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Gender, Diversity and Ethnocentrism in Europe

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Ethnocentrist prejudice continues to encumber Western feminist discourse. Ethnocentrism is founded on the primacy of difference and implies domination. The latter provides a set of facts, data and presuppositions that shape political constructions and influences our way of thinking and our relations. Ethnocentrism reproduces binary and regulatory thinking that has marked Orientalism, it essentializes the differences between us/them, emancipated women/oppressed women, it rejects hybridity, and considers the difference as a deviation from the norm, and contributes to historical invisibilization and victimization of non-Western women.

The border between ethnocentrism and Orientalism is porous, as was illustrated in the way in which the question of the Islamic headscarf was handled in Europe, especially in France, by hegemonist feminists, intellectuals and public authorities. This binary neo-Orientalist thinking collapses cultural differences and practices into a simple dichotomy of a universal category of 'otherness.' Ethnocentrist presuppositions with regard to non-Western cultures (Western superiority, Eastern inferiority) have been used to advance a Western feminist project that aims to transform Western society, while preserving its institutions and ideologies. The Western feminist condemnation of the Islamic headscarf, regardless of whether it was imposed on women by their male relatives or was voluntarily worn by the women themselves, also assumes a homogeneity within the Islamic community with all Muslim women being similarly positioned. This perspective leads to condemning Islam and Muslim societies as patriarchal oppressors, and contributes to racist 'othering.'

Therefore, it is not surprising that thirty years after Edward Said's "Orientalism" the same racist stereotypes and clichés about Muslims and Arabs still predominate in Western mass culture. Stuart Schaar declares that his students at Brooklyn College over a period of nearly forty years continued to call Arabs 'towel heads', 'camel jockeys', and 'oversexed'.

“Negative popular stereotypes have remained strong and public policy remains influenced by these mass images” (18).

I. Exclusion of Muslim Women from Feminist Theorizing

Paradigmatic changes that have occurred in Western feminist theories since the 1970s have allowed a revisit to the myth of women’s universal condition. The questioning of white, Western middle class feminism and its meta-narratives, however, have come from the outside.

As Stuart Hall argues, new subjects, new genres, new ethnicities, new regions and new communities, that used to be excluded because they were subaltern or because they did not belong to the center, have emerged or have obtained, through their own struggles, the means to speak for themselves for the first time. In Western societies, the discourse of power and the discourse of dominant regimes have been threatened by the mounting of marginal and local cultures (Hall 183).

Indeed, non-Western women, who have gained access to representation in the postcolonial era, have questioned the universality of Western white middle class feminisms and their meta-narratives. As a response, Western feminist teaching has added issues relevant to non-white, non-Western women as variables to analyze without re-conceptualizing the whole white middle class knowledge. For Chandra Mohanty and Jacqui Alexander, this token inclusion means that non-white and non-Western middle class theories are plausible only in relation to their specific experiences with no use value in relation to the Western world (Mohanty and Alexander xvii).

A link can be established between the position of power held by white women in gender and feminist studies, the subject of their theorizing, and the kinds of analytic tools they deploy (Mohanty and Alexander xvi). The number of specialists from subaltern ethnic social groups, who have had access to academic positions remains very low, and minority and marginal voices and discourses are still largely concealed in gender and feminist studies in Europe.

The mounting of Islamist movements from the 1980s onward, the September 11, 2001 tragedy and the Islamophobia that followed, further marginalized the voices of Muslim women in both Western and Muslim

societies. This context has imposed a double oppression on Muslim women. On the one hand, as Ayesha Imam argues, radical Islamists impose important limitations on Muslim women's freedom and rights. On the other hand, gendered Islamophobia has been accentuated and has revitalized Orientalist tropes and representations of Muslim women as individuals who are backward, oppressed, victims of patriarchy, devoid of political maturity and who need to be liberated either by imperialist interventions (like in Afghanistan) or by Western feminists (as illustrated in the question of the Islamic headscarf in France).

II. Orientalist Feminism Past and Present

In this context, Orientalist feminism has had an important impact and popular appeal in North America and Europe. "Orientalist feminism is popularized through novels and films, and it has become a 'boom industry' that has created huge problems for Muslims. 'True' accounts, such as the book and movie 'Not without My Daughter', helped to incite racist, anti-Muslim and anti-Iranian feelings across Europe and North America. In the aftermath of 11 September, this genre has gathered a new momentum" (Bahramitash 229).

The dominant discourse within gender and feminist studies still refuses to conceptualize the power of Muslim women and to confer on them the status of social and political agency. Like colonial feminism, that gave itself the mission to rescue 'oppressed sisters' in India, Egypt or Algeria, neo-Orientalist feminism has made the question of Muslim women one of the major stakes of the 'civilizing mission' and of assimilationist policies as Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda argue. According to Marnia Lazreg: "The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive [Muslim] women of self-presence, of being" (87).

In the words of Aihwa Ong, "the 'othering' process, characteristic of colonial discourse, resurfaces in Western feminism producing epistemological and political gaps between us feminists and them 'oppressed women'. For feminists looking overseas, the non-feminist 'other' is not so much patriarchy as the non-Western woman...Feminist scholars have a tendency to proceed by reversal: non-Western women are what we are not. These tendencies situate non-Western women in a subordinate position

within feminist theoretical and textual productions. These self-validating exercises affirm our feminist subjectivity while denying those of non-Western women (Ong 80-81; Schick 370-71). Ong further demonstrates that such Eurocentric attitudes are colonizing and deny women living in different societies their own realities, their own experiences in the construction of gender and sexuality, and the right to determine the meanings and goals of their own lives.

Colonial discourses attempted to stabilize the hierarchal social order and natural stability of gender categories. Racist, colonialistic, unexamined, stereotypical images of Muslim women depicted them as eternal victims, prisoners of the harem, characterized by enforced confinement, under-education, ignorance, passivity, inactivity and powerlessness. Orientalism is an ideology of colonization and makes use of male dominant discourse. "As male dominant discourse, it serves to reproduce the skewed gender relations which it exploits. Thus, in power relations among nations and power relations between the sexes inheres a kind of dialectic that ought to imply a feminist agenda: the critique of the eroticization of colonialism is also part and parcel of the struggle against sexism in the societies where these ideologies originate" (Schick 349).

Orientalism is constructed on the dichotomy between the self (with positive values) and identified with rationality, equality, or liberty, and the other (or everything that the self does not accept) who is identified with irrationality, licentiousness, and exoticism. Orientalist mechanisms are at work, which consist of qualifying as Oriental/Islamic all negative aspects of Western culture and evacuating them as such. As Joyce Zonana has demonstrated (599-600), Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Vindication of the Rights of Women', the founding text of Western liberal feminism (first published in 1792), associates the Orient with despotism and tyranny implying that patriarchy was an Eastern element to be purged from the West. Written by a thinker in line with the philosophers of enlightenment, 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' is, akin to Montesquieu's 'Lettre persane', full of images that identify power abuse within the East (especially the Muslim Orient). Wollstonecraft also applies the label 'Oriental' to every aspect of women's treatment in Europe that she finds objectionable. "She finds that European women's 'limbs and faculties' are 'cramped with worse than Chinese bands' (Wollstonecraft 128), Western women are educated in 'worse than Egyptian bondage' (Wollstonecraft 221); their masters are 'worse than Egyptian

taskmasters' (Wollstonecraft 319). However, as Zonana argues, it is Mahometanism and the Mahometan institution of the seraglio or harem that Wollstonecraft singles out as the grand type for all oppression of women. She accuses any Western writer that treats women as a subordinate being of writing 'in the true style of Mahometanism' (Zonana 600). The feminism of Wollstonecraft's 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' ultimately pleads that the West rid itself of its Oriental ways, becoming more Western; that is more rational, enlightened, and reasonable. In her book, Wollstonecraft emphasized three aspects of the Eastern treatment of women to which feminist writers return: "The central belief that women do not have souls, which justifies and explains the other practices; the excessive sexuality of the harem, embodied partly in polygamy but also in luxury, indolence, and the trade in women; the enforced confinement, undereducation, and inactivity of women in the harem that reduces them to animals or children" (Zonana 602).

In Western Orientalist writing and art, the harem was generally depicted as a space in which listless uneducated women sat passively awaiting their chance to meet their master's sexual needs, punctuated only by murderous rivalries between themselves or by untold female perversions (Lewis and Micklewright 17). In "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem?", Leila Ahmed writes that "the only relatively early writer to cast doubt on the common assumption of the oppression of Muslim women and to counter notions of their licentiousness was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who accompanied her English ambassador husband to Turkey in 1716. While in Turkey, she had free access to women and to harems and she took the trouble to check out her facts. She points out to her readers that wealthy Muslim women owned and controlled their properties even when married. They were thus much better placed and had less to fear from their husbands than their sisters in the Christian world. She also pointed out that the notion 'commonly believed in our parts of the world', that women had no souls was a myth. In Muslim belief, women did have souls and were indeed promised paradise ..." (Ahmed 525).

As for Orientalist photographers, they used the images of Middle Eastern women sometimes as sex objects and sometimes as a metaphor for

1. Including, as we saw, by Mary Wollstonecraft.

the 'Orient'. As Sarah Graham-Brown shows, Orientalist photographs of women served to define otherness, to express Western men's sexual fantasies in socially acceptable, in so far as they are remote and hence unthreatening, ways; and to justify colonialism by conjuring the backwardness and depravity, the timelessness and availability, of the Middle Easterners. The Muslim East has been used by feminist Orientalists as a means for criticism of the West itself. "Feminist Orientalism is a rhetorical strategy (and a form of thought) by which a speaker or writer neutralizes the threat inherent in feminist demands and makes them palatable to an audience that wishes to affirm its Occidental superiority. If the lives of women in England or France or the US can be compared to the lives of women in 'Arabia', then the Western feminist desire to change the status quo can be represented not as a radical attempt to restructure the West but as a conservative effort to make the West more like itself" (Zonana 594).

III. First Wave Feminists' Depiction of the Muslim East

First wave Western feminists accepted key elements of the West's Orientalist legacy—namely the unquestioned belief in the superiority of Western ways. As Charlotte Weber demonstrates, membership patterns within the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (1912-50) ultimately reproduced the global relations of dominance between imperialist and colonized countries. Moreover, European and American women filled most of the organization's leadership positions. As Weber demonstrated, between 1912 and 1950 its journal *Jus Suffragii* published 27 pieces that made reference to the Middle East, often full of Orientalist clichés, about the laziness and ignorance of harem women. The International Alliance of Women continued to uphold the example of Western feminist movements as the archetypal expression of feminism. The growing regularity with which Muslim women were described as 'ignorant' or 'tradition-bound' suggests that as Western women attained more of their own feminist objectives (beginning with suffrage) 'the East' came to appear increasingly backward (Weber 182). These Western feminists who adhered to the package picture's view of cultural contexts as homogeneous, undermined historical variations, ongoing changes in cultural practices and the political negotiations that helped to change the meanings and significances of

practices (Narayan 1086). They thus replaced gender essentialist analysis with culturally essentialist analysis and believed that Muslim women's liberation could be achieved only by abandoning indigenous ways.

The issue was also being discussed by Muslim women themselves. Some Westernized Egyptian feminists from upper class backgrounds, such as Huda Shaarawi, removed their face veil in 1923 and later also their head veil while other Egyptian feminists sought an Islamic route to emancipation and, like middle class Malak Hifni Nasif, retained the veil to differentiate themselves from Westernized feminists like Shaarawi (El Guindi). In addition to her advocacy for women's access to education, health and professions, Malak Hifni Nasif participated actively in the movement to increase the minimum age of marriage for girls. It is noteworthy to mention that it was a Muslim deputy who introduced a bill into the legislative assembly in 1914 attempting to raise the minimum age of marriage for girls to sixteen but failed (Baron 163).

Likewise in Iran at the turn of the twentieth century, the condition of women served to define the demarcation between the 'civilized' world of Europe and the 'barbarian world' of Islam. The idea of nation carried by secular modernists was permeated with an Orientalist influence and articulated in gendered terms. The reconfiguration of family life as the building block of the modern nation became a condition of achieving modernity. Modernists, whose project was focused on law, science and progress, aimed to transform the home by educating women, bringing them into public life and recreated them as companionate wives of the nation's men. They considered the Islamic veil as the major impediment toward women's access to the public sphere and to civilization that is Europeanization (Kian 2004b, 386). However, their aim was not to question gender inequalities but to facilitate regulated access of women to the public sphere in order to sustain patriarchal authority within the family. The issue was openly discussed by women's rights advocates. Some argued that the interdiction of the veil was the first necessary step toward women's participation in education, work and progress, others thought that the Islamic veil was not the cause of women's inferior position and that Islam was not incompatible with women's rights (Kian 2007, 203).

Western feminists, however, never considered that feminism in the Middle East might take an alternate route, using Islam as its guide. As Chandra Mohanty argued "In the context of a first/third world balance of

power, feminist analyses which perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West produce a corresponding set of universal images of the 'third world woman', images like the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife. These images exist in universal, a historical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing world connections" (Mohanty 352).

In the colonialist era, Western feminists used assumptions about the Orient in order to further their own agenda. This feminist Orientalism is reflected in Western feminist writings that often treated Islam as an ideology separate from and outside social relations and practices. Feminist Orientalists viewed Muslim women as lower on a scale of human development and in need of salvation by their Western feminist sisters.

As Leila Ahmed argued "Although Western feminists have succeeded in rejecting their culture's myths about (Western) women and their innate inferiority and irrationality, they continue to subscribe to and perpetuate those myths about Muslims, including about Muslim women, and about harems, as well as to assume superiority towards the women within them" (526).

For Western feminists, whose goal was to attain formal equality, women's participation in public life was seen as the prerequisite condition of their emancipation. They thus assessed women's status in non-Western countries by the supposition that the degree of women's oppression mirrored the degree of their seclusion from the public sphere. In this context they qualified the veil as the instrument of women's seclusion and segregation, and the quintessential symbol of women's subordinate status.

Western feminists assessed women's power and authority on the basis of their access to the public sphere. They thus overlooked the degree of social influence Muslim women actually possessed, and also did not pay attention to how Muslim women interpreted their own status and needs. Contrary to the assumption of Western feminists that depicted Oriental women as prisoners of the harem, Middle Eastern women were present in the public realm. As Judith Tucker argued, in Egypt for example, the economic agency of lower class urban women was supported by local and informal networks which weakened following the centralizing integration of the Egyptian economy into the European market (64).

The social practices of religious observance also brought women into

contact with each other and provided a mechanism for creating and fostering personal and political alliances. Women exercised political and social agency within a segregated realm that was related to the whole of society. Women's presence outside of the home had also been achieved by charitable donations, (building fountains, founding religious schools, bath houses, etc.) that bore their name and was another method by which women's identities entered the public domain (Lewis and Micklewright 20).

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Western feminists gave primary emphasis to the abolition of the veil. In 1947, International Alliance of Women president Hanna Rydh maintained: "The veil is no mere fashion, it is a wall which materially and spiritually is debarring its bearer from the developing intercourse and opportunity to co-operation with the men in a world crying for co-operation" (Weber 142). The Western feminists' insistence that Muslim women needed to be 'freed from' their veils and their oppressors (their own fathers, sons, husbands) perpetuated the discourse of colonialism. As Leila Ahmed argues Western feminists were embedded in the service of colonialism at the very same time as colonialists combated feminism within its own society (153).

In the post-colonial era the Islamic veil has substituted the harem as a metaphor. The mechanisms of domination are reinvented with the complicity of many western feminists and at best the indifference of others as illustrated in the Afghan case. The western media depicted Afghan women as 'pregnant', 'fleeing', 'starving' and 'widowed', thus reducing Afghan women to the "sum of their most desperate parts" (Peters 122).

Many American feminists, including 'The Feminist Majority Foundation', some Canadian and European feminists supported the American invasion of Afghanistan on the grounds that it protected Afghan women's rights and liberated Afghan women. "Images of burqa-clad Afghan women represented as victims of 'barbaric', unshaven, cave dwelling fundamentalists' dominated the media and provided the basis for the Bush administration's rhetoric that this war would liberate Afghan women. A similar pattern emerged in Iraq as gendered and racialized representations of the war were used to convince Americans that the invasion of Iraq would liberate the Iraqi people from a brutal and misogynist dictator. This engendering of the war not only constructs the 'victimized women to be rescued', but also their 'hyper-masculine rescuers' and 'cowardly oppressors'" (Hunt and Rygiel 9).

The static and essentialist construction of Muslim women as the oppressed other that had been used by colonial powers to justify colonial conquest thus became a powerful instrument in the ideological war that aimed to obtain the consensus of the Western public opinion (including feminists) to wage war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

IV. The Headscarf Affair in France and the Revitalization of Orientalist Tropes

The current dominant discourse on the headscarf reveals similarities with the colonial narrative of the late Nineteenth century that pointed to the veil as the symbol of inferiority of Muslim culture and a threat to Western cultural values. It is therefore important to uncover the genealogy of current discriminations against veiled Muslim women in Western countries.

In the past two decades, the appearance of veiled women in Europe and the United States, who use the veil as a means to enter the public sphere, came to be considered an abnormal phenomenon. In proclaiming Islam to be monstrously oppressive of women, as evidenced by the veil, colonialist men had used the language of feminism to justify their imperialism. Lord Cromer, the British General Consul in Egypt from 1883 to 1907 was persuaded of the inferiority of Islam and Muslim societies or what he called the “spirit of the Oriental”. He condemned vehemently the way in which Islam treated women and declared that the veil and women’s seclusion were fatal obstacles toward the access of Egyptians to Western civilization. Cromer further argued that Egyptians should be persuaded or forced to become civilized by abandoning the veil. This same Cromer, however, did everything he could to prevent Egyptian women from access to schools and when he returned to Great Britain, he founded the ‘Men’s League’ to oppose the grant of voting rights to British women (Ahmed 1992, 152-53).

Many Western feminists, for whom the veil is a symbol of tradition holding Muslim women back, refuse to see the Islamic veil as a free choice that can also be used as a symbolic rejection of ethnocentric gender ideologies and as a means to emancipation for women. Through voluntary veiling, these young women living in non-Muslim societies externalize their identity as a visible discourse and attempt simultaneously to empower

themselves in order to refuse arranged marriages, continue to study or participate in public life. Some Muslim women have thus used the veil as a means to introduce change in power relations. Some others, who are involved in a project of moral cultivation, adopt the veil to be close to God.

V. The Headscarf Affair: an Overview

In 1989 the presence of three veiled students (two Moroccans and one Tunisian) in a high school in Creil, north of Paris, created a national debate. Some universalist feminists and intellectuals such as Elisabeth Badinter published a letter demanding that the headscarf be banned on the ground that it is an instrument of male domination and that it is a threat to the Republican school system.² Following Krista Hunt, we can consider the feminism of these intellectuals ‘embedded feminism’ as the incorporation of feminist discourse and feminist activists into political projects that claim to serve the interest of women but ultimately subordinate and/or subvert that goal.

In France, this embedded feminism that is universalist and secularist advocates political nationalism founded on the idea of moral superiority of national identity. This nationalism constructs an ‘ethnic other’, i.e. the Muslim community, in order to offer a pretense of neutrality, universality and inclusion. On the other hand, by qualifying Islam as oppressive and patriarchal, this feminism contributes to the construction of a naturalized cultural difference and a racist otherness.

The veiled students were expelled from the high-school for refusing to remove their headscarf, which they argued was in observance of their religion, and the headmaster of the school claimed the wearing of religious clothing was incompatible with the French concept of *laïcité*.³ As Parekh argued “The *hijab* was, in their case, a highly complex autonomous act

2. See the letter signed by Elisabeth Badinter, Régis Debray, Elisabeth de Fontenay, Alain Finkielkraut and Catherine Kintzler, in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 2 November 1989.

3. Upon appeal the Council d’Etat ruled the girls were within their rights to wear religious attire. Ultimately the decision of the Council d’Etat reinforced *laïcité* by reasserting the role of the state as an entity that will not control religion.

intended both to remain within the tradition and to challenge it ...To see it as a symbol of their subordination, as many French feminists did, is to miss the subtle dialectic of cultural contestation” (73).

The French Minister of Education argued that the role of the Republican school is to integrate not to exclude. Both the Ministry of Education and the State Council (Conseil d'Etat) left the decision to headmasters to either expel veiled students or to have them take off their veil through negotiation and persuasion. It should be noted that the context in which the question of Islamic headscarf was raised differed from the 1980s to 2004.

In the 1980s, the French authorities responded to social crises in poor suburbs, composed mainly of Muslims, through the implementation of ethnically oriented policies, especially toward the ‘Beur’ (second or third generation Maghrebi immigrants). In the 1990s, the ethnic orientation of state policies changed to become centered on the question of Islam; the second largest religion in France.⁴ French public authorities had finally realized that Muslim immigrants are settled in France forever and that their children are or will be French citizens. Moreover, the Rushdie affair and terrorist acts committed by radical Islamists in Paris, Madrid and Rome had posed the question of re-Islamization among youths and the clash of identities in Europe. As a result, when the question of the Islamic veil was publicized again in 1994, security concerns about Islamist threats had become paramount and some discourses stigmatized veiled students and warned of the infiltration of Republican institutions by Islamists. Concomitantly, however, a new reading of the veil emerged among some specialists of Islam or gender who argued that the veil was also a personal choice and a means to women’s emancipation.

VI. The Typology of Headscarf in the Changing Sociopolitical Context

In their pioneering work, Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar distinguished three types of veil: the traditional veil of Muslim women

4. The number of Muslims in France is estimated at 4 to 5 million.

migrants, the compulsory veil imposed on young women by, in particular, the male members of their family, and the veil that women claim. More recent research shows that the reasons leading women to wear the headscarf have been diversified in conjunction with other factors, and that identities are increasingly fragmented.

Some young women who live in 'Muslim majority' suburbs wear the headscarf in order to gain respect in their neighborhood while other women adopt the veil to mark their return to Islamic 'national' traditions (following their Moroccan, Egyptian, Tunisian counterparts). They become members of Islamic associations in their neighborhoods, learn Arabic in order to read the Quran, refuse mixed marriages with non-Muslims and prefer to marry a Muslim man from their parent's country of origin. An increasing number of young women point to the spiritual dimension of Islam and explain their decision to wear the headscarf as a means to come closer to God and to the Prophet of Islam. According to these women, "the headscarf is the symbol of their belonging to the Islamic faith, a symbolic border they establish between themselves and their non-practicing mothers, between themselves and other young women in poor suburbs whose 'moral degradation' they criticize (Ikkène 96). Furthermore, the headscarf became a means to emancipation for young women. Through veiling, they are empowered and can refuse forced marriage, continue to study or participate in social life. The headscarf has thus contributed to change power relations in favor of young women who use the headscarf to assert agency by taking control of their appearance (Boubekeur 147). Following Homi Bhaba, we can argue that these young women have emerged in unintended places and subvert the authority of power and knowledge and produce other spaces of subaltern significance.

In the first part of the Twenty-first century, state policies to fight 'Islamist' terrorism were accompanied by attempts to create an official, national and peaceful Islam to counter foreign Islam. The latter appeared in France and Europe in the 1980s through transnational movements especially Tablighis from Pakistan, Salafists from Saudi Arabia, Muslim Brotherhood from the Maghreb or the Middle East, and more recently Jihadists close to al Qaida. These forms of Islam compete with each other and often reproduce in Europe the various current conflicts in the Muslim world.

Although French authorities attempted to create a secular Republican

French Islam (l'islam de France), they also turned to foreign Islam to solve problems with Muslims in France. During the headscarf affair in 2003, President Nicolas Sarkozy, then Interior Minister, and the main candidate of the right for the 2007 presidential elections, went to al-Azhar seeking a religious edict from al-Tantawi (the Mufti of Egypt). The latter issued a 'fatwa' asking Muslim students in France not to wear the veil at school. However, taking a French problem to the Arab world had some consequences; one of which was the demonstrations organized in some Arab countries against the French law banning the veil at school.

In 2003-04 the veil also appeared in the workplace, hospitals, courts, etc. It is no longer limited to high-school students but has expanded to informed, adult, working women. Moreover, some young women who wear the veil are not from Muslim origins. They are new converts. This is the much publicized case of two sisters, Alma and Lila Lévy who were finally expelled from a high-school in a northern Parisian suburb. This case led public authorities to realize that Islamization, which they believed was symbolized by the veil, could go far beyond women from Muslim origins. To this was added two major traumas: the September 11, 2001 tragedy and the April 2002 presidential elections in which Jean-Marie Le Pen, the candidate of the extreme right obtained almost 20% of the vote and acceded to the second round of elections. The former trauma provoked security anxieties, while the latter was analyzed as a political effect of the so called Islamization of the French Muslim immigrants and the threat it posed to French national identity. This portrayal of Muslims, however, is contradictory to the results of several polls showing that the majority of them aspire to secular and private Islam. Gendered Islamophobia targets Muslim women specifically through the construction of negative stereotypes, harassment and discrimination based on religious identity.

VII. Is the Headscarf a Threat to National Identity in France?

In the 1980s, the extreme right and a part of the right posited the impossibility for Muslim immigrants to assimilate. This essentialist-culturalist perspective is now shared by a much wider range of actors across the political spectrum. The question raised by the rightist 'Le Figaro' magazine back in the 1980s, "Will we still be French in thirty years?" has

now become a major political preoccupation. During his electoral campaign President Sarkozy declared that if he is elected he will create a ministry of immigration and national identity. Although the increasing political debate on nation and national identity, which is also related to the social and economic uncertainties about the future caused by the expansion of the European Union, is understandable, the outcome might be dangerous when and if the state dabbles in identity for it tends to essentialize notions of national culture. What is even more problematic is to equate (Muslim) immigration with the loss of French national identity.

However, is there a single definition of French national identity? Ernest Renan defined nation as the cult of ancestors, the willingness of being together, having done important things together and the willingness to continue. Pierre Nora, a prominent historian, and a member of the French Academy, however, declares dead this old nation that Renan defined. Nora argues that this view, on which we still live today, is relevant to an old national identity, the one that associated the past and the future. Nora concludes that this bond no longer exists.

National identity is not formed once and for all. The Republican identity came after feudal, monarchical and revolutionary identities. The crisis of French national identity started in the aftermath of the First World War. It was further deepened when France lost Algeria in 1962, and when some years later the state power, as a major dimension of national consciousness, was weakened. The old national identity was further weakened with the disintegration of all forms of authority: family, church, political parties, etc.

The Republican identity, secular, democratic and universalistic, is now overwhelmingly acclaimed by some intellectuals against Islamic identity. Max Gallo, a historian and leading nationalist intellectual declared: "We should affirm our values. Islam opposes its concepts to ours. It opposes tolerance to secularism. But secularism is the sovereignty of citizens and the condition of the possibility of tolerance, for a free individual is not the oppressor of others. He tolerates others and gives them the same freedom. Islam opposes equality to the notion of equity but the latter is a means to introduce inequality" (Gallo 203). The abstract, egalitarian universalism of the French Republic is increasingly criticized by intellectuals from Muslim/Maghrebi descent like the scholar Nacira Guénif.

Moreover, Gallo seems to forget that the second colonial empire in

Africa and Asia (1879-85) was established by the Republic and that the notion of 'free individual' neither applied to the colonized nor to French women. As Nora argued, "According to human rights, the history of the French nation is criminal". For Catherine Hodeir and Michel Pierre, the aim of political and military organizers of the 1931 colonial exhibition in Paris was to reinforce national sentiments and to demonstrate the living apotheosis of colonial efforts undertaken by civilized nations'. Clotilde Chivas-Baron, a fervent advocate of French colonialism was among the organizers of this colonial exhibition. Chivas-Baron was supported by influential French feminists including Marguerite Durand, the founder of the feminist journal 'La Fronde'. Clotilde Chivas-Baron promoted the idea that in order to perpetuate colonial domination French women should participate actively in colonization by migrating to French colonies in order to create settler families (ix).

Insistence on the superiority of 'Western culture' functioned as justifications for colonialism. As Uma Narayan pointed out, this self-portrait of 'Western culture' had only a faint resemblance to the political and cultural values that actually pervaded life in Western societies. Thus liberty and equality could be represented as paradigmatic Western values at the very moment when Western nations were engaged in slavery, colonization, and the denial of liberty and equality to large segments of Western subjects, including women (Narayan 1083).

It was in the context of a collective hysteria around the Muslim threat (symbolized by the Islamic headscarf) to national identity and the urgent need for its preservation that the Stasi Commission was created in July 2003, and recommended the promulgation of a law to ban the Islamic headscarf in public school. The commission stated that "In respect for freedom of conscience, and the neutral character of the institutions, behaviors and signs expressing a religious or political affiliation are prohibited in schools and high-schools. The prohibited behaviors and religious signs are open signs, such as large crosses, veils, or kippas. Discrete signs are not included, for example medals, small crosses, stars of David, hands of Fatimah, or a small Quran."

As the following statement shows, secularist intellectuals overlook the polysemy of the veil and present a totalizing perspective that is contradictory to democratic values that republican national identity is supposed to defend: "The veil demonstrates the primacy of religious law on

the law of reason that school is supposed to convey. The veil not only negates the *raison d'être* of school, it also affirms a fundamental inequality and the inferior status of women" (Gokalp 218). In the words of Françoise Gaspard "Hounding the veil has served to substitute for a true reflection on the articulation between universalism and diversity, secularism and equality, equality and struggle against discriminations" (Gaspard 74).

The Islamic headscarf was thus banned because it gave too much visibility to women who wore it and who demanded to be accepted and respected despite their cultural differences with the majority of the population. Several members of the Stasi Commission however, were not even given a chance to suggest names for the hearing.⁵ Moreover, veiled women were considered as 'alienated' and excluded as witnesses. The majority of MPs (Socialist Party, Right, Centrists) qualified the veil as a sign of fundamentalism. Only some human rights advocates, a few feminists and some leftist intellectuals went against the general unanimity that was created about the law. According to Human Rights Watch report in 2004: "Some in France have used the headscarf issue as a pretext for voicing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments. Some arguments appear to be based on the premise that all Muslims want to oppress women or that women and girls who choose to veil themselves do not understand women's rights."

During public debates, women's conditions were the main argument given by proponents of law. This feminism of principle was opposed to the feminism of responsibility. The latter argued that the exclusion of young girls from high-school would lead to their isolation, leaving them to religious oppressors and male domination. The idea was also that both compulsory veiling and unveiling exerted violence on women, and that the majority of veiled students felt deeply humiliated by forced unveiling and wore the veil as soon as they are outside the school boundaries. Christine Delphy, a prominent French feminist, thinks that the law banning the headscarf is an important regression and a profound rupture from feminist struggles of the past. She declared that "this law did not emancipate Muslim women, for emancipation can only be achieved through conquering rights not through humiliation or repression. Moreover, the law only penalizes women; no fundamentalist man was hit by this law" (Delphy 70). In fact, Islamist associations that advocate a return to traditions, reject mixed marriages, and encourage women to adopt the veil, remain active in poor

suburbs.

One year after the application of the law, 108 veiled girls were excluded from school and hundreds of others preferred to abandon school or public life. The March 2004 law has led to an urgent need for Muslim schools. Until February 2007, there was only one Muslim school in France (in Lille) with 83 students, most of whom are women. A second school was opened in March 2007 in Lyon.

With the exception of 4 Sikh boys who were expelled from school, all other victims of this law are women. Muslims, however, did not mobilize for or against the law. This lack of mobilization that also occurred during the affair of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad proves that Muslims do not constitute a community in France. The banning of the Islamic veil did not solve any problems. Some French Muslims who consider themselves part of a 'positive minority' continue to demand citizenship, freedom of expression and religious choice. The question of French national identity is not solved and the nation has become a site of confrontation between citizens who hold to an old definition of the nation and the descendants of slaves and the colonized who claim multiple identities.

Despite gendered Islamophobia, many young Muslim women, who have opted to wear the veil, demand equality. These demands that show the access of Muslim women to representation also questions the hegemonist discourse of white, middle class feminism and its meta-narratives. It suggests that there is no one single way to emancipate and no one model of emancipation to be followed by all women throughout the world. It also invites us to question our presuppositions about Islam and the veiled woman. Voluntary veiling poses the question of equality in diversity. It invites us to establish a new link between the problem of cultural diversity and that of social equality (Fraser 48).

The time has come for diversity to be recognized through a new definition of a French nation that accepts multiple national identities. As Achille Mbembe argued: "The recognition of difference is not incompatible with the principle of a democratic society... Such a recognition does not mean that the society functions without common ideas and beliefs. In fact, this recognition is a precondition for these ideas and beliefs to become really

5. Including Jean Bauberot, Alain Touraine, Gilles Kepel.

common” (Mbembe 173).

It is urgent to criticize ethnocentric feminist and intellectual paradigms that mark hegemonist currents within Western feminisms including the supporters of a liberal perspective of universalism that disregards social conditions and negates the differences under the pretext of a universal emancipatory project.

The recognition of diversity is yet to be constructed. The stake is to find a space to integrate the differences that exist among women and that operate as conflicting political forces. As Judith Butler argues, it is through complex cultural actions that we can try to come up with a universality that is not imperialistic.

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Abstract

Gendered Islamophobia has become accentuated in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 tragedy. The way in which the question of the Islamic headscarf was handled by hegemonist feminists in Europe, especially in France, reveals similarities with the colonial narratives of the late Nineteenth century that pointed to the veil as a symbol of inferiority of Islamic culture and as a threat to Western cultural values. The 'headscarf affair' demonstrates that ethnocentrist prejudice continues to encumber Western feminist discourse. Ethnocentrism, which is founded on the primacy of difference and implies domination, reproduces the binary thinking that has marked Orientalism. This paper shows that the border line between ethnocentrism and Orientalism as the ideology of colonialism is porous and that the 'othering' process, characteristic of colonial discourse, has resurfaced in Western feminism. Racist and colonialist stereotypical images of Muslim women have thus become commonplace. Like in the colonialist era, Muslim women are depicted as oppressed, eternal victims of patriarchy, characterized by enforced confinement, ignorance, passivity and powerlessness, and in need of rescue by Western feminists. This paper refutes ethnocentric assumptions that essentialize the differences between us/them, emancipated women/oppressed women, and that have contributed to historical invisibilization and victimization of non-Western women. It criticizes ethnocentric feminist and intellectual paradigms that mark hegemonist currents within Western feminism, and advocates a universality that is not imperialistic.

Keywords: colonialism, Orientalism, ethnocentrism, Orientalist feminism, Islamic headscarf, hegemonist feminism.

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