

# Veiling, Secularism and Islamism: Gender Constructions in France and Iran

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## Abstract

Dominant discourses on the veiling of Muslim women have become part of a larger Western debate on the assumed “threat of Islamic fundamentalism”.<sup>1</sup> Veiling is often invoked as an icon of traditional religious identity that represents opposition to the modern world. Ironically, the diverse positions in the Muslim world on the nature of relationships to tradition do not challenge the view of Islam as a fundamentalist entity. In the West many discussions on the “veiled woman” frequently assume, either implicitly or explicitly, that Muslim women are mute, victimised, often without personal agency, and ultimately incapable of self-definition. On the other hand, the Muslim woman who has discarded her veil, or chosen not to veil, is repeatedly depicted as a fully integrated free human being. The dichotomies – veiled/unveiled and imprisoned/free – are problematic categories that need critical re-consideration.

In this article we will explore the politicisation of the ubiquitous Muslim veil within a French and Iranian context respectively. We will examine how the prevailing political discourses in both these contexts construct particular representations and realities for Muslim women. Despite different ideological structures and contexts, both France and Iran impose laws and regulations that reduce many Muslim women's capacity for agency and self-expression in the public sphere. We identify certain parallels in how seemingly disparate cultural and national political discourses in these two contexts instrumentalise images of Muslim women for specific ideological agendas. We note how in these very different contexts, dominant discourses on veiling continue to objectify Muslim women and do not engage with Muslim women dialogically as subjects capable of agency and self-definition.

## France: Pursuing *Laïcité* or Legalizing Xenophobia?

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the veil has emerged as a highly politicised symbol, and often acts as a visible boundary marker between what characterises the West and Islam.<sup>2</sup> In many Western societies the overriding association of the veil with oppressed Muslim women has had a negative impact on understandings of Islam as a whole. Especially post- September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the view of Muslim women as both supporting an inherently violent religion, and as subordinated members of the self-same religion has increasingly gained currency in the West. In many Western contexts, the veiled Muslim woman has come to symbolise Islam's "otherness" and its irreconcilable differences from post-enlightenment Western cultures.

In France where Islam is a minority religion, the *hijab* (head-scarf) was prohibited in all public schools by law on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2004.<sup>3</sup> Along with other "obvious" religious symbols such as the Jewish kippa and "flashy" Christian crosses, the *hijab* was seen as a public symbol of strong religious commitment (Plesner, 2004: 153). Before the prohibition by law, each school could decide whether or not they wanted to ban the *hijab*. This led to heated exchanges regarding schools that prohibited the use of *hijab*. Consequently, the French government implemented a law prohibiting the wearing of "obvious" religious symbols at *all* public schools (Giddens, 2004: 127). The prohibition unleashed intense and, at times, furious debates in Europe. There were massive protests against this prohibition of the *hijab* from Muslims living in France and other parts of the world.<sup>4</sup>

The apparent reason for the prohibition of the Muslim headscarf in public schools can be found in the French principle of secularisation known as *laïcité*.<sup>5</sup> This principle signifies a separation of church and state as a prerequisite for peace and national integration. As such, maintaining religious neutrality in civil society is seen as central to French secular identity. In this context, the donning of "obvious" religious symbols are perceived as antagonistic to *laïcité*, fostering forms of diverse public religiosity that purportedly hinder national integration. Simultaneously, the French constitution clearly states that *laïcité* also incorporates the individual's right to religious freedom and the equality of all citizens regardless of origin, race or religion. The right to equal treatment despite religious conviction principally presents a challenge to the prohibition of religious symbols in public schools (Plesner, 2004: 150-160). The application of *laïcité* reveals that there are deep ambiguities in relation to the multilayered meaning of this concept. For some *laïcité* is understood as a commitment of passive neutrality and non-intervention within the private religious realm, while upholding the principle of non-discrimination in public sphere. For others *laïcité* can be understood to mean an overriding obligation to protect secularism, a fundamental assurance of the nation's sovereign independence from religious authorities. In practical terms however for some Muslim women, *laïcité* has translated into a coercive removal of *hijab* in public schools.

A Muslim woman that wears the *hijab* in France is often understood, in the public and political sphere, to strongly advocate a Muslim identity. This commitment to a religious identity is further assumed to increase the isolation of Muslims from integration into the French society (ibid: 171). Politicians in France have contended that the principle of *laïcité* is threatened since Muslims distinguish themselves from the “unified” majority (ibid: 164). The argument concerning lack of integration with respect to the increasing enclaves of Muslims is paralleled by a public discourse reflecting an underlying fear of a greater “threat” – Islamic fundamentalism. The French parliamentary speaker, Jean-Louis Debré, a member of the ruling Union for a Popular Movement Party (UMP), explicitly raised the sceptre of Islamic fundamentalism during the passage of the prohibition bill. He triumphantly stated that the prohibition reinforced that a public school “is a place for learning and not for militant activity or proselytism”.<sup>6</sup> By associating militancy to a particular type of sartorial norm among some Muslim women, the speaker in fact reveals his own prejudices. Xenophobic attitudes against Muslims appear to be as significant in the *hijab* debacle as are difficult questions on the nature of integration of a religious minority.

Various strategies pertaining to acculturation and integration have been imposed on minority communities across Europe, at times to the detriment of those groups that are ethnically and visually distinct minorities. Humayun Ansari, Professor of Islam and Cultural Diversity points out that integration and acculturation was often understood as “a process in which language, customs and institutions of the adopted country are internalised by the settler body” (Ansari, 2004: 209). However as migration to Europe from various parts of the world became more diverse from the 1960s onwards, with the influx of migrant workers, related family reunifications and increased cases of political asylum seekers, the idea of acculturation was transformed. Previous views of acculturation with assumptions of a monolithic immigrant identity were replaced by the ideas of integration and multiculturalism (Baxter, 2006: 168-69). The new approach did nevertheless allow for the majority to “retain the right to question, if not condemn, the minority’s religious and cultural practices” (ibid: 170). Consequently, as we have seen in France, and various other European countries, rules and regulations, or proposed new bills that deal with the veil/*hijab* in public space have been imposed. As such, European countries partake in different national modes of engagement, that predominantly have repercussions for Muslim minorities and the ideal of multiculturalism.<sup>7</sup>

Did France prohibit the use of *hijab* in public schools to improve integration, or did they want to assure assimilation and a uniform national identity? The French concept of integration as it relates to the *hijab* prohibition carries with it a certain authoritarian and majority-rule attitude that leads one to ask questions pertaining to public interest. What is the public interest for France in banning religious symbols? In the aftermath of 9/11 there has been a tendency

among Western nations to restrict the use of religious symbols in schools and at the workplace. Are the rules and regulations, with respect to the prohibition of *hijab*, implemented across various European countries because they are all concerned about the lack of integration? Or, is it the fear of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Europe assumed to be symbolised through Muslim women's dress? Is there a link between veiled women and Islamic fundamentalism? Is there a tacit assumption that the more veiled women in the streets, the more power to the Islamic fundamentalists?

When surveying the political debates just prior to the prohibition, it was first and foremost the *hijab* as opposed to religious symbols in general that the government wanted to ban. As such, Islamic religiosity was singled out and portrayed as a danger to French secular nationalism. In the media the *hijab* emerged as a religious symbol that restricts women's agency and self-definitions. Christian crosses and Jewish kippas did not receive the same attention. Hence the debate largely focused around how Muslim women in particular represent a sense of "otherness", and at the same time their inferiority under a misogynist religious ideology. Subsequently, the French government's discourse often assumed and depicted Muslim women as voiceless, victimised and lacking agency. The prohibition can be seen as both an attempt to "liberate" these mute Muslim women, and also to restrict the power of Islam.

The *hijab*-prohibition pertains to two separate but related issues. Firstly, the French government assumed that a prohibition would improve the situation of veiled Muslim women. Secondly, as a consequence of the unveiling, Muslim women would now participate in the community as "free" women - something that would increase social integration or assimilation, since the Muslim women now are the "same as us". All these positions were expounded by the French government without any significant or wide-ranging discussion with Muslim women. In a typical colonial manner, Muslim women's views and voices were not considered. Public discourses both in form and content reflected prejudices and patronising cultural stereotypes against Muslims.

Researchers predict that the prohibition will, in fact, lead to the formation of several Muslim private schools and thereby increase segregation (Plesner, 2004: 168-69). The coercive removal of the veil from public schools will, in all likelihood, exacerbate Muslim isolation in France. By regulating Muslim women's clothing through state policy, the French government adheres to a certain secular fundamentalism. It uses draconian means to uphold the nation's secularity when it comes to creating particular national identities of sameness that work in accordance with the dominant political ideology. In fact there are direct discursive parallels between coercive state policies of unveiling and those of enforced veiling as in Iran, which we will discuss in the next part of this paper. The coercive veiling or unveiling of Muslim women is often perceived as an attack on identity and individuality with serious consequences for possibilities of self-

representation. Coercive prohibition of *hijab* discriminates against French Muslims albeit under the political ticket of integration. As a consequence, many more Muslim women may adopt the *hijab* in public spaces as a form of political and social protest. Muslim women activists have criticised coercive unveiling and its relationship to secular Western norms. Some Muslim women's self-definitions are clearly related to religious ideology and the possibility to represent a counterculture to Western modernisation.

The *hijab*-ban created enormous attention in the French media: Michela Ardizzone investigated the debates in the daily newspaper *Le Monde*, and two weeklies *L'Express* and *Le Point*. She found that the debates were entirely articulated by men whether they were politicians, school principals, or religious leaders (Ardizzone, 2004: 634). Consequently, Muslim women's voices were not recorded in the French press as represented by these three newspapers. The principle of *laïcité* was investigated by the Stasi Commission, a commission that was established by President Chirac prior to the *hijab*-prohibition, and whose main objective was to investigate the implementation of secular values. The Stasi Commission also examined whether a law that prohibited religious symbols was required. Only one Muslim woman wearing the veil, Saida Kada, was invited to speak to the Commission - revealing the lack of broad-based and genuine consultation with Muslim women at the national decision-making level. Saida Kada stated that she thought her "presence was used as a charade" (Bauer, 2004:12).<sup>8</sup>

Muslim women's voices were vociferous when it came to protesting against the prohibition in the streets of Paris. The first demonstration in December 2003 took place before the implementation of the ban and was more than 3000 people strong. On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2004, tens of thousands of people from varying backgrounds rallied all over the world to show their opposition to the prohibition of *hijab* and other ostentatious religious symbols in public schools.<sup>9</sup> In France, signs and banners were carried proudly with slogans such as: "Reservedness is a right, the headscarf is my honor" and "[n]either fear, nor husband, the headscarf is my choice". Other Muslim women expressed: "Mr. Chirac, our headscarf is not an aggression to the Republic," and "France you are my country, *hijab* you are my life" (Wing and Smith, 2006: 765). The demonstrations pointed to the central matter of women's choices, and also on the importance of the *hijab* as a symbol of asserting an identity as both French as well as Muslim (ibid).

Against the background of the *hijab*-ban in France and parts of Germany, the international network *Assembly for the Protection of Hijab* (or *Pro-Hijab*) was established. Their vision encompasses the need to "campaign nationally and internationally for the protection of every Muslim woman's right to wear the *Hijab* in accordance with her beliefs and for the protection of every woman's right to dress as modestly and as comfortably as she pleases".<sup>10</sup> *The Assembly for the Protection of Hijab* represents an important channel for Muslim women to convey opinions and views regarding modest dress and *hijab*. Their work also includes

projects that evolve around the rejection of Western negative stereotypes of Muslim women, as well as the need to fight racial, religious or sexual discrimination.

Eurocentric assumptions around a specific racialised, national identity is threatening the idea of multiculturalism. The racial and national identity crisis in Europe is a reality. Both second- and also third-generation immigrants are still characterised as *immigrants*. This implies that not only is a “foreign” religion seen as alienating, but also race is an indicator of “otherness”. So it does not really matter if you are born and raised in a European country, neither does it matter that you speak the country’s language just as fluently as any “European”. It does not matter if you have been going through the “European” education system, been employed in a “European” company, participating in the community, or identify yourself as “European”. Real “Europeans” are actually Caucasian and will, therefore, still see you as an immigrant.<sup>11</sup> Anti-immigration political parties in Europe are continuously growing in strength. Mainstream conservatives are advocating assimilation as the main objective for a possible future coexistence (*ibid*). Angela Merkel, opposition leader in Germany stated that, “the idea of a multicultural society cannot succeed. It is prone to failure from the start. Multiculturalism is not integration” (*ibid*: 30). However, immigrants will always be seen as immigrants, no matter how assimilated or integrated they are – and veiled Muslim women symbolise an immigrant “other” most starkly in the French national imagination. However, many Muslims themselves argue that, in fact, “Islamic ideals can coexist with European values” (*ibid*: 31).

What do these developments indicate? The *hijab*-debate in France is founded on certain secular suppositions from within a particular historical trajectory. Secularisation in Europe presumes a particular form of separation of state and religion. Underlying much of the French national debates on *laïcité* and *hijab* are un-interrogated Eurocentric assumptions relating to the relationship between religion and public life, without sufficient inclusion of the realities of a growing Muslim minority. The European secularisation experience was formulated within the context of specific cultural norms and realities. With the influx of Muslim populations into Europe, the dominant French culture encounters a cultural, ethnic and religious “other”. Premised on implicit cultural and historical notions of appropriate female dress, the French government is assuming a specific form of normative “non-religious” appearance in public space. Among other things, the debate is characterised by a lack of critical scrutiny regarding the dominant cultures constructions of what precisely constitutes “religious” as opposed to cultural expression; the assumptions of what “private” and “public” faces of religion actually mean in the context of diverse religious traditions; or how French secularisation assumes Euro-centric norms for dressing and cultural identity.

The French *hijab* polemics indicate a lack of genuine respect for cultural diversity. The French public largely refuse to recognise that normative French

women's clothing is simply one form of cultural self-expression, while some Muslim women use varying forms of headscarves to reflect other cultural norms and/or religious beliefs. For instance, a French woman that wears a scarf can often be understood as *chic* by the general public, whereas a Muslim woman with a scarf is assumed to be a threat to civilisation. Implicitly the French culture of clothing is used as a cultural yardstick against which the Muslim "other" is measured. Instead of looking at these cultural particularities and varying forms of religious expression, the debate veers off into a discussion on the separation of religion and public space. In addition, such views of secularism also want to render religion invisible in the public sphere. The disparity between accepted cultural expressions in terms of clothing relates not only to ideological and religious differences, but also to issues around race, ethnicity and xenophobia.

Within liberal democracies, individual choice, personal freedom, a concern for human dignity and religious toleration are purportedly cherished values that also promote cultural diversity. The French government's ban on the headscarf counters all these values and ideals. By prohibiting the *hijab* in public schools the French government undermines its symbolic importance for some Muslim women's identity. Wearing the *hijab* can also be a fundamental part of religiosity and a symbol of religious conviction for some Muslim women, while for others the *hijab* is simply culturally appropriate clothing. Yet others wear the *hijab* as a result of a combination of factors in which both religiosity and cultural specificities are part of women's self-representation. As such projecting the binary of separating religion and public life is an outside imposition. Wearing the *hijab* in public space is not automatically a public statement; in essence, the veil does not necessarily indicate opposition to the prevailing political ideology or modernisation. For some Muslim women *hijab* is simply *how* a woman dresses. In the process of implementing the prohibition of the *hijab* the French government is also effectively legitimising certain prejudices against Muslim women – prejudices that convey the *hijab* as representative of Muslim women's inferiority and lack of autonomy. To the extent that Muslim women donning the *hijab* still represent the "other", "they" are not becoming like "us". To enforce integration into the French dominant culture thus results in the implementation of laws and regulations that coercively force "them" to become like "us".

In a Western context the definitions of "Muslim" and the fear of Islamic fundamentalism in the dominant discourses restrict authentic Muslim women's self-representations. Instead the majority are promoting their own perceptions of "Muslimness". This lack of dialogical engagement is increasing alienation and xenophobia towards Muslim population in Western contexts. A major challenge to majority groups in Europe is to engage in genuine processes of dialogue that render mutual, authentic understandings and accommodation of diverse religious beliefs. The worldwide demonstrations with regards to the *hijab*-ban highlight the sensitivity of religious issues in our global community.

The instrumentalization of Muslim women's dress and image in political contexts is not unique to Europe. The representations of Muslim women's bodies and clothing were equally crucial in defining the cultural and political imagination of Khomeini's Iran, as they are in debates around secular principles and integration in France. We will now examine how the various constellations within an Iranian context have constructed various female identities in relation to a post-revolutionary political ideology.

### Iran: Resistance to Westoxication

Within the Iranian context discourses of veiling are embroiled in broader gender and national politics. In post-revolutionary Iran coercive veiling imposed by the state has informed the realities of Iranian women. The veil has come to signify a whole constellation of ideological and political agendas enmeshed in the modern history of the Iranian state.

In pre-revolutionary Iran opposition to the Shah reflected a range of ideological positions from Marxism to Islamism, and did not derive essentially from the need to establish an Islamic state (Moghadam, 1993: 88).<sup>12</sup> Resistance by Iranian men and women to the Pahlavi regime was primarily a reaction towards the corrupt secular legacy of the Shah who was notorious for nepotism and unfavourable economic policies (Najmabadi, 1991: 64). He was seen as a dictator who promoted a political agenda which did not prioritise the well-being of Iranian people (Tohidi, 1994: 123). Many secular, unveiled women also participated in the Iranian Revolution (1977-79). For the most part, women's rejection of the Shah's regime did not specifically focus on whether a new regime would improve the position of women, but rather on a general opposition to the Shah's reign. There were, however, also some Iranian women who expressed resistance to the modernisation ideal of the Shah by donning the *hijab* in public space (ibid). Historically, groups of Iranian women had risen in protest against the earlier Pahlavi leader, Reza Shah, who imposed a governmental campaign to unveil women in 1937 as part of a Westernisation program (Najmbadi, 1991: 49). Reza Shah had linked Iranian women's traditional dressing to the country's "backwardness". According to the Pahlavi rhetoric at the time, veiled Iranian women represented the antithesis of modernisation and progress, and therefore their way of dress had to be rejected. Critics asserted that the Pahlavi regime indulged in power structures promoted by earlier colonial empires, and as such became a "puppet government" controlled by Western imperial forces. The "act of unveiling" enacted by the Shah which, subsequently forced women to take off the veil before entering public space, became a token of Western dominance and the submissive Iranian state. So in fact the Shah's coercive unveiling of Muslim women was also entangled in a larger ideological agenda to which West-ernisation was central.



For the anti-Shah revolutionaries, the concept *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxification) was used to characterise their disillusionment with the Shah's process of modernisation, and was advocated by secularists and Islamists alike.<sup>13</sup> The term alludes to the alienation felt by many Iranians concerning the implementation of the Shah's version of Westernisation. It reflects the rejection of this type of administration and also the dissatisfaction with the reformation that had taken place during the Pahlavi era.<sup>14</sup> The concept of *Gharbzadegi* also subsequently became a way to describe women influenced by what was perceived to be a degraded Western-type morality. Accordingly, the *gharbzadeh* woman encompassed some of the most problematic Western evils: "she was a super-consumer of imperialist/dependent-capitalist/foreign goods; she was a propagator of the corrupt culture of the West; she was undermining the moral fabric of society; she was a parasite, beyond any type of redemption".<sup>15</sup> For some, like the Islamic militants, the *gharbzadeh* woman was any woman who was unveiled. For others, the *gharbzadeh* woman represented "the painted dolls of the Pahlavi regime" (ibid: 65). Nevertheless, *gharbzadeh* woman became the antithesis of the new Islamic woman, and specific notions of Islamic modesty became the most desirable virtue. Afsaneh Najmabadi contends that the ambivalence reflected in the debates concerning female identity in Iran can be symbolized by the concepts of "modern-yet-modest" used in the Pahlavi period and "Islamic-thus-modest" used in post-revolutionary Iran (ibid: 49; 65-66). These concepts represent a shift in the image of the ideal woman.

The Pahlavi regime projected an ideal of the Iranian woman as one who wore modern, Western style clothing while remaining modest in terms of the society at large. The "modern-yet-modest" ideal became a complicated matter best mirrored in the concepts of *jelf* (too loose) and *ommol* (too traditional) (ibid: 66). In the 1960s Iranian women who adopted Western skirts that were too short were seen as *jelf* and represented a promiscuity that was sexually corrupting Iranian society. On the other hand, if their skirt was too long it was understood as *ommol*, reflecting old-fashioned and backward values (ibid: 66). The "modern-yet-modest" ideal became a fountainhead for contentious dualities, and Iranian women found themselves in the midst of a learning-by-doing experiment.

As part of their political agenda, the Islamic Republic created new female images to counter the Pahlavi discourse on women. The "Islamic-thus-modest" model and the ideal of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad were established. Fatima's life and experiences were understood to illustrate the female ideal particularly through her family responsibilities as wife and mother. The Islamic state, prioritising women's roles in the domestic sphere, imposed laws concerning women's education and professions restricting their participation in public and communal life (Afshar, 1996: 125). As such, their constructions of Fatima echoed a state gender ideology that significantly disempowered Iranian women. In July 1980, the compulsory implementation of a particular

understanding of Islamic dress was introduced. Every part of a woman's body was to be covered, except for her hands and face (Poya, 1999: 73). This imposition constituted an explicit reversal of the Shah's policy of unveiling and his enforcement of a modern Western dress code. "Islamic-thus-modest" implies that Iranian women must follow the dress codes established by the Islamic state, which was equated with female modesty. As such, Iranian women were no longer trapped between the concepts of *jelf* and *ommol*; a particular form of traditional dress became the *only* acceptable ideal. Ayatollah Khomeini condemned the women who protested against the adoption of the Islamic dress, claiming that they had been brainwashed by the Shah's "Westoxication" and internalised the immorality advocated by the Western world.<sup>16</sup> Some women who supported the new regime were seen marching, shouting: "Death to foreign dolls" (Ferdows, 1986: 132). The traditionally dressed Iranian woman became "the public face of the revolution", and the female dress code became a symbol of the first successful implementation of an Islamic state (Afshar, 1998: 117-118). Women were used to signify a broader political and ideological agenda that gained supremacy among the ruling elite. The coercive female dress code symbolically represented the re-establishment of the country's forgotten moral code. "The painted dolls of the Shah" was a stage left behind, and only reflected an intrusive eclipse in the history of the Iranian society. Once again women were used as voiceless agents, this time to depict a discarded Western image.

The emergence of new security units that policed women's appearance effectively forced women to don the *hijab* in public space.<sup>17</sup> Their objective was to look after public morality by ensuring that women in public spaces were dressed according to the regime's prescriptions of Islam. The results of these security stake-outs were that no women dared to enter public space without the appropriate dress (Poya, 1999: 73). For Iranian women there was a more immediate, pragmatic and self-preserving rationale for adopting the veil: the security units were known to be violent; their methods included amongst other strategies, to pour acid over unveiled women (*ibid*). Veiling was thus not only coerced, but also violently and aggressively policed. Traditionalist Islamic women, who were recruited into these security units, were co-opted as part of coercive state machinery. Ironically they actively participated in the realisation of a political ideology through the suppression of other women. They simultaneously asserted power while becoming instruments of a patriarchal state apparatus. In the regime's rhetoric Muslim women, representing the antithesis of the Western woman, became the veiled protectors of social morality, and undertook the responsibility of participation in a "just" society.

Some proponents of the veil argued that it helped to uproot the corrupting beauty-myth of the West. Nonetheless, the dominant discourses of women's veiling in Iran at the time also assume that women were responsible for men's moral behaviour: if women were treated as sex symbols by men, it was their own fault

because they did not comply with the Islamic rules of modesty.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the communal wearing of the Islamic dress espoused a certain form of a shared, albeit, coerced national identity. The new Islamic dress code mainly affected the modern women in urban cities. Women living in rural areas, who always had dressed traditionally (even under the Pahlavis whose policy did not reach or affect the rural community at large) continued to do so. Similarly, traditional middle-class women in urban areas who had rejected the politics of the Shah were more likely to identify with the female ideal promoted by the new regime (Poya, 1999: 74).

In post-revolutionary Iran, the veil acquired yet another layer of meaning during the Iran-Iraq war. The veiled Iranian woman was now represented as being more pious than the Iraqi woman (Shirazi, 2001: 94). Posters depicting veiled Iranian women as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters who supported their sons, brothers, husbands and fathers in the war were displayed everywhere. The ideal of womanhood portrayed on the posters could be seen as representing the ideal woman Fatima, fundamentally constructed around her relationships of support and assistance to male family members in times of strife (*ibid*: 96). These particular constructions of women and female ideals were deliberately instrumentalised in the Iran-Iraq war to promote the state's political and military agendas. The Islamic Republic of Iran further embellished the political symbolism of the veil by associating veiled women with the rhetoric of *jihad*. Posters depicting veiled Iranian women holding guns became widespread. The aim was to signal that these women supported the war and at the same time fought for their religious rights. In essence, Iran embodied true Islam; Iraq did not. Depictions of Iranian women who willingly sacrificed their sons in the war supported the ideal of martyrdom. Even though martyrdom was a religious ideal unconditionally reserved for men, Iranian women embodied this ideal by representing Fatima. Thus the militant image of the veiled Iranian women was part of the war propaganda at the time, an image that we find resurfacing in current French veiling debates. In reality those Iranian women could not legally participate in the war and as such not obtain the martyr-ideal (*ibid*).

Islamist Iran continues to represent the veiled Iranian women as repositories of modesty, and Islamic values throughout the world. As such, state discourses of morality are simplified by reducing morality almost exclusively to women's sexual modesty, behaviour and dress. Morality is in fact a broad category that relates to a number of human relationships. One could argue that a more comprehensive engagement with the notion of morality would demand a critical interrogation of coercive gender relationships including state-imposed dress codes for women.

From these developments it is clear that Muslim women's dress has occupied a central symbolic space in the politics of the Islamic state, as it had in the prior Pahlavi era.<sup>19</sup> The veil has constantly been defined and redefined in the changing political climate and women were used instrumentally by consecutive patri-

archal political regimes. Iranian women themselves have had limited autonomy and power in relation to the dominant state constructions of female ideals. Different governments have controlled and curtailed the existence of women's organisations and activism, and in an earlier period, also deprived women of the right to vote.<sup>20</sup> For women, the political ideologies of both the Pahlavis and the Islamic State have been defined by explicit elements of gendered political coercion.

Despite the overwhelming attempt to control women's agency by the Islamic State, groups of Iranian women have resisted. Two feminist trends namely, secular feminism and Islamic feminism, emerged in response to the gender politics advocated by the Islamist regime. Islamic feminism is a discourse that elucidates on the "woman question" from within an Islamic framework (Moghadam, 2002:1142).<sup>21</sup> According to Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998), Muslim women's debates on issues pertaining to gender and sexuality in Iran have evolved over the last 25 years. One of the most significant developments in relation to gender politics is the changing approach to questions of fundamental gender difference. Whereas previously much of women's debates in Iran have accepted that men and women's biological differences justified differential treatment, Islamic feminists now argue that the discriminatory treatment of women is due to unjust social circumstances. They have adopted an increasingly critical stance against supposedly Islamic justifications for a divine basis of gender discrimination (ibid).

A popular platform for Islamic feminist voices is the women's magazine *Zanan*, launched in February 1992, which has emerged as a strong site for raising gender consciousness. *Zanan* advocates new *Shari'a* interpretations, and suggests new understandings which elucidate equality *within* the confines of Islam (Mir-Hosseini, 1996: 286). *Zanan* is part of a new discourse which promotes the advancement of women's choices by prioritizing feminist voices and perspectives. Interpretations include both laws and regulations pertaining to the domestic sphere as well as to the public domain (ibid: 293). The 1992 Divorce Amendments is a result of this Islamic feminist engagement and gives women the right to "domestic wages for the work they have done during marriage" (ibid: 286). Iranian feminists have made valuable contributions to Islamic scholarship in Iran and internationally.

While secular Iranian feminists focus on the suppressive nature of Islamic ideology, and claim that women's liberation within this framework is unattainable (Moghadam, 2002: 1151). Mahnaz Afkhami, a Muslim feminist writing from exile in Washington D.C., asserts: "I call myself a Muslim and a feminist. I'm not an Islamic feminist – that's a contradiction in terms" (ibid:1152). Afkhami's position reflects the secular feminist stand which argues that a fusion between Islamism and feminism is an oxymoron. Another secular Iranian feminist Valentine Moghadam questions the one-dimensional view of women's liberation within the Islamic ideology. She claims that by engaging in theological arguments, as

opposed to questioning cultural and political establishments, Islamist women will not achieve results that actually contribute to drastically change their position in society. Further, she asserts that such a form of gender consciousness focussing so extensively on re-interpreting religious texts could lead to the reinforcement of patriarchal structures embedded within Islamic ideology (ibid: 1158).

Another controversy has emerged among these different groups of feminists. Many secular Iranian feminists chose to live in exile and this reality has become contentious. Secular Muslim feminists who still live in Iran claim that their counterparts chose an easy way out; as such they could be seen as the "Quislings" of Muslim feminism. They argue that these women are sitting on their high horses criticising everything that is wrong with the Islamic state in relation to gender issues without partaking in the actual struggle within the country (Najmabadi 1998:73). On the other hand, secular Muslim feminists in exile claim that the women presently residing in Iran, calling themselves either Islamic or secular feminists, need their help. They enforce this argument on three accounts. Firstly, women residing in Iran are implicitly supporting the present patriarchal regime. Secondly, by supporting the politics of the Iranian state they have compromised themselves and what they believe in, in order to actively participate in the community, for instance by donning the veil. And thirdly, their agency is taken away from them by complying with the rules of the regime and they can thereby be seen as silenced victims in need of "a voice outside" (ibid: 73). However, an increased dialogue between these different feminist groups is emerging as reflected in articles that appear in *Zanan* where opposing arguments have been presented (ibid: 73).<sup>22</sup> Through these debates concerning contemporary Muslim feminist establishments, it becomes clear that there is a multiplicity of feminist Iranian voices. Iranian women are not a homogenous group, and it is imperative to recognise the varying and multi-dimensional feminist discourses that advocate notions of female agency and empowerment.

## Reflections

Despite the diverse meanings of the *hijab* in varying Muslim social, religious and cultural contexts, the veil continues to be an increasingly politicised symbol in contemporary Western political discourses. The "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West has become a tiresome mantra in current politics. Images of veiled Muslim women have been used to reinforce such polarised constructions. In reality these polarised realities are also partly the product of European colonial history and the related political encounter between Christianity and Islam. In addition, the terrorist actions performed by small, extreme fundamentalist groups in the name of Islam have also sharpened the nature of polemical and negative representations of Islam as a whole. Especially in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, xenophobia, racism and religious prejudice have particularly

affected Muslim women who wear *hijab*, because of their visibility as Muslims.

Within the scope of this paper, we have illustrated how women's agency and representation in Iran and France have been and are controlled by authoritarian, patriarchal tropes that result in alienating female ideals. The coerced unveiling implemented by the French government inscribes competing and contradictory frames of reference on Muslim women's bodies. The dominant French discourse treats Muslim women as objects to be utilised within broader ideological debates that ultimately disregard and marginalise Muslim women's voices and agency. Both the French and the Iranian governments demonstrate, through authoritarian laws on veiling/unveiling, direct discursive parallels. Despite all the rhetoric of equality and freedom from oppression (especially in Western discourses), both French and Iranian narratives severely restrict Muslim women's choices. Ironically, these two discourses that seem to be so opposed to one another are structurally dealing with Muslim women in similar ways. The Muslim women who are directly affected by these various state machineries and regulations are seldom, if ever, engaged in a genuine dialogical relationship. For the large part, assumptions are made about these women's realities, their images are exploited in ideologically charged ways and laws are unilaterally imposed on them.

In a more global contemporary context, veiling has neither a unitary meaning nor a frozen ahistorical significance. Particularly in countries where Muslims are a minority, the veil is often part of a broader politics of identity. For some women, freely choosing to wear the veil as a symbol of identity in an un-Islamic context characterises their individuality. It represents an independent process of identity construction reflecting the "modern" characteristic of self-determination. At the same time, there are religious as well as secular Muslim women that contest the notion that veiling is necessarily required by Islam. Yet others challenge the coercive *imposition* of veiling based on sexist gender ideologies. Others see the veil as a tool that liberates and empowers instead of imprisons. There are also cases where some Muslim women become part of a political apparatus that impose either veiling or unveiling on their peers. Veiling has multiple significations reflected in different political and historical contexts that inform varied opinions and choices of Muslim women. In order to properly address the contemporary debates concerning prohibitions and banning of the veil, it is necessary to deconstruct Western generalisations and universalistic assumptions about the realities of Muslim women.

Within the European context, debates pertaining to "obvious" religious symbols and secular identity also beg the question about who decides what it means to be a Muslim? And on what basis does one conclude that the wearing of *hijab* in public spaces connotes a certain statement in relation to a specific religious identity? And how does one arrive at the conclusion that specific forms of religious identity threaten secular ideology and values such as equality and democracy? Western political and cultural expressions are informed by values and norms

that have emerged out of particular histories of secularism and modernisation. Within the *hijab* debate there is clear evidence of Western authoritarian and pre-conceived notions of sameness imposed on religious and cultural “others”. As such the European encounter with Muslim minorities is defined in terms of prejudices resulting in problematic restrictions of particular forms of religious and/or cultural visibility in public life.

Many Europeans believe that the veil accentuates identity differentiation and gender stigmatisation. However, if the veil is banned, will this necessarily improve the position of Muslim women in a Western context? Muslim women’s participation in these debates is imperative when implementing laws that specifically affect the nature of their public presence. By not engaging in dialogue with Muslim women, those most directly impacted by the *hijab* prohibitions, Western discourses reflect a colonial narrative that does not recognise the voice or agency of Muslim women. In a democratic and post-colonial Western context the imposition of dominant cultural values on the religious and often ethnic “other” needs to be contested. While Muslim women’s identities in Western contexts are varied the projection of the veil as the “new” Islamic icon has informed the self-representations of many Muslim women. However, whether the veil is worn or rejected, it is enmeshed in complex symbolic and political matrices which cannot be discounted when trying to engage with this phenomenon. The use of *hijab* in itself is not a symbol that advocates lack of integration. It is people’s attitudes that promote this view and the imagined link between donning the *hijab* and isolation. For Muslim women in Europe embracing values such as equality, religious freedom and individual rights while still being seen as “other” is difficult and challenging. It is crucial to address Muslim women as a heterogeneous group with multiple identities and various expressions and manifestations of these identities.

So what are the possibilities for a future discourse? Multiculturalism and coexistence have become contested concepts. They are embroiled in a complex politics of identity that raise critical questions of the nature of integration and/or assimilation of Muslim minorities in Western societies. Prevailing discourses concerning Muslim women must be interrogated since they are often informed by misinformation and prejudices.

There is a need for deeper knowledge and understanding of Islam and for dialogue with Muslim communities. In creating societies characterised by mutual understanding and genuine multiculturalism, there needs to be greater openness to varying forms of self-representation. It is imperative to move away from geo-political essentialisms that positions Muslim women’s bodies as instrumental for broader political agendas. A significant step towards a transformative, inter-cultural dialogue demands among other things to embrace polyvocality and personal narratives – these urge interlocutors to reflect on the fullness of human experiences and the complexity of people’s self-understandings.

## Notes

- 1 In this article we will make use of both the words *hijab* and the veil. *Hijab* and veil are concepts that often have been used interchangeably. However, there are different nuances of meaning when using each of these terms. The word veil, mostly used by Westerners in debates around Muslim female dress, can include reference to a face-veil, a head-scarf and/or a cloak. However in Muslim societies, there are numerous terms used to describe varying forms of modest female clothing depending on country of origin, historical era, class, status and age. The word *hijab* has also been interpreted differently by Muslim scholars. Its multiple meanings allude to seclusion, separation in space (domestic/public, men/women), protection and veiling. See El Guindi, 1995:108-109.
- 2 Throughout this article we make use of the categories, Islam and the West without assuming that these exist as homogenous, discrete or fixed entities. Rather, we use these categories descriptively to reflect expressions of shared identity among different groups. For a more thorough analysis pertaining to these categories see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.
- 3 An estimation of the Muslim population in France is between 6 and 8 million people, 10-12% of the French population. See Storhaug, 2006:199.
- 4 The Economist, February 7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> 2004.
- 5 *laicisation* n.f. laicization, secularization. *laiciser* v.t. to laicize, to secularize. *laïcité* n.f. undenominational character (of schools etc.). See Cassell's New French-English, English-French Dictionary, 1965.
- 6 Reported by Reuters in the *New York Times*, February 10, 2004. "Ban on Religious Approval Advances in France."
- 7 See <http://www.prohijab.net/english/hijabban-news.htm> to find out more about banning the *hijab* in various European countries.
- 8 Saida Kader is the head of FFEME, a political activist group for French Muslim women that assists Muslim girls who have been expelled from school, because of the use of *hijab*, back into the academic system.
- 9 [www.greenleft.org.au/2004/568/33122](http://www.greenleft.org.au/2004/568/33122)
- 10 [www.prohijab.net](http://www.prohijab.net), their aims include: "To bring an end to the Hijab ban wherever it has already been imposed; To prevent the spread of the Hijab ban developing any further; To co-ordinate the various efforts being made to end or prevent the Hijab ban; To provide a platform for Muslim women to express their views; To expose and discourage any false stereotypes which present Muslim women as being oppressed; To liberate Muslim women from any form of race, religious or sex discrimination whether it be state, institutional, organisational or individual discrimination".
- 11 See also Walt, 2005:31
- 12 Mohammad Reza Shah came to power in Iran in 1953. References to Reza Shah (the first Pahlavi who ruled from 1925-1941) will be made explicit.
- 13 *Gharbzadegi* was the title of a book written in 1964 by Jalal Al-e Ahmad, it reflected the anti-Western attitudes conveyed later by Ayatollah Khomeini. See Tohidi, 1994:121.
- 14 The Pahlavi-era is used to refer to the period of time governed by both Reza Shah and Muhammad Reza Shah.



- 15 Najmabadi, 1991:65, *Gharbzadeh* woman was further illustrated as: "a woman who wore 'too much' make-up, 'too short' a skirt, 'too tight' a pair of pants, 'too low cut' a shirt, who was 'too loose' in her relations with men, who laughed 'too loudly', who smoked in public..."
- 16 In *Zan-e Ruz*, a women's magazine published in Teheran, this editorial was published in April 1984. It deals with the concerns of the Islamic society: "...Islamic belief and culture provides people of these societies [Islamic societies] with faith and ideals...Woman in these societies [are] armed with a shield that protects her against the conspiracies aimed at her humanity, honour and chastity. The shield is verily her veil. For this reason...the most immediate and urgent task was seen to be unveiling...Then she became the target of poisonous arrows of corruption, prostitution, nakedness...After this, she was used to disfigure the Islamic culture of the society...and drag society in her wake toward corruption, decay and degradation...Today the Muslim woman has well understood...that the only way for her social presence to be healthy and constructive is to use Islamic veil and clothes..." Najmabadi, 1991:68.
- 17 Examples are: Sarollah (the Blood of God), Ershad Eslami (Islamic Guidance), Komiteh (local Islamic councils) and Pasdaran (the Revolutionary Guards). See Poya, 1999:73.
- 18 Note that modesty in this context becomes strongly connected to the idea of a modest dress, i.e. the Islamic dress - modesty equals Islamic dress.
- 19 Through dressing, women became represented as the protectors of the various political agendas. Three dates can be seen as descriptive for the various political developments. Firstly, in 1927 a woman's organisation called *The Messenger of Prosperity* established Women's Day on 8<sup>th</sup> March to celebrate the Iranian women without relating her to any pre-conceived female ideal. However, in 1937 this day was changed under the first Pahlavi to 7<sup>th</sup> January since the latter date marked the implementation of his campaign to unveil Iranian women and strive towards the ideal unveiled western woman. Thirdly, in 1980 Khomeini changed Women's Day to 6<sup>th</sup> May, the birth of Fatima, the new Iranian ideal presented by the Islamic Republic. These three dates, ironically, reflects the pervading changes in the political domain due to varying political agendas. See Poya, 1999:67
- 20 Women's right to vote in Iran was first granted on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1963 This was almost 30 years after the act of unveiling was introduced. See Poya, 1999:50.
- 21 Adherents of this view are Iranian women like Afsaneh Najmabadi, Nayereh Tohidi and Ziba Mir-Hosseini.
- 22 For a more thorough discussion on these issues that pertains to increased dialogue read Najmabadi, 1998: 73-77. In *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito, Eds. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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