Mobilizing (and Weaponizing) Visible Identities: Unveiling the French Discourse

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This essay contends that the French government weaponizes the "visible identities" of veiled Muslim women through colonial feminist discourse to uphold secular values and reinforce traditional conceptions of French identity. It provides a brief overview of how France became a secular state and explain why secularism is at the heart of French identity. This helps uncover the roots of why headscarf debates are so controversial in France. Drawing on on existing scholarship to examine how the French state uses various feminist rhetorics to uphold secular values, the author argues that the feminist discourse that centers on "saving women" legitimizes headscarf bans based on gender equality. Lastly, this piece considers how the French state is excluding Muslim women from public debates to uphold secular values using concepts such as epistemic justice, hermeneutic marginalization, and the argument of false consciousness.

In France, the figure of the veiled woman has recently become a controversial symbol of religious fundamentalism and a threat to Western modernity. A French ban on the *hijab* in 2004 and then on the *niqab* in 2010 were directly influenced by anti-terrorism security measures following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Terrorist attacks in French territory has amplified the weaponization of Muslim women. It is widely believed that the 2016 local bans on burkinis, for instance, are a reaction to public fear of Islamic terrorism after a terrorist attack in the city of Nice (Dearden, 2016).[1] Similarly, a 2021 ban on the *hijab* during school trips has been attributed to fear following the beheading of teacher Samuel Paty. Paty was killed after showing his students caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad during a lesson on free speech in 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2021).

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[1] The *hijab* is a head covering/scarf that is worn by some Muslim women to cover their hair and neck. The *niqab* is a long, black garment that covers a women's body and face. A "burkini" is a swimsuit that covers a woman's entire body except the face, hands, and feet. In this article, the terms "headscarf" and "veil" are frequently used as stand-ins for the *hijab*.

I argue that the French government weaponizes the "visible identities" of veiled Muslim women through what Leila Ahmed (1992) calls "colonial feminist" discourse to uphold secular values and reinforce the so-called "French identity." Weaponization is a process of attacking a person or group using a specific characteristic, such as symbols or identities. Although Linda Martín Alcoff (2006) conceptualizes "visible identities" based on race and gender, I contend that religious belonging can be considered a visible identity. The veil is an outward symbol of religious identity, which makes Muslim women an easy target for Islamophobic abuse. The Muslim community is a visible minority that is a victim of heavy discrimination in France (Le Monde, 2019), and French bans highlight how religious identities can be targeted in everyday ways.

First, I provide a brief overview of how France became a secular state and explain why secularism is at the heart of French identity. This helps uncover the roots of why headscarf debates are so controversial in France. Second, I will draw on existing scholarship to examine how the French state uses colonial, Orientalist, and Western feminist rhetoric to uphold secular values through the weaponization of veiled women. I argue that feminist discourse that centers on "saving women" legitimizes headscarf bans based on gender equality. Third, I consider how the French state is excluding Muslim women from public debates to uphold secular values using concepts such as epistemic justice, hermeneutic marginalization, and the argument of false consciousness.

Historical context

The contestation of the headscarf within French society derives from France's development into a secular state devoted to *laïcité*. *Laïcité* is not the same as freedom of religion. Rather, it means keeping public spaces neutral in terms of religion. France's contested history with the Catholic Church, as well as various wars over religion, help explain why secularism is at the heart of the French identity, including within its educational system. For instance, the Catholic Church had a strong grip on French schools before a 1905 law prohibited the state from officially recognizing or endorsing religious groups. Public anxiety over overt religious symbolism within the public sphere can be explained by previous conflicts centered on religion (Platt, 2014). More broadly, the protection of public order has always been a priority for French institutions. Secularism is understood as what keeps society intact (Bowen, 2006), and that influences how the state governs public spaces such as public schools and government buildings – two spaces where the headscarf is banned. Central to these bans is the perceived protection of French identity and values (Bowen, 2006). Proponents of *laïcité* believe it can be used as a tool to prevent religious groups that appear to support illiberal practices, such as forced marriage, from gaining

political power. Opponents of *laïcité* argue that it further discriminates against religious groups because it excludes them from the public sphere (Yardim & Hüseyinoglu, 2021).

It is noteworthy that these debates often utilize the discourse of "saving women" – that is, they believe that "Third World women" need saving because they come from "uncivilized" and oppressive cultures. This rhetoric stems from colonial feminism, a branch of Western feminism that uses an Orientalist framework to assert that they know what is best for Muslim women (Crosby, 2014). Ahmed (1992) describes colonial feminism as "feminism used as a tool against other cultures to benefit the colonisers" (p. 152). (Orientalism is a constructed lens through which the West consistently produces an image of the East as uncivilized and barbaric to dominate it. The West justified its imperial conquest through this constructed representation; see Platt, 2014). The discourse of "saving women" has also been weaponized to justify military interventions, such as the United States' intervention in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Secularism, colonialism, and Orientalism are similar in that they contain a hierarchy of values and cultures that is imposed on other groups.

Upholding secular values using colonial feminist rhetoric

Debates about the veil are numerous and heated among feminist scholars and advocates, and I believe these debates directly relate to the discourses used by the French government. Some critics argue that *laïcité* is used by some feminists to achieve a form of gender equality that is framed as universal. However, it is actually Western-centric (Patel, 2013; Fernando, 2009) and is typically viewed as part of colonial feminism. Others claim that the emergence of Westernized, secular Muslim women who encourage unveiling is also problematic since it requires women to abandon cultural traditions to conform to the French version of citizenship (Kemp, 2010). The French government uses feminist colonial discourse to encourage the Muslim community to adjust to French customs by stressing the role of secularism in achieving gender equality.

Notably, many analyses of this issue perpetuate a monolithic, reductive representation of Muslim women (Yardim & Hüseyinoglu, 2021) due to their focus on how Muslim women can change their behavior to avoid discrimination. There is little consideration of how the French state uses these assumptions and perspectives to its advantage and weaponizes identity for political ends. The veil is reduced to a symbol of gender oppression, and colonial feminists see unveiling as a tool of emancipation. A good example of this is Laurence Rossignol's 2016 comment when she was France's Women's Rights Minister; she compared veiled Muslim women to Black slaves "who accepted slavery" (quoted in BBC News, 2016). Rossignol's comparison shows she believed that Muslim women who chose

to wear the veil were submitting to oppression, a viewpoint which encourages the monolithic representation of Muslim women as needing to unveil to free themselves to achieve equality. By using the discourse of "saving women," the government also embodies the figure of a savior, which is useful for upholding the state's political agenda because it hides assimilationist policies under a moral argument that is publicly accepted.

This reductive representation is problematic for several reasons. It erases Muslim women's agency and essentializes the narrative that they are forced to veil, which is not the case for many (Wing & Smith, 2006). Furthermore, the essentialization of their experiences erases the possibility of different realities (Spelman, 1988). When the French state argues that all veiled women are oppressed, it ignores the reality that many women have decided to wear the veil for reasons such as faith, protection from the gaze of men, and compliance with family values (Ahmed, 2011). Failing to take different experiences seriously can lead to the violation of women's rights to freedom and expression of religion. Denying their right to choose how to dress does not automatically improve the lives of those who are forced to veil. The "saving women" discourse also implies a lack of agency in Muslim women's lives, which contradicts feminism's core principle: elevating women's agency.

Such reductivism also hides an assimilationist agenda in the name of protecting French identity. This point can be illustrated by comparing the feminist discourse used in the colony of Algeria and in the context of France's current ban on the veil. During France's 132-year occupation of Algeria, colonizers launched propagandistic efforts to "emancipate" Muslim women from "patriarchal oppression" in unveiling campaigns (MacMaster, 2009). These campaigns were a strategy to assimilate Muslim women into France's secularism. Despite using the discourse of feminist liberation, French colonists did not have Algerian women's interests at heart. Neil MacMaster (2009) considers how the word "emancipation" was used by the French government; it referred to reforms that ensured equality of rights between French metropolitan women and Algerian Muslim women. However, an assimilationist agenda hid behind this term because it sought to transform Algerian women into bourgeois French women. Moreover, the emphasis on girls' education was an effort to impose Republican values on brothers, fathers, and husbands (Wing & Smith, 2006). This strongly resembles the current situation in France. Under the banner of "emancipation," the ban has been implemented in schools and forced Muslim girls and women to unveil and conform to secularism. This assimilationist policy reflects France's anxiety around the public display of religious symbols and the nation's fear of losing its "French identity." In this way, veiled women are weaponized through the French government's use of colonial feminist discourse to reinforce secularism and corresponding French identity.

Excluding Muslim women from public debate

The French state excludes Muslim women from public debate by restricting their spatial mobility, ignoring their experiences, and delegitimizing their voices to uphold secular values. In debates around the veil, Muslim women in France are "silent symbols" (Wing & Smith, 2006, p. 747), though they have hyper-visible identities (Yardim & Hüseyinoglu, 2021). According to the government's own figures, 60% of Muslim women who wear the veil have experienced discrimination due to their religion, compared to 42% of Muslims overall (Le Monde, 2019). Indeed, Muslim women are easy targets for Islamophobia because they wear the veil, an outward symbol of Islamic affiliation, and are therefore frequently excluded from public spaces. Because of their hyper-visible identities, they are targeted by the French government as symbols of Islamic terrorism. After the 9/11 attacks and the emergence of Islamic terrorism in public debates, veiled women became the prime targets of public anxiety over terrorism. The "Western obsession" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 786) with the veil comes from its association with terrorism and is perceived as dangerous for Western democratic values.

In the context of Islamic terrorism, there is widespread fear of France's disunity. The communitarian dimension of French Republicanism aims at defending French identity against a "perceived growing cultural affirmation" by Muslim citizens (Heine, 2009, p. 177), and French President Emmanuel Macron warned in 2021 that Islamism was undermining the unity of the Republic (Reuters, 2021). The reinforcement of French Republican values in the face of Islamic extremism requires the exclusion of Muslim women (Heine, 2009) because it instrumentalizes them, using colonial feminist discourse in the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, as amplified by restrictions on religious freedom for Muslim women following terrorist attacks. Yet, the bans punish and target Muslim women for Islamic terrorism and essentialize the Muslim community's beliefs rather than thwarting future attacks. I believe those bans are sexist and Islamophobic, hidden beneath the discourse of secularism and Republican values.

Another way the French government weaponizes Muslim women to uphold secular values is by ignoring their experiences and delegitimizing their voices, as highlighted by three key concepts: epistemic injustice, hermeneutic marginalisation, and the argument of false consciousness. *Epistemic injustice* relates to the credibility of some people being doubted or ridiculed based on prejudices (Code, 2014). A good example to illustrate epistemic injustice is the way veiled women were framed by the French media in debates about the head scarf. In one illustrative interview, for instance, three veiled women were perceived as insolent and contemptuous rather than as powerful figures reclaiming the

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rights of women (Adizzoni, 2004). Their credibility was doubted and ridiculed when they were asked about their experiences wearing the veil, thereby discrediting their opinions about the bans and the state's attempts to regulate their personal expression. Such an approach is infantilizing, enabling society to ignore Muslim women's complaints because insolence is usually assigned to someone who is in a position of inferiority and defying authority. It should further be noted that prominent voices highlighted by the French media were almost exclusively men; male politicians, journalists, and religious leaders. The women at the center of the issue were thus denied a voice in the public conversation, and their choice was instead defended or opposed by patriarchs (Adizzoni, 2004).

Hermeneutic injustice occurs when "someone has an area of their social experience obscured from understanding owing to prejudicial flaws (Fricker, 2007, p. 153). This concept stems from a broader framework called "critical race feminism," which highlights how essentialist images of Muslim women portrayed in the media fail to incorporate women's voices. This framework is helpful for analyzing how Muslim women have been silenced by media debates that privilege men and for offering possibilities for "demarginalizing" the opinions of women (Wing & Smith, 2006; Brems, 2014). Critical race feminism scholars argue that an "outsider" perspective is often used to depict veiled Muslim women and that legislators do not show an interest in learning about their "lived experiences" (Brems, 2014). Muslim women struggle to share their experiences (and be listened to) as a marginalized identity group, and it is notable that powerful actors, such as French legislators, have an interest in obscuring these experiences so they can better assimilate Muslim women into the secular French identity (Heine, 2009).

False consciousness is another symptom of epistemic injustice that has been brought to life in the wake of France's veil controversy. False consciousness means that someone has an "unconscious, conditioned reflection of their oppression" and are therefore "complicitous in it" (MacKinnon, 1983, p. 637). In other words, it is a way of thinking that keeps a person from perceiving the true nature of their situation. Veiled women are viewed as having internalized their oppression and inferiority, which is used to de-legitimize their experiences and opinions; they are perceived as brainwashed. This discourse legitimizes Western women speaking for women of other cultures and races and weaponizes Muslim women by silencing their opinions and having their experiences re-framed by others (Wing & Smith, 2006; Crosby, 2014). By invoking imperial feminist rhetoric, Western women end up oppressing Muslim women more than liberating them; they assist the French state in imposing laws that police women's bodies and limit their spatial mobility – all justified as a way to help them and increase their agency. This is part of colonial and oriental discourses that prominent feminist scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) denounce. Mohanty (1988) argues that there is a form of "ethnocentric universalism" in

Western feminist discourse that posits women from the Global South as oppressed and Western women as emancipated (p. 64). Therefore, women's experiences must be historically situated and not essentialized (Mohanty, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 2002). I believe that there is work to be done to deconstruct France's "reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 786).

Conclusion

I argue that the ban on the veil is a sexist and Islamophobic policy, hidden behind the discourse of gender equality and Republican values. Viewed through a colonial feminist discourse, Muslim women are weaponized to reinforce French identity and its value of secularism. Bans on the veil have Orientalist and colonial roots, using the ideal of "saving women" to encourage veiled women to conform to French secular values. Muslim women are also excluded from public debates, and their voices are frequently ridiculed or ignored. In this sense, their lived experiences of wearing the veil are stolen from them.

The French government's adoption of a Republican definition of *laïcité* privileges colonial feminism rather than a more equitable and inclusive post-colonial stance. This version of *laïcité* views secularism as a way of protecting the public space by restricting religious affiliations to the private sphere (Maclure & Taylor, 2010, p. 20). Although the state insists on the principle of neutrality, it is hostile towards religious belief and adopts discriminatory policies, such as the ban on wearing the veil. Perhaps it is time to implement a form of secularism which welcomes all religions and requires only institutions to be neutral, not individuals. Liberal and pluralist *laïcité* claim that religious beliefs are individual rights and cannot be penalised, for instance (Maclure & Taylor, 2010). Since the Muslim community represents France's largest minority (Le Monde, 2019), it is time to adapt policies to include this community – which is also part of the French identity. France's values are Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. As Adrien Katherine Wing and Monica Nigh Smith (2006) write: "Let's make sure that also includes sisterhood" (p. 785).

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