



## **”I Have Never Seen A Girl Wearing A Muslim Headscarf On Television Without It Being About The Scarf...” A conversation with Rikke Andreassen**

by Ellen Nyman

I am at an art exhibition in Germany, watching an educational film on how to use a condom for protection against AIDS. The film is from South Africa. One of the women at the lesson giggles and smiles shyly, as she pulls a condom over a wooden phallus. Her friends are in stitches and the situation exudes lust and powerlessness. I am watching the film, surrounded by happy German art lovers. But they are no longer looking at the film. They are looking at me with well-meaning expressions on their faces. Their gaze is asking me whether I even know how to use a condom. I leave the room in anger – over seeing a condom lesson from Africa at an art museum for white people? Even the best intentions for using an educational film at an art exhibition are completely overshadowed by the prejudice that Africans cannot produce art. Or if they can, their internalization of Western assistance projects is apparently so deep that they cannot even figure out that they have produced an educational film. One might also ask oneself whether the head of museum has thought about the effect of presenting an African condom lesson at a German art museum for a Western audience. Here, the context of the film acquires a crucial significance for the way it is viewed. This problem is significantly more widespread within the mainstream media. Journalism dealing with the so-called third world or ethnic minorities in Europe can often tend to have a presentational character and, in this way, appear to be some sort of ambassador for the group in question. Where the specific topic dealt with is presented as a cultural trait representing a group or a nation. If the information is limited or clichéd and unnuanced, the general attitude about them becomes the same. Every day, the Western media project images of, for example, women from the so-called Third World as passive, helpless, illiterate, deeply religious, circumcized, unable to act and homogeneous. It is a general belief that these people are not proactive. This prejudice is consistent with the old racial view that “Africa is sleeping;” the continent suffers from “African sleeping sickness.”

*Rikke: I have analysed television news for the past 30 years. Television news is the primary source of information for Danes and is, consequently, very important. There, the Muslim headscarf is construed as the ultimate symbol of oppression. And it is used all the time to illustrate immigrants/refugees visually.*

*Ellen: I very rarely see a girl wearing a headscarf on television unless she is talking about the headscarf. It is very rare, for example, that she is invited to discuss the greenhouse effect or anything else; but they often invite girls wearing headscarves to discuss the headscarf. As I see it, her entire identity in the media consists of the fact that she wears headscarf.*

*Rikke: I would go even further and say that I don't think I've ever seen a girl with a Muslim headscarf on television without it being about the headscarf.*

*Ellen: I haven't, either.*

*Rikke: It is not even something that happens rarely. It doesn't happen. Her function is to be a contrast to us. Her function is to be the binary opposition to Danish white women. Every time you see a woman in a headscarf – and you can see how oppressed she is, because the myth says uniformly that it is Allah who forces her to wear a headscarf – then you have the contrast with Danish women, who are so liberated. If we hadn't been watching the Muslim girl in a headscarf for 30 years on the television news, we might have started thinking about our own situation.*



### **Knowledge is the most important tool against prejudice...**

One incest story does not make all Danish men into potential paedophiles, because our knowledge of them is as widespread and nuanced as it is. A news story about gang rape committed by men of foreign descent may well be a true news story. However, when all the papers write about that and that alone, a false image about men of foreign descent is formed in the media. A media image for which no one takes responsibility.

*Rikke: Only 20% of the Danish population speaks to immigrants/refugees even once a week. Which is to say that the absolute majority do not know any visible minorities and that is what makes the media seem so strong.*

A general shift of any proportion is a populist action based on viewer numbers. People usually talk about the press as the fourth estate, whose job is to keep an eye on the others – the legislative, executive and judicial. Every day, however, the need grows for some arbiter to keep an eye on the media.

*Rikke: ...that is why you can't ignore these media images. It may be that the media claim that they are just showing reality and that they do not make up the stories – nor do they – but it doesn't help, when it is the only reality people see. There is an exchange between society and the media. The media portray society, but they also help create society.*

In her book *Dark magic in the white media*, media researcher Ylva Brune reflects on a new kind of conscious journalism as a possible way out of the problem. For example, the way many journalists deal with and treat a subject is incredibly uniform. It is as if the news is produced according to fixed production schemes and predetermined forms of narrative. A critical consciousness and discussion of these schemes and such homogenous communication should open up new patterns and, thus, new perspectives as well. She continues with a discussion of consequence neutrality. For example, must the media report negative stories/truths about immigrants, even if they prop up racism? To this, Ylva Brune responds that “of course there are many negative truths about immigrants – for example overrepresentation in criminal statistics. However, this overrepresentation is not even close to the media’s overrepresentation of criminal immigrants.” As a sort of consequence-neutral apology for once again bringing up the subject, “immigrant boys” are often ascribed the role of victim, since they are socially marginalized. Nor can “immigrant girls”, who appear significantly less in the press, all be cultural victims of a repressive family.

*Rikke: There are a lot of television programmes about the violence to which visible minority women are exposed. This violence is, “of course,” due to their culture, because it is a violent culture. They base these programmes on “experts” – who are, as a rule, white, middle-class, middle-aged men – and who are experts in the situation affecting these abused women. The women can't even be used as experts on their own situation. They become presented in such a way that they only appear as passive victims.*

In her research on Somalians in Sweden and their view of female circumcision, anthropologist Sara Jonsdotter has created a concept for this sort of problem. She calls it political exploitation, when official society – i.e. politicians, experts, journalists and bureaucrats – takes on the responsibility for conducting the ethnic debate in society without including the relevant ethnic groups. Often there is no way a particular minority can defend itself against the claims being made. Because of their tenuous presence in the country, they often do not hold high positions in the social structure from which they can participate in the debate on an equal footing. Moreover, she believes that the huge distinction between the internal debate and the public debate hinders integration.

*Ellen: But who is responsible for cultural mediation? The positive message that is supposed to bring nuance to our images of different cultures, increase our knowledge and forge connections? As long as I do not know about or anyone from Chechnya, Kurdistan, Georgia, Somalia... then my only source of information is the news. The responsibility lies with us all.*



### **“I do not want to be part of the governing norm!”**

In a book called *The Children of Diversity Seek Their Place* by Knocke and Hertzberg, ethnologist Fredrik Hertzberg stresses the relevance of calling attention to discriminatory mechanisms in society. What he means is a sort of “superior/inferior relationship” in an ethnic designation, whereby Danishness is contrasted with a conception of non-Danishness as something deviant. Discrimination must be seen as an expression of a system based upon an unequal power relationship. A sort of hierarchy of values which, despite laws and diversity, still sorts people out by origin, determining their place in the social space.

Ellen: *Is it the same thing to say I am a “homo” as to say, for example, I’m a “Paki”? Saying I am a “homo” is a particular definition of one kind of sexuality in relation to another. But saying I am an immigrant says nothing about one’s ethnicity. It simply means that one is not an ethnic Dane.*

Rikke: *Saying I am a homo also says I am not a part of the existing norm! I’ll try to redefine it by saying: I don’t want to be part of the governing norm! Choosing to live as a lesbian is not merely a question of sexuality. It is actually a political action, opting out of hetero-normalcy!*

Negative labeling gets its arguments from anything that can serve an intent to exclude, such as gender, hair color, skin color, name, residential area, clothing style, accent. The upgrading of the phrase immigrants and their children demonstrates the clear negative association coupled with it. To label someone as an “immigrant” or a “Paki” calls for a counter-reaction, if its ultimate consequence leads to “Danishness” being actively denied in favor of an exclusive identification with one’s ethnic origin or “Immigrant Denmark.” This may be the beginning of a more articulate strategy of resistance analogous to the political slogan of African Americans: “Black is beautiful.” Paradoxically, this may also be an expression of the fact that external categorization has been internalized in one’s self-image. Another strategy may be, for example, commuting between Denmark and one’s land of origin. (Jenkins 1994)

Ellen: *Once, a Dutch lady sat next to me on a plane. She asked me where I came from. I answered that I came from Sweden/Denmark. A little later, an African man, who sat on my other side, asked: “Me, man, I’m from Kenya. Where you from, sister?” I replied: “Me, brother, me African too, Eritrea Eritrea!” Disappointed, the Dutch woman asked me, why I had suddenly become an African, when to her I was “only” Swedish and Danish. I told her that I am Swedish, Danish, Eritrean, and I decide for myself what I am and when.*

Rikke: *It’s also about subject/object, because there is a difference in saying “I am Danish” in order thereby to constitute yourself as a subject, which you also do when you represent yourself as a Swede or Eritrean. You don’t, when you say, “I am an immigrant.”*

### **When can a girl with a Muslim background become Prime Minister of Denmark?**

Most so-called minority struggles achieve their results through good intentions, courage, changes in the law, quotas and affirmative action. But what happens then? What has to happen to achieve equality? When can a girl with a Muslim background become Prime Minister of Denmark? We do not want our minorities to be second-tier citizens in society. But what has to happen in order for a comprehensive subjectivization to become effective?

Ellen: *In a formal sense, everyone is equal before the law; but, in practice, there is structural discrimination. There is nothing to prevent a woman from becoming Prime Minister, but there are only about four in the world. We all live with that norm and anything else would be strange, even for minorities. Even women view the notion of female leaders as awkward.*

Rikke: *Race and gender are not constituted separately in a vacuum. They mutually influence each other. You are seen in one way as a woman and white, and in another way as a woman and black, and in a third way as a woman and Arab, and so on.*



In Norway and Sweden, patience is about to run out, and this leads to vigorous debates on quotas in areas such as child leave, leadership posts in business and institutions of higher learning. And possible quotas for immigrants are discussed in terms of secondary schools and employment criteria for the labor market in general.

*Ellen: But the quota debate creates an ambivalence for many. Both when you shake up normative habits and when you nail down social constructivism in the predominant constructions upon which one bases one's rights.*

*Rikke: As long as a fixed, defined group contains a lot of people, it is relatively easy to win rights – for example, we homosexuals are 10% of the population, we must have some rights. That is easier than if you say that sexuality is a construction and there are no fixed identities. Then, it is more difficult to win rights as fluid individuals than as a substantive group. But even though we experience identities as fixed cores, this does not mean that we all should not have the same rights.*

Whether the Scandinavian countries ever will or can become particular enclaves I have difficulty believing; but it is a necessity for minorities as well as for majorities to learn to identify themselves with something other than the norm and its view of the world. I think that it is a struggle for the norm as well as for minorities to restructure and view oneself and one's situation as fluid. Intelligent affirmative action may be exemplified by a picture from Stockholm's Gay Pride Parade, which is the only occasion, in which police have permission to wear uniforms off-duty during the parade.

Ylva Brune; *Mörk magi i vita medier*, Carlssons förlag 2001

R. Jenkins; *Rethinking ethnicity: identity, categorization and power*. Vol.17, no. 2. 1994

Wuokko Knocke, Fredrik Hertzberg; *Mångfaldens barn söker sin plats*, Svartvitts förlag 2000