Over our Heads? Muslim Women as Symbols and Agents in the Headscarf Debate in Flanders, Belgium
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Abstract

This paper discusses the recent headscarf debate in Belgium that erupted following the bill against headscarves in public schools in France in the fall of 2003. It is argued that the political and public discourse on the headscarf in the Flemish media can be viewed as illustrative of the essentialism that permeates the presumed opposition between gender equality and cultural diversity, played out in the ‘multicultural riddle’ of national, ethnic and religious identity and citizenship in contemporary European nation-states. The various subject positions on veiling as either ‘oppressive,’ ‘threatening’ or ‘liberatory’ must be situated in colonial and postcolonial history, and the contemporary problematization of ‘integration’ and the politicization of Islamic identity. Special attention is given to the way Muslim women as actors differentially participated in the discussion through letters to the media and protest marches in various cities, yet also how their voices were ignored and even strategically appropriated by Belgian male politicians and public figures in the familiar language of ‘colonial feminism.’

History and Resolution of l’affaire du foulard in France

In December 2003, the recommendations by a specially appointed commission by President Chiraq for a bill on banning ‘ostentatious’ or ‘provocative’ signs of religious symbols in state schools and other public buildings in France

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hit the international media. Headed by the national ombudsman Bernard Stasi, and consisting of twenty members from different political factions, the committee had undertaken a six-month study, including more than 120 hearings, into the current status of the republic’s cherished principle of laïcité, or the French version of secularism. Although, all “conspicuous” signs of religious belief, including the Jewish kippah (skullcap) and “oversized” Christian crosses have been included in the bill, both the main focus of the report and of the origin and ensuing political debate has clearly been the ‘Islamic headscarf.’

According to some press, the ‘radicalization of Islam’ (testified, for example, in the rise of acts of anti-Semitism) would lie behind the resurgence of the headscarf debate, with politicians from both the left and the right now supporting the ban. For example, following the presentation of the committee’s report, Mr. Stasi is to have claimed that the proposed law aimed at preserving constitutional secularism, yet also to counter those “forces trying to destabilize the republic” (Henley 2003). During his visit to Tunisia at the beginning of December, Chirac himself is to have remarked that the wearing of the headscarf would be “a sort of aggression” (The Economist 12/11/2003). The headscarf was conceived as a barrier to the ‘integration’ of the 5 million population of Muslims in France, and according to Hanifa Sherifi, from the cabinet of education and ombudswoman of the commission on ‘headscarf affairs,’ the ban would help “protect Muslim women and girls from the influence of Islamic fundamentalism” (De Standaard 12/11/2003).

In many respects, the current political discourse on the headscarf in France is reminiscent of what is known as the great l’affaire du foulard of the late eighties. As has been the case in a number of Northwest European countries during the last decade or so, that debate was sparked by an incident involving the wearing of headscarves at school. In September 1989 in the commune of Creil, France, three schoolgirls of Maghrebi origin were expelled upon refusing to remove their scarf in class at the headmaster’s demand. The event subsequently gained the attention of the national press and became the subject of heated public and political debate, dominating the media for the weeks and months to follow.

To date, various social scientific analyses have been made of the press coverage during this period. These show how a piece of cloth became politicized to the extent of symbolizing a whole crisis and struggle over the meaning of French national identity. Although analytical frameworks and theoretical emphases vary, on the one hand the particularity of the French historical tradition of laïcité is emphasized, yet always set against a broader question, namely what Baumann (1999) refers to as the ‘multicultural riddle’ of national, ethnic and religious identity that has challenged many western liberal democratic nation-states with ‘culturalized’ minority groups over the last decades.

As the controversy surrounding the current French bill on secularism makes clear, this laïcité, or tradition of strict religious neutrality and anticlericalism, is understood as a defining feature of French identity, and it is historically embedded in public institutions such as schools. But in general, as Auslander (2000: 284-285) points out, that many of the debates over the presence of religious signs in public places in Europe are often provoked following conflicts at schools is certainly no coincidence; (state) schools par excellence “are the site of citizen’s imaginary about the future.”

In her comparative analysis of the debates surrounding Islamic headscarves in French, and Catholic crucifixes in Bavarian classrooms, Auslander (2000) sees these controversies as symptomatic of crises of national identity and sovereignty in contemporary European states. In her approach, these cases illustrate the changes to the modern nation-state in the face of European unification and, in general, the processes
of globalization. In the French case, nonetheless, and as has been testified in headscarf affairs in other countries, this challenge to the ‘modern’ understanding of citizenship, also certainly takes place within the context of the problematization of the presence of particularly Muslims (both first, second and third generation ‘immigrants’) in Europe in terms of their ‘integration.’

The various analyses seem to suggest history is repeating itself, as in the late eighties discussion on secularism in France, this clearly was linked to the perceived problem of the integration of Muslim minorities, which was in itself aligned to the ‘threat’ of Islamic fundamentalism. According to Wayland (1997: 552), there were ‘three [impenetrable] principle discourses that shaped and divided the ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ foulards into different camps: hijabs were viewed as an attack on secularism in the schools, as a threat to the French model of integration, and as evidence of Islamic fundamentalism on the rise in France.’

What was a novelty at the time, was that the polarization between those for and those against the wearing of the headscarf in public schools, cross-cut political party alliances. Whereas Le Pen’s far-right National Front evidently opposed the headscarf through rhetoric such as “the threat of immigrants overrunning France and ruining French culture” (Moruzzi 1994: 658), other – but not unequivocally – central-right politicians similarly drew on what Thomas (2000) calls a ‘cultural nationalist’ ideology geared towards assimilation and cultural conformity. Those on the left side of the political continuum appeared even more divided. Some socialists opposing the headscarf on the grounds of France’s secular republican tradition, often simply reiterated the right-wing’s assimilationist rhetoric, whereas “both sides made near-hysterical references to a vulnerable national heritage, Moslem fanaticism and fundamentalism, and the need for a strong national sense of discipline that was not afraid to say no, to prohibit young women wearing headscarves from attending public school classes” (Moruzzi 1994: 660).

Those on the left taking a more tolerant position towards the foulard, including the antiracist and immigrant advocacy groups were clearly in the minority. The socialist Minister of Education Jospin was among those favoring more lenience, in the first place motivated by a more pragmatic view towards the promotion of integration, citizenship and equality. Jospin ultimately declared that whereas schools should discourage their students from wearing a headscarf, this did not warrant their exclusion by being expelled. Eventually, the matter was passed on to The Council of State, which gave a ruling in late November 1989. It followed the line of Jospin’s propositions, permitting the headscarf in schools and other religious signs, unless they would “constitute acts of pressure, provocation, proselytizing or propaganda…” (Wayland 1997: 553)

Despite the recurrence of various headscarf affairs and calls for a ban in France throughout the subsequent decade, and as the beginning of this paragraph shows, it is not until recently that the prevalent assimilationist discourse of that time has returned, intensified, resulting in a definitive antifoulard legislation in February 2004. Although the force of laïcité as central to the definition of French national and cultural identity cannot be overlooked in its dealing with religious pluralism and ‘ethnic minorities,’ it is likely that the escalation of the fear for intégrisme since 9/11/2001 has contributed to the present - rather dramatic - resolution. As the present press coverage shows, and whilst discussion has now also spread beyond France’s boundaries, the headscarf appears to be even more so perceived and portrayed as a symbol of ‘Islamic religious fundamentalism’ and therefore as a threat to “western civilization.” In this discourse, ‘religion’ – most often a monolithic ‘imaginary Islam,’ is deployed when dealing with the proclaimed ‘failure’ of assimilationist, integrationist or
multiculturalist policies, but also, as I will illustrate later for the current Flemish case, due to the growing visibility and activism, and politicization of ethnic and religious identity, or the question of ‘political Islam’ within Europe.

Veiling: a Multifarious Symbol and Practice in Context

In the conclusion to her analysis of the French headscarves affair in 1989, Thomas (2000: 185) notes that one of the commonalities among both left and right-wing politicians was not only the way in which the foulard, or ‘veils’ in general, were seen as threat, a rejection of ‘integration.’ They were also “regarded widely as signifying submission to sexual subordination, obscurantism, and arbitrary paternal authority.” Wayland (1997: 556) similarly remarks how this broadly shared perception of the headscarf as a symbol of Muslim women’s subjugation was “directly challenging France’s commitment to egalitarianism,” that valued the integration of the individual rather than recognizing group identity and accommodating ‘difference,’ be it founded on the basis of religion, ethnicity or gender.

Among those from the left opposing the headscarf and fulminating against Jospin’s more tolerant position, were intellectuals and activists including feminists like the philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, who recently again spoke out on the 2003 bill. Moruzzi (1994: 661-662) claims their western liberal feminist viewpoint was aligned with much of the assimilationist national discourse, the headscarf representing an ‘act of subordination’ and its wearers mere passive objects to be ‘rescued’ by the state from ‘Islamic’ patriarchal male control. In the press, the representation of the headscarf as both a ‘passive act’ in terms of inferiority and submission to (male) family pressure, however, was also – and simultaneously – depicted as embodying ‘backwardness and militance’. According to Molokotos Liederman (2000: 375)

the headscarf worn by Muslim schoolgirls could therefore also be seen as an ‘affirmative act’ of religious fervor, indoctrination and one supporting Islamic fundamentalism.

This linking of the headscarf to a myriad of ‘veiling’ and other hair/head/face/body covering practices among contemporary Muslim women throughout the world in the western imagination has its roots in what - as for the Middle East is concerned - El Guindi (1999: 3) calls a “material/ideological set of presumably connected practices and institutions making up the complex veil-harem-eunuchs-seclusion-polygamy.” Comparative work from various disciplinary perspectives has shown the tremendous diversity in veiling practices across cultural and religious traditions, thus showing that this western obsession is but one historically and politically located discourse in which a type of dress or ‘piece of cloth’ has become imbued with particular symbolic meanings.

For those studies focusing on Middle Eastern veiling or what is nowadays identified as an Islamic tradition or practice, it is often noted how (institutionalized) veiling practices in fact predate Islam in the Mesopotamian/Mediterranean area. Moreover, veiling in pre-Islamic Arabia was not only limited to women, but also practiced by men (e.g., the Tuareg), an often overlooked fact by those departing from an exclusive women’s studies focus (El Guindi 1999: 12, chapter 7). Veiling practices are similarly bound to class and ethnic relations; they can refer to power and status; cross-culturally they can signify complementary, exclusionary and privileging, egalitarian, hierarchical and seclusionary patterns (ibid: 13). Although limited, the comparative work that has been done on veiling practices testifies to the enormous individual, historical, geographical and contextual variety and complexity in interpreting the wearing (including the not-wearing) of ‘the veil,’ or acts of both dictated and voluntary covering and uncovering in general.
The Veil in the Western Imagination, Reversed Orientalism and Resistance

Contemporary headscarf controversies in a number of West-European countries are played out within discourses and policies, depending on the particular traditions dealing with the multicultural riddle of national, ethnic and religious identity. Gender is central to these struggles, as the headscarf is linked to women’s status, symbolically and strategically deployed within an essentialist discourse on difference that supports the idea that gender justice would be irreconcilable with cultural and religious pluralism. Whatever their traditions and policies on secularism, immigration, and interculturalism, generally, in the contemporary western imagination (as expressed in the media and political discourse) the headscarf worn by Muslim girls and women of migrant origins is often taken as a symbol of both gender inequality and Islamic fundamentalism or ‘threat.’ Although this interpretation in terms of submission-radicalism may have intensified since 9/11, the political, religious and gendered connotations of the veil have their roots in an earlier phase of East-West interaction.

Whereas in Orientalist constructions of the Middle East there had always been a preoccupation (including fantasizing) with gender and (female) sexuality, such as in the linking and homogenizing of the phenomena of seclusion, harems and veiling, it was in the colonial period that the supposedly inferiority of Muslim women became central to discourse on Islam. Especially in the late nineteenth century, Ahmed (1992: 152) argues that the veil and segregation were seen as symptomatic of the subordination of Muslim women. This was then understood as an inherent feature of ‘Islam’ that in turn justified the colonizers’ own cultural and religious supremacy and legitimated colonial rule:

Veiling – to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.

These historical references show that the current perception of veiling as a symbol of female submission as intrinsic to ‘Islam’ thus clearly has historical origins and by far precedes some of the major battles against gender inequality in the West. The simultaneous perception of veiling as a threatening phenomenon can similarly be traced to both colonial and postcolonial contexts of East/West confrontations. It was precisely the discourse and enforcement of unveiling from the side of the colonial governments that in turn would unleash a whole new dynamic of veiling practices and its reinterpretation. For the unveiling of women, be it during the Soviet rule over Muslims in Central Asia (Shirazi 2001), or as Frantz Fanon has explained in the case of France’s control over Algeria, has habitually been employed as a strategy in the cultural and political control over Muslim territories.

Ahmed (1992) argues that the colonial discourse on the veil as a symbol of women’s oppression and therefore religious, cultural and societal backwardness was eventually taken up by various ‘westernized’ educated Muslim male thinkers and leaders from the middle and upper class. In Egypt for example, El Guindi (1999: 177-178) notes that even though women were already discussing issues of emancipation (in both western-oriented and own culturally grounded forms) as early as the 1870’s, the veil itself only became central within a ‘men’s discourse on women’s issues,’ in their quest to introduce ‘European-style civilization and modernization.’
Hence those denouncing the veil - as in the Egyptian lawyer Qassim Amin’s writings on women’s emancipation towards the end of the nineteenth century - , and those banning the veil, - like the Shahs of Iran in the twenties and fifties, or Ataturk in Turkey -, simply reproduced and assimilated the colonial representation of their culture, symbolized in the veil as the subjugation of women.

Because of this very appropriation, during the process of decolonization and continued critique against western imperialism, the veil later became a symbol of resistance, as a kind of ‘reversed orientalism.’ In Algeria, for example, the consequence of Frances’s unveiling policies was that in the struggle for independence in the fifties, Algerian women reclaimed the veil as a national and cultural symbol against occupation (El Guindi 1999: 170-2). In Ahmed’s words (1992: 164):

Standing in the relation of antithesis to thesis, the resistance narrative thus reversed – but thereby also accepted – the terms set in the first place by the colonizers. And therefore, ironically, it is Western discourse that in the first place determined the new meanings of the veil and gave rise to its emergence as a symbol of resistance.

The veil became associated with both anti-colonialism and anti-westernization, carried to an extreme in the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, whose ‘moral defense,’ according to Shirazi (2001: 108), “seems to rest painfully on the shoulders of the properly veiled woman. She has become Iran’s bulwark against the cultural assault of Western nations.” In many postcolonial contexts, the veil functions as a site for the construction of gender and national, cultural and religious identity. Veiling can be an example of the cross-cultural pattern in which women’s bodies, appearances and their (correct) behavior are used as a marker of communal identity, attributing them the status and responsibilities of the ‘bearers’ and ‘reproducers’ of cultural authenticity (e.g., Yuval-Davis 1997).

Women's Viewpoints? The Question of Agency

The headscarf controversies show that in the current western imagination, the veil is also perceived as a symbol of resistance and therefore threat, in that since the seventies it has featured in the sense of emerging Islamic consciousness and activism. As they have done in the past, contemporary Muslim women who may or may not identify as ‘feminist,’ be it religious or secular, may defend or reject veiling. Additionally, due to the development of women’s studies, contemporary research finally gives attention to the subjectivity of Muslim women themselves, including those wearing the veil out of what appears to be a commitment to a politicized Islamic gender identity.

Whereas western feminist women have mostly replicated men’s colonial discourse on the veil as symptomatic of female and therefore cultural inferiority, in academia at least, the process of decolonizing theory and research in the field of women’s studies has enabled more culturally and contextually sensitive analyses of the lives of non-western women, that move beyond the victim or ‘false consciousness’ paradigm that characterized an earlier phase of feminist thought. By now, critiques by minority, Third World, and postcolonial feminist scholars of the western feminist orientalist and essentialist assumptions concerning the ‘unified subjugated non-western woman,’ who is represented as the hopeless ‘victim’ of presumed traditional or authentic ‘culture’ or ‘religion,’ have brought attention to the diversity among women in terms of their identity, agency and their struggles against sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, neo-liberal capitalism
and globalization (e.g., Bulbeck 1998; Mohanty 1991, 2003; Narayan 1997).

Research into the lives or ‘agency’ of Muslim women who may or may not for a variety of reasons wear the hijab is burgeoning. Essentialism and orientalism is avoided by careful analyses of the way veiling can be situated and explained in terms of the dynamics of gender, nation, religion, or tradition. It is questioned if and to what extent veiling may signify women’s autonomy, individuality, and identity, and/or – even simultaneously - mark gender inequality and sexist oppression. Franks (2000: 918), for example, claims that “the headscarf is, of itself, neither liberating nor oppressive, and [...] the power relations with which it is associated are situated not only in the meaning with which it is invested but also the circumstances under which it is worn.” Hirschmann (1998: 349) argues that veiling in and of itself means nothing, but that it “can be used as a vehicle for developing a more complex understanding of agency and subjectivity.”

Discussions take place whether the donning of the veil can express a form of situated ‘feminist’ practice, such as when women in some Muslim societies may wear the hijab as a means to enter the (male-dominated) public sphere, as a kind of ‘mobile home,’ or in doing so may be ‘freed’ from being (sexually) objectified in the male gaze. Others question the extent to which they may be complying with male-defined norms of female modesty, or are ‘bargaining with patriarchy.’ Many Islamist women donning the veil may be seen to be constructing their own kind of feminism and politico-religious identity, one that expresses a gender ideology of equivalence, justice, privacy and morality, opposed to and in rejection of western consumerism and exhibitionism. Others are more wary of the way a relativist approach towards cultural difference and women’s agency – such as the veil as a ‘tool of women’s empowerment’ - in both research and in multicultural policies may precisely contribute to fundamentalist practices and the consolidation of group identities that in practice perpetuate and legitimize women’s inequality ‘in the name of’ culture or tradition (e.g., Moghissi 1999; Narayan 1998; Sahgal & Yuval-Davis 1992).

The social scientific research in the west that has been carried out on Muslim women’s own discourse and motivations for veiling (or not veiling) stands in contrast and disproves the dominant essentialist rhetoric in the current headscarf debates (e.g., Bartowski & Read 2003; Dwyer 1999; El Guindi 1999; Franks 2000; Read & Bartowski 2000; Killian 2003; Secor 2002). From a constructionist and praxeological perspective on social reality, women may equally take subject positions that appeal to essentialist discourses on the veil as either ‘liberatory,’ ‘oppressive,’ ‘compulsory,’ ‘required,’ ‘religious,’ ‘private,’ ‘personal,’ ‘emancipated,’ etc. They ‘negotiate’ their identities, against a whole range of changing discursive practices on the veil in relation to gender, sexuality and embodiment that intersect with ethnicity, religion, community, belonging and exclusion.

Returning to the context of western liberal democracies and the emergence of political Islam, as the current controversies show, the majority of the population clearly sees the headscarf as a form of both cultural, political and gender non-conformity. The removal of this veil is curiously posed as a solution to the so-called failure of integration at the level of the nation, in a European context of closing off borders and countering immigration, and in a global climate of increased ethnocentrism, racism and Islamophobia. Consequently, it is also ‘reclaimed’ by migrant and minority women and men in the politics of asserting religio-ethnic identity. It has become a gendered symbol and a tool around which the contestation over identity, difference and citizenship takes place in the multi-cultural, -religious and -ethnic reality of individual nation-states in the process of European expansion and unification.
Women's Voices in debating the Headscarf: Over our Heads?

In her feminist analysis of the 1989 _affaire du foulard_ in France, Bloul (1994) argues that although the issue of women's rights was central to the early phase of the national debate, it was soon downplayed after a few isolated female politicians and intellectuals had prioritized the veil as the symbol of female submission. Attention soon shifted to the topics of secularism, immigration and French identity. Rather than limiting her focus to the deployment of gender at the symbolical and ideological level, Bloul specifically gives attention to the actors and their positioning in the discussion of gender issues during the whole affair. Bloul claims that the 1989 public debate in France was almost entirely monopolized by both French and Maghrebi men, making their claims 'over the heads' of the very women who were concerned.

According to Bloul (1994), the discourse of both French and Maghrebi men (whether defending or opposing the headscarf), replicated that of France's 'colonial sexual politics in terms of colonial desire,' showing 'continuity between colonial and postcolonial phallic strategies.' These remarks are consistent with the essentialism implicit in both the colonizer's unveiling politics and the representation of Muslim women as both subjugated and eroticized (see Ahmed 1992; El Guindi 1999; Shirazi 2001). Additionally, in referring to the process of 'reversed orientalism' in the liberation of Algeria, Bloul argues that many Maghrebi men in the headscarf debate applied a rhetoric of resistance on the veil, comparable to that of Algerian men who attributed - veiled - Algerian women the status of symbol and guarantor of national identity.

Hence, in the late eighties French headscarf debate, a great number of French politicians and public figures, including those from the right, suddenly "became the champions of women's rights, echoing the historical position of French colonial power in favor of the enforced 'liberation' of indigenous women." (Bloul 1994: 121) However, in France 2003, both the make-up of and the testimonies presented to Stasi's commission on secularism show that 'women's voices,' including those from both non-indigenous and indigenous backgrounds were by no means absent. The publication of a petition in the women's magazine _Elle_, signed by 60 prominent French women (including Elisabeth Badinter, and well-known women of North African origin, like Fadéla Amara) calling for a ban of the foulard, similarly gained much media attention.

At this point I turn to the recent Flemish headscarf controversy that erupted in the wake of the international attention to the French bill in the fall of 2003. Although similar to the French headscarf controversies, by and large the public debate took place 'over Muslim women's heads,' I will show that also for the Flemish context, women's voices, including women from migrant backgrounds for and against the veil were (made) heard.

As has hereto become clear, the headscarf controversies in a number of West-European countries with Muslim minorities can be framed in a certain political discourse of the 'failure' of integration or multiculturalism that applies culturalist rhetoric, regardless of their varying colonial and migratory histories. Another dynamic is that in and across these countries, various kinds of ethnically-religious defined identity politics are developing (such as the Arab European League in Belgium and the Netherlands). The headscarf is seen as inextricably bound to the question of both the 'oppression and emancipation of Muslim girls and women,' a topic that often features centrally in many political and public debates on both integration and the assertion of Islamic or Islamist identity.
For example, a familiar theme is the idea that migrant women may ‘pave the way’ for integration, by virtue of their higher success in study results and career prospects compared to “their unemployed brothers who dangerously roam the streets, deal in drugs and display their aggressive macho behavior” – which obviously is a particular construction of ‘Muslim masculinity.’ The image of those ‘integrated’ successful women of migrant backgrounds, and have ‘cast off the veil’, is sometimes unscrupulously appropriated by far right-wing parties as exemplary for the right way to integration (as assimilation), who have meanwhile turned to culturalist rather than ‘racial’ essentialist discourse in their – equally ‘racist’ – policies. The same parties, and for the most part the broader public, however, have mostly shared the view of the veiled Muslim woman as either subjugated to her tyrannical Muslim husband or brothers, or otherwise (or simultaneously) as the embodiment of (their father’s and brother’s) fundamentalist terror and threat.

In the transposition of the debate on religious symbols in public places from France to Belgium, the debate over diversity and citizenship in the face of the fear of fundamentalism and the question of ‘European Islam’ forms the general background for the headscarf debate. In contrast to France, to a much lesser extent was any tradition of secularism or national identity at stake; firstly, as a federal country composed of semi-autonomous political communities, Belgian national identity and its meaning is more under attack than under defense, as Dutch and French-speaking (and a smaller German-speaking) communities have been in the process of both increasing political federalization, and ‘ethnic’- cultural essentialization.

Additionally, although the Southern French-speaking part of Belgium may be more closely affiliated with French cultural and political traditions, laïcité is not a defining feature of the Belgian nation-state. In accordance with many other European countries where officially state and church may be divided, as in the Netherlands, Belgium can be seen to embrace a weaker kind of secularism, - the legacy of the system of ‘pillarization,’ where despite the unequal representation and power of the catholic church (in Belgium), for example, religious pluralism is to some extent acknowledged in the public sphere.

Finally, although the recent Belgian headscarf debate (as have various ‘incidents’ in the past) similarly centered on the question of ‘to ban or not to ban’ headscarves in public places such as schools, in actual reality, any ban would only have applied to a fraction of the schools, as the school system is less centralized than in France; different schools are run by a variety of institutions, including the so-called subsidized ‘free-schools’ (mostly catholic schools, but also non-confessional education), but also the ‘official’ city schools, schools run by provincial governments, and schools run by the federal communities (education being a federal rather than a national affair) and finally the non-subsidized private schools. Hence, until now, both the general political plea has been not to enforce any general ban, in favor of leaving decisions to the schools themselves. In practice, however, schools are in the very process of issuing their own bans that are causing Muslim girls to leave. ‘Headscarf incidents,’ therefore, will likely continue to take place in the future.

**The Transposition of a French Affair**

In the spring of 2003, months before any news of the discussion on the headscarf in France became headline material in Belgium, the women’s faction of the Arab European League held a protest march in the city of Antwerp, carrying the slogan “Not the headscarf oppresses us, the system does.” Despite the fact that such a performance of Muslim women (with and without headscarves) defending
their rights out in the street in such a public and activist manner was quite a novelty in Flanders; the event did not receive any significant media attention. The visual representation of the event in the alternative media (Indymedia Belgium) shows - with the participating girls and women clad in larger than life portraits of the AEL leader Dyab Abou Jahjah – makes the political context of this particular protest march clear. At the time, the Flemish faction of the AEL had recently joined forces with the (politically powerless) communists under the party name ‘Resist’ in order to run – without much success - for the upcoming federal elections.

In the summer and fall of 2003 a number of headscarf controversies throughout Europe were briefly reported in the Belgian media, such as a court case brought by a Muslim school teacher in Germany who was refused a teaching job because of her headscarf, and the kick-off of the parliamentary commission research in France in July. There were brief references to the various incidents such as teachers protesting against the headscarf in schools and other instances in which girls had been expelled taking place in French cities since the spring. One paper made mention of a piece in the women’s magazine Elle on the stories of Muslim girls in the French banlieues who were forced to veil in order to protect themselves from being harassed by gangs of non-indigenous boys, and the protest against this oppression of women in Muslim communities by organizations such as Ni putes ni soumises. (DM 8/9/2003)

By October 2003 in Belgium, however, another few headscarf protests were staged by the AEL, this specifically in reaction to the banning of headscarves in a number of secondary schools in Brussels and the city of Mechelen, again briefly reported in the media. A French-speaking secondary school in Brussels had banned the headscarf and expelled twelve female pupils, due to what they perceived to be a form of ‘extremism’ among a growing number of girls wearing large veils and even gloves in the classroom. The school felt drastic measures became necessary after a small group of ‘radical’ Muslim girls started pressuring others to veil (DM 9/12, DS 9/15, 10/2/2003).

By the beginning of November the Flemish press began to report extensively on the findings of the French parliamentary commission and the likelihood of a bill on the ban against ‘ostentatious’ religious symbols in public schools and the way in which Chiraz and apparently the greater part of the French population would be in favor of such a prohibition. (DM 11/8/2003) The headscarf debate in Belgium was launched, and it became clear that various voices would be given some space in the media, such as the publication of a letter by a group of Muslim schoolgirls from the town of Hasselt protesting against racism, followed by some reactions from both indigenous and non-indigenous women. The schoolgirls claimed that they were “excluded from society,” and forbidden entrance to the vast majority of the schools in their town due to the fact that they chose to wear a djilbab (long coat). The general tenet of their letter was that the girls ‘as Belgians’ were discriminated in their rights and opportunities in life simply because of their religious clothing. (DS 11/18/2003)

Whereas one indigenous woman teacher rejected the headscarf in it being both opposed to secularism and gender equality, another woman from the board of the AEL applauded the girls for their bravery, naming them the “perfect example of ‘emancipated’ Muslim women.” “Even when these girls bring their stories out in the open to the press, people are still unwilling to understand that Muslim women want to and can be their own spokespersons.” (DS 12/12/2003) Meanwhile, during this period, and in commentary to the news of Chiraz’s support for the French commission’s advice, papers also emphasized the way the bill would have been equally expressive of the concern for the growing numbers of girls in
the poorer cités of France pressured into wearing the veil, by those ‘soldiers of green fascism.’

The media debate on the headscarf took another turn when the leader of the Walloon liberal party (ML) launched the idea of a general roundtable with all the democratic parties on ‘common rights and values,’ for the purpose of a charter that may lead to later legislation. He is to have claimed that although inspired by the French debate on laïcité, the roundtable should not focus on merely the question of religious symbols, nor anything like a ban on headscarves in particular, Belgium having a more ‘liberal tradition’ on such matters than France. However, the potential conflict between such values such as freedom of religion, gender equality, tolerance and both Islamic and right-wing extremisms were topics that were thought should be seriously discussed.

Whereas various intellectuals and politicians called not to limit any discussion on interculturalism to the headscarf, by the beginning of the New Year, a number of senators from the Walloon socialist and liberal parties had offered a resolution on banning the headscarf at schools and public buildings following the French bill. The socialist (French-speaking) Minister of Integration and Equal Opportunities, reacted with dismay in the press about the proposal and she launched a methodology for an ‘intercultural dialogue,’ consisting of four workgroups, on the separation between church and state, gender equality, the organization of intercultural society and on developing a code for good practice.

This dialogue should then result in a report that may serve for policy measures by September 2004, thus avoiding the ‘headscarf affair’ turning into an electoral battleground facing the coming elections of June 2004, a position that seemed to be shared by the vast majority of politicians – save the extreme right Flemish Block, of course. However, a number of liberal politicians did come out with statements linking the headscarf to fundamentalism and showed their concern over the “import of a miniature clash of civilizations.” (DS 1/10/2004). Nevertheless, the peak of the headscarf debate in Flanders was to follow the publication of the essay “Forced veiling is unacceptable” by Patrick Dewael (2004), the liberal vice prime-minister and minister of Internal Affairs of the federal government, which was published simultaneously in main French and Flemish-language newspapers on January 10th.

In the Name of ‘Women’s Rights’: Co-opting (Colonial) Feminism

Dewael’s rhetoric in his statement on the headscarf is utterly reminiscent of colonial and postcolonial unveiling rhetoric, in which the white man proclaims to be the liberator, savior or protector of the poor ‘oppressed’ native woman. Ahmed (1992: 152) has shown how in Egypt, the position of native women was central to colonial essentialist discourse on Islam in the nineteenth century:

...that the Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of Other men, and in particular on Islam, in order to give an aura of moral justification to that assault at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own society – can easily be substantiated by reference to the conduct and rhetoric of the colonizers.

The British consul general in Egypt, Lord Cromer, for example, used this brand of ‘colonial feminism’ in his view that whereas Christianity elevated women, Islam – and therefore Muslim men - only degraded them, as expressed in the practices of veiling and segregation. At the same time, however, according to Ahmed, back at home, the very same
man was a founder and sometimes president of the ‘Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage.’

The resemblance with the contemporary unveiling propaganda in the discourse of political and public figures in the West in which the language of women’s rights is co-opted in order to (re)consolidate white neo-liberal hegemony is striking. The US president similarly applied the same discourse on the ‘liberation of Afghan women’ (by removing their burqas) in order to justify military intervention. Abu-Lughod (2002) claims that in this ‘obsession with the plight of Muslim women,’ that has intensified since the war on terror began, political leaders resort to religio-cultural reifications, and a kind of colonial feminism is applied by the very politicians who are otherwise known not to be particularly supportive of feminist issues.

In his essay “Forced veiling is unacceptable,” Dewael (2004) draws attention to the ‘limits of tolerance,’ in which the rights of minorities to practice their culture and religion, should not override the fundamental principles such as the separation of state and religion and that of equality between men and women, and finally, the rights of the individual. According to Dewael, although groups demanding for their freedom of religion defend the ‘right’ of Muslim women to wear the headscarf, in practice this would often come down to the “implicit acceptance of the order by Muslim men that their women must be veiled.” The author concurs with Chiraq’s claim that “the degree of civilization depends on the position of women in that society” and consequently any kind of forced veiling is unacceptable in as much as forced marriages, sexual mutilation and polygamy. Although it is noted that one “should respect those that veil voluntarily,” the “true motives of those enforcing the veil must be unmasked” and “through the law we must protect those who need our protection.”

This essay unleashed a host of responses, and almost daily the newspapers had their special rubrics on the so-called ‘veil debate.’ For instance, the minister of Integration and Equal Opportunities reminded of her project of intercultural dialogue, claiming that Dewael’s radical and aggressive statements were “dangerous for the social cohesion.” Although most of Dewael’s party colleagues (including the Flemish liberal party’s leader and the prime-minister of the federal government) had hereto been more hesitant in any proposal for a general ban, after his statement, he did gain more party support, and (in standing in one line with the Walloon liberal faction) at the level of the Flemish government a resolution on banning ‘ostentatious’ religious symbols in the city and Flemish community schools was proposed.

However, next to the skeptic liberals, the other parties – except for the Flemish Block who applauded Dewael’s proposition, such as the socialists and Christian-democrats could not be made enthusiastic about any of these plans. They all referred to the level of the schools to solve their own headscarf issues, or argued that the aggressive language on the headscarf was either nothing more than a bypassing of the real problems of integration, or a move to take away votes from the Flemish Block, a party that gets many votes but has never been accepted as partner to any coalition.

A number of critical pieces on Dewael’s discourse written and co-written by women outside of the political establishment were published in the papers, such as that by the chairwoman of the ‘Coordinative Centre for Migrant Girls and Women’. She claimed that the slow process of integration could not be simplistically blamed upon Islam. Headscarves, she argues, by contrast can be seen as a symbol of the emancipation of migrant women, who are in the process of a ‘double emancipation’ within their own, and within the Belgian community. Although a small minority is oppressed and may be forced to veil, she argued that any ban would simply contribute to segregation through the erection of
Islamic schools: “Dewael is behaving like an unemancipated man of twenty years ago who is telling the woman what to do.” (DM 1/12/2004)

A few other writers critiqued the way the author simply uses the headscarf as a means to enhance the stigmatization of the minority communities, a ‘non-debate’ about head coverings rather than tackling the real problems of ethnic discrimination in education, employment and housing (from the spokeswoman of the Green Party). (DM 1/13/2004) Some of these critical writers also refer to the way Dewael rhetorically links the headscarf to practices such as sexual mutilation, forced marriages, gang rape, and so on. What is especially interesting is that he draws on (non-academic) publications by Muslim women who have ‘cast off the veil.’ Most of these references are French publications, such as the personal account of, for example, Samira Bellil who was gang raped for not veiling, or sociologist Hélène Orain who assembled the stories of young women of the cités, claiming that ‘traditional’ practices such as ‘religious cutting,’ polygamy, forced marriages and the ‘virginity cult’ are on the rise. Fadélâ Amara’s – who also testified in the Stasi commission and signed the Elle petition - book Ni putes, ni soumises is also mentioned, which was named after an organization that opposes the veil, following a protest movement on 8 March 2003 in which 30,000 women protested against oppression in Paris.

Dewael also refers to the Iranian writer Chahdortt Djavann, whose essay Bas les voiles! was translated into Dutch from French the following month. In the mean time Djavann has been interviewed in many a journal and on prime time TV. Her basic view is that any kind of veiling would symbolize the status of women as ‘sex objects’ and ‘potential sinners,’ and that those Muslim girls in the French bidonvilles would merely be veiling out of protection against male sexual aggression. Another ‘liberated’ secular Muslim woman’s voice that the author refers to is that of the Somali refugee Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who fled from an arranged marriage, and ended up in the Netherlands where she was later to obtain a degree in political sciences. Hirsi Ali initially worked for the Dutch socialist party and gained much public attention with her sharp critique of ‘Islam,’ as what she perceives to be the central factor accounting for the problem of the integration of minorities in the Netherlands (Hirsi Ali 2002).

In 2002 Hirsi Ali surprisingly switched from the socialist to the liberal party, as she felt the left had not been adequately addressing the problems of Muslim women in Dutch society, whose oppressed status she attributes to ‘Islamic culture,’ including such practices as the ‘dogma of virginity,’ ‘arranged rape,’ and domestic violence. As a parliament member for the liberals, Hirsi Ali claims to have received more space to work on the emancipation and integration of migrant women, opposed to the socialists who in her view did nothing and argued that ‘those women are happy in their own culture’ (Hirsi Ali 2002: 9). Hirsi Ali continues to work as a parliamentary member for the liberal party, and to date remains under protection since the many death threats she has received since she first stepped into the lime light.

Dutch feminist anthropologists Brouwer and Ypeij (2003: 6) argue that the fact that Hirsi Ali comes from a Muslim background, has made her argument only more convincing and it has strengthened the anti-Islam discourse in which the oppression of Islamic women is symbolic: “On the one hand she has put the position of Islamic women and girls on to the political agenda with the purpose of improving their situation. On the other hand, her critique only confirms the existing prejudice on Muslim women in popular discourse.” Those Muslim women’s organizations in the Netherlands that for years had been struggling to gain more support, may have finally received some more attention since Hirsi Ali’s
performance, yet as Iranian-Dutch feminist anthropologist Ghorashi (2003) argues, it has also only strengthened the proposition that there is no space for the emancipation of women within the Islamic faith. In the Netherlands, the dichotomy has deepened, precluding the possibility of dialogue across women from different backgrounds. Hence, once more, not only has the (traditional) western secular liberal equality model of women’s emancipation been imposed as the definitive norm. In the current headscarf controversy, a (false) ideology of feminism as the mark of western civilization is strategically being co-opted in a colonial ‘phallic’ discourse that pits any form of gender justice against cultural pluralism.

Although hereto relatively unknown in Belgium, like Chahdorrt Djąvann, Hirsi Ali suddenly gained more political and media attention since the Belgian headscarf affair peaked at the beginning of 2004. What we see here, therefore, is the curious transnational appropriation of a feminist language, in which women’s voices are being heard, but especially those voices of secular liberal Muslim women, who in any case are not part of the Belgian minority community about whom the whole debate is supposed to be concerned. Both these writers in particular are opposed to ‘Islamic sexual morality’ (Hirsi Ali) in all its forms. Djąvann compares any kind of veiling with a ‘walking prison,’ apartheid and prostitution (DS 1/29/2004).

Writings of male and female academics and writers have alternated between views favoring to move beyond this ‘non-debate’ to that of pluralism, of dealing with the real problems of multicultural society and the status of minorities, of the possibility of the headscarf representing a form of emancipation, and the need to listen to non-indigenous women themselves on their views about ‘liberation.’ However, others — among whom important public male figures — continued in appropriating a liberal feminist language and particular Muslim women’s voices, to their own defense of secularism and liberalism, or at worst an essentialist colonial discourse on Islam as inherently oppressive to women and irreconcilable with western values. This kind of rhetoric obviously only strengthens the popular idea that the headscarf is representative of both Muslim women’s inferiority — whether enforced or among those suffering from a ‘false consciousness’ or ‘internalization’ of their own oppression — and Muslim men’s religious fundamentalist Islamist aggression, that is reaching into the schools and neighborhoods of ‘our own home towns.’

As for Muslim women themselves, in the press some reactions to the tenet of colonial feminism were published, among which a letter signed by some thirty different non-indigenous women’s organizations. In this statement the women complained that the debate was taking place ‘over their heads,’ and that as ‘liberated headscarf wearing women’, Islam plays an important role in their own process of emancipation, and that any interpretation of the headscarf from the side of the state would be an infringement on the freedom of religion as guaranteed in the Belgian constitution and European Convention (01/19/2004).

The week following the large protest marches in January 2004 against the French bill in France, in other European cities and in Asia and the Middle East, the Flemish papers also reported a press conference held by the ‘Action Committee of Muslim women in Flanders,’ representative of some 33 girls and women’s organizations. Again the angry point was made that the idea of a ban designed by the Minister of Interior Affairs, had not been discussed with any Muslim women themselves, and the claiming that the headscarf would be oppressive ‘in our names,’ would only lead to further stigmatizing of “our fathers and brothers as oppressors of women and exploiters.” (DS 1/28/2004)
Another Muslim women's organization, the 'Platform for Non-indigenous Women,' organized a protest march against the ban on wearing a headscarf at schools and public buildings in Antwerp on February 8th. As the papers reported, again, the protest was directed at Dewael to 'leave our scarves alone' against interference in the emancipation process of women and emphasizing free choice. On February 22nd, another protest against the headscarf at a transnational level was staged, this time by the AEL. The marches were to have included both women and men, yet were gender segregated, according to the press coverage on the organizers' motives "in order to show that women are not forced by men to wear the veil." The same organization has drawn up a petition at a European level against the French bill, addressed to the presidency of the European Union. Interestingly, the grounds of appeal are coined in transnational terms, in referring to the freedom of religion and of human rights.

**Concluding Remarks**

On the one hand it can be inferred from the (Flemish) press coverage of the current headscarf debate to date (February 2004) in Belgium that essentialist 'colonial' veiling and unveiling rhetoric was reproduced. On the other hand this was countered by a number of critical voices, including those of Muslim women refusing their 'objectification.' The different positions of various politicians, concerned citizens and protesting activists, sometimes cross-cut party, gender, ethnic or 'majority versus minority' identities. Hopefully this signals opportunities for future intercultural dialogue on citizenship, identity, difference and justice beyond the headscarf that continues to be deployed in the creation and reproduction of exclusionary boundaries.

**Notes**

1 In her study, El Guindi (1999) uses the 'more marketable' term 'veil' (instead of the Arabic hijab, and due to the 'absence of a single, monolithic term'), in order to refer to an enormous diversity in dress (both gender specific and gender neutral) hair covers, face covers, head covers, overgarments, etc. in the Arabic world.

2 For example, state recognized religious traditions such as Judaism and Islam that are entitled to subsidies for religious services and religious education.

3 The sources quoted in this analysis are the two most well-known 'quality' newspapers in the Dutch language (thus primarily catering to the Flemish public), De Standaard (DS) and De Morgen (DM).

4 The Arab European League first gained public attention when its leader Dyab Abou Jahjah (a Libyan refugee who obtained a doctorate in political sciences in Belgium and lives in Antwerp), suggested that Arabic should become the fourth official language of the country. A number of controversies followed surrounding the organization until in November 2002 Abou Jahjah was arrested after being accused of provoking riots after the murder of an Islam teacher in Antwerp. The AEL has subsequently been consistently diabolized as dangerous and fundamentalist in the polities and media. (www.arabeuropean.org)

**References**


