covering.

At this point, I draw much of the analysis on the works of Franz Fanon, Oliver Roy, Talal Asad and Edward Said who talk very extensively on the idea of cultural symbols and the notion of the construction of the Orient. These scholars can help us understand the fact that face covering is

used and missed since the last four decades. For example, Edward Said's *Orientalism* helps us understand the unfamiliar and strange, since it has questioned Western construction of the East through a well-organized science.

These scholars and their theories can be used to analyze the importance given to the face covering nowadays and its relationship to Western discourse on the dress code. What needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that the meaning of the face covering is no longer a static. It`s now an instrument for resisting coronavirus and more importantly a considerable gesture of precautionary measures. Furthermore, masks and their multiple forms have figured, and continued to figure at the heart of anthropological, semiotic and postcolonial studies which offer a context to fathom and decipher the meaning, symbolism and the social functions of masks.

DISCUSSION

In human history, masks and their multiple forms were omnipresent in all aspects of life. It has been used in drama, religion, tradition and ritual and there are very few societies that do not find meanings and functions of masks in their historical records (Edson, 2005). These masks or face covering were very prevalent and strongly preserved across societies as forms of celebration. They communicate very strong societal thoughts and they have several functions. (Mack, 1994) However, and since the last three decades, masks and face covering began to have new meaning and symbolisms associated with them.

Significantly, coronavirus pandemic has opened new opportunities to rethink the aggravations and controversies that dominated most of the debates on the face covering since the last decade. Ironically, the very same girls and women who were prevented from wearing the face covering, are now allowed to use all the sort of face covering and they might even be fined if they don`t so in public places such in the supermarkets. This latter is what this paper is trying to add to studies and discussion on the face covering. It tries to look at the rampant use of the face covering in public places from an anthropological perspective. Furthermore, the current situation, insinuates that masks and their multiple forms including the face covering are still a very important topic in the fields of anthropology, semiotic, postmodernism and postcolonial studies.

Some of the mythology of face covering are related to linked security seasons and people`s uneasiness with those who are fully covering their faces. However, COVID-19 and the

precautionary measures taken by all countries to combat the virus may topple down the aforementioned claim. More significantly, COVID-19 has brought unprecedented thing on the French territory. This was the case of the face mask and fashion. No doubt that this gesture will lead some people to remember the politics of the full face veil in France in 2011. So, the very piece of cloth that caused so much debates and more importantly was fused with many connotations is no longer a problem on French territory due to the coronavirus outbreak. The full face covering that once was not welcome has now entered the fashion shows as one can see through the below picture:

Figure 1: Models were seen wearing facemasks at Marine Serre`s Paris Fashion week show. This shot has evoked a lot of debate and led many people to link it with the full face veil that was banned in 2011 in the name of French secular values and the equality of men and women. However, it`s not used here as a counter discourse, rather it`s used to reveal the richness and multiplicity of the face covering. It is taken from Leighton-Dore Samuel`s article, 2020.

Anyone who is familiar with the French debate on the face covering and later on the ban on all sorts of face veils will be troubled by the above picture. This emanates from the fact that there is no difference between the above veiled women and the niqabi women who were banned in 2011. This trending of the face masks at Paris Fashion Week may lead some to argue that there is a double standard discourse when it comes to French politicians and their debates on what people should wear in public. Additionally, the above picture will surely ignite a lot of debate since it may

evoke the idea of French leaders` hypocrisy and the restrictions they imposed on the niqabi women in the name of the secular values. What needs to be accentuated is the fact that COVID-19 has reduced French leaders` obsession with face covering and more importantly it will reduce the trauma caused by French discourse on face covering in 2011.

Apparently, the meaning and the underlying assumptions associated with the face coving— such as the face covering is objectively offensive and a security threat—have been debunked by the above picture. From an anthropological perspective, COVID-19 helped us rethink not only the functions of masks, but also how masks and ideas associated with them change overtime. Additionally, COVID-19 will urge people to look very seriously at some of the stereotypes linked with the face covering which in most cases are based on some orientalists' discourses. The notion of vilification in relation to the dress code as we have seen in the French debate on the face covering can no longer hold these days.

Surprisingly, the above picture did not receive the attention that the face covering received particularly by Western media. For instance, *Le Figaro* and *Le Point* which used to give much of their coverage to the French bans on the face covering are now very silent and none of them discussed the trending of facemasks in Paris Fashion Week at Marine Serre. It`s clear now that these newspapers are more interested in the idea of preserving the secular values at the expense of the individuals' liberty and freedom. Nevertheless, the silence of the French media in relation to the trending of the facemasks is an evidence that their excessive portrayals of the full face veil in 2011 had much to do with the French mainstream political discourse during that time.

Clearly, the rampant presence of the face covering during the coronavirus outbreak will lead to new ways of looking at masks/face covering and their intended meanings. The idea that face covering is a security threat is overlooked since the facemasks have entered the fashion shows and trending. Thus, what could be learned from COVID-19 is that the face covering remains a multilayered signifier. It can be used and misused depending on the context. In last two decades, the face covering was not welcome in most of the public spaces due to many mythologies. However, it becomes now an integral part of people`s daily life to combat the coronavirus. The blueprint of the entire discussion is the fact that face covering is no longer a security threat during the coronavirus pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Finally, what could be learned from COVID-19 is that masks and face covering in general continue to be part of everyday society. But, its meaning and the way it is seen and interpreted, depends solely on the context where it is used. For example, it was seen as a source of fear, security concern and inequality a decade ago in some European countries. But, during the coronavirus pandemic the face covering is used to combat the fear of contracting the virus and as a precautionary measure in public places where it was banned a decade ago. Thus, the fact that the face covering is not compatible with the secular values has been challenged by the unprecedented use of the face masks during the coronavirus outbreak.

Significantly, COVID-19 and excessive use of the facemasks will surely urge policy makers to rethink the concept of public and private spaces and individuals` freedom to wear. For example, French ban on the face covering in 2011 is now being questioned by the trending of face covering in French weekly fashion shows. This latter may deconstruct some of the main discourses on face covering which in most cases are hostile to those who prefer to wear the face covering such as the case of the niqabi women who were deprived of wearing full face veil in public places.

As it has been stated earlier, the aim of this paper is not to offer a counter discourse to the debate on face covering that took place in most of European countries, rather to celebrate and accentuate the importance of the face covering as well as its different functions. More importantly, the masks or face covering in general remain a very important security instrument in face of COVID-19. Furthermore, the current situation, insinuates that masks and their multiple forms including the face covering are still a very important area of research in the fields of anthropology, semiotic and postmodern studies. Apparently, the face covering can be used, misused or even abused depending on the contexts and how people see it in a particular geography, time and space.

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