

Jul-2014

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Recommended Citation

Crosby, Emily (2014). Faux Feminism: France's Veil Ban as Orientalism. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 15(2), 46-60.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol15/iss2/4>

Faux Feminism: France's Veil Ban as Orientalism

By Emily Crosby¹

Abstract

In the early months of 2010, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy told Parliament that the burqa is “not welcome” in France, citing this as a step to defend France against extremists. Employing Edward Said’s theoretical notion of “Orientalism” as means of discussing the “Other,” I argue for a more critical look at France’s role in limiting religious freedom and denying notions of female agency. More specifically, I urge a more diversified view of feminism and female identity outside of the Western paradigm. By viewing the veil as a rhetorically universal symbol of oppression, Western feminists and political figures are missing the opportunity to recognize the diversity of religious adherence and feminist agency that exist in a variety of forms, some of which are highlighted in this paper. While touting the ban’s role in promoting gender equality, Sarkozy employs “faux feminism” – a specious appropriation of feminist sentiment to rationalize Orientalist aims. In effect, this approach reifies Muslim women as victims in need of Western “heroes” while promoting a unique form of sexist Islamophobia.

Keywords: Orientalism, French veil ban, Western feminism, Muslim women, Islamophobia

Introduction

In the early months of 2010, French President Nicolas Sarkozy told Parliament that the burqa is “not welcome” in France, citing this as a step to defend France against extremists (as cited in BBC News, 2010, p. 1). The burqa or burka, often referred to generally as a veil, is a full body outer garment worn in public spaces by Muslim women who adhere to certain tenets of Islam. Sarkozy’s concerns regarding the burqa as well as the niqab, a veil covering the entire body except the eyes, have created a contentious atmosphere in France that solely targets women, exposing the unique parameters of how the veil is perceived in a contemporary Western context as extreme and thus, unwelcome.

The veil’s meaning, however, is not only a timely issue due to recent state actions in France; it also has a lengthy history as a rhetorical symbol. Maria Boariu (2002) argues that there was a salient shift from the veil acting as a religious symbol to a political metaphor. In her article, which addresses France’s role in colonizing Algeria, she states that the “unveiling” of Algerian women provided “proof of colonial power” because it visually demonstrated that the native Muslim women were succumbing to colonial influence enacted by France, which arguably oversimplifies the motivations as to why Muslim women are wearing the veil in the first place (p. 174).

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Boariu states that the Koran,² the Islamic text of God transcribed by Muhammad, differentiates between public and private spheres and provides clear rules on acceptable behavior within them. Women, who are associated with the privacy of home, are expected to wear veils in public. In effect, women are “taking their seclusion with them” (Boariu, 2002, p. 179). But many, including Sarkozy, argue that the veil not only represents patriarchal oppression but more significantly presents a safety issue, since these veiled women are typically unidentifiable.

Therefore, in July 2010 Nicolas Sarkozy and French Parliament passed a law that banned facial covering. Legislators claim that the ban uses only “general terms,” as to not target Muslim women specifically, because no mention of Islam was included in the ban’s rationale (AFP, 2010, p. 1; BBC news, 2010, p. 1). This decision comes several years after former French President Jacques Chirac passed a law in 2004 that banned ostentatious religious articles in all public schools (Knox, 2004, p. 1), further substantiating France as a secular country. However, since the facial covering law came into effect in April 2011, it has been framed as promoting gender equality for veiled women rather than national security, exposing that this ban is not designed to limit facial coverings in general but the burqa and niqab specifically. Thus, Sarkozy and other French officials are participating in a process I call faux feminism – the specious, “faux” appropriation of feminist sentiment by Westerners to promote Orientalist policies. Therefore, in this paper I explore how France’s 2011 veil ban may be viewed as Orientalism, spurring a unique form of sexist Islamophobia, which complicates the translatability of Western feminism.

A Review of Literature

Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978) explores how he came to understand the “Orient” as a scholar in the U.S. As a Palestinian American intellectual and post colonialist theorist teaching and living in the U.S. in the latter half of the 20th century, Said not only experienced a level of discrimination firsthand but also recognized how the U.S. views the Orient as “Other.” This process of othering is what Said labeled Orientalism. He articulates that

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said, 1978, p. 3)

Furthermore, Orientalism is a concept that demonstrates how Western nations came to superficially understand regions that were outside Western paradigms. *Orientalism* (1978) demonstrates how European culture, in particular, gained strength and honed its identity by setting itself in contrast to the Orient. According to Said, men make their own history, and in turn, both the geographical and cultural entities of the Orient are “man-made” because the Orient, essentially, “is an idea” (p. 5). By reducing the Orient to an idea, Europeans came to understand it as “not a center of great cultural achievement” (Berger, 1967, p. 16), but a “debased” region comprised of “barbaric” people (Said, pp. 96, 172).

This framing, Said (1978) argued, is maintained not only through Oriental Studies in the academy but through literature, art, philosophy, political theory, and various rhetoric, which

² The Koran is also referred to as Quran or Qur’an.

consistently depict the Orient as “Other” (p. 1-2). Therefore, “knowledge of the Orient either proves, enhances, or deepens the difference by which European suzerainty...is extended effectively over Asia. To know the Orient as a whole, then, is to know it because it is entrusted to one’s keeping, if one is a Westerner” (Said, 1978, p. 256). This notion of “one’s keeping” incites several connotations particularly regarding colonialism – that the Orient is vulnerable loot “for the taking.” Said noted that the relationship between Occident and Orient was based on power, domination and varying degrees of hegemony (p. 5), suggesting that the Orient is an object for Western consumption.

Hegemony “bounds and narrows the range of actual and potential contending world views. Hegemony is a historical process in which one picture of the world is systematically preferred over others” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 257); therefore, the “freest” members of a culture are those among the power elite (McGee, 1980, p. 5). Said argued that those who were “freest” were France and Britain, who most often capitalized on the riches brought about by colonialism. Similarly, France and Britain consistently imposed their cultural norms on “them” – that is, non-Europeans of the Orient.

However, as Said pointed out, France and Britain’s unbridled authority eventually became contested in the first half of the 20th century. He writes that France and Britain shifted their method to appear that the Orient was a “partner” in colonial conquest. They took this approach because the Orient was posing more of a challenge to its colonizers than it had for the previous decades; and second, the West was entering a new phase of “cultural crisis” due to the diminishment of Western suzerainty over the rest of the world (Said, 1978, p. 257).

Women and Cultural Crises: The Problem of Essentialism

Some posit that the West is still experiencing a cultural crisis, particularly regarding the contemporary rise in feminist consciousness. In Shahrazad Mojab’s article “Theorizing the Politics of ‘Islamic Feminism,’” she details the “crisis” of feminist theory. She notes that feminism in the West is still struggling despite its advances because of the continuation of patriarchal domination. She claims that this struggle causes U.S. feminists to often neglect oppressive gender relations in non-Western society (e.g. Islamic nations), causing the fragmentation of women around the world (2001, p. 124). Mojab’s perspective is germane to this article most notably because she recognizes Muslim women’s agency as feminists and how relatively new political dictatorship, in Iran specifically, has reinforced the unfair construction of Muslim women as merely oppressed victims – rather than capable agents – to contemporary audiences. Yet, feminism was mobilized in these regions as early as 1907 (Mojab, 2001, p. 128) exposing the often overlooked or underestimated presence of “Third World feminism.” Most significantly, Mojab argues that many feminists are complicit in the victimized framing of Muslim women because First World feminism, and its privileges, does not seamlessly translate to other cultures. In fact, transnational feminist scholarship like Chandra Mohanty’s significant 1988 article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” called into question how white, Western feminists were problematically “colonizing” Third World women’s experiences.

As Mohanty argues, Western feminism has participated in the construction of a “singular monolithic” Third World Woman, which promulgates a Eurocentric, essentializing binary of those with/without power (p. 61). Mohanty, therefore, encourages self-reflexivity among feminists because women occupy “multiple locations as both oppressors and oppressed” (Kruks, 2005, p. 179). To ameliorate this clash, Mohanty proposed a “feminist solidarity model,” which

focuses on the quality of life “within the boundaries of nations and between nations and indigenous communities” emphasizing the fluidity of global forces (p. 506). And most significantly, this model recognizes power and agency in a nonessentializing form. However Western feminism is not solely to blame for the problematic framing of Muslim women, rather the “othering” of Muslim women has extensive roots throughout colonialist discourse.

Said (1978) highlights how colonialist discourse shaped the Western imagination about women of the Orient, particularly through the writings of 19th century French author Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan, according to Said, produced a widely influential “model” of the quintessential Oriental woman: “she never spoke of herself, never represented her emotions, presence or history” (p. 6). Flaubert’s claim that this woman’s behavior was “typical” to women of the Orient exposes the essentializing potential of the colonialist gaze. Proust wrote that Oriental women “sang songs [that] were without meaning and even without distinguishable words” (1970, p. 135), exposing colonialists’ clear negation of the nuances of culture, nation, and language. Flaubert also described women of the Orient as temptresses, based on his limited encounters with only a few women. Flaubert recollects that his mistress, as token Oriental woman, was “a disturbing symbol of fecundity, peculiarly Oriental in her luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality” (Said, 1978, p. 187). From this perspective, it seems as though his mistress is not only representational of the “Other” but acts as a metaphor for the Orient itself: an untapped, abundant resource full of exotic rewards and wonderment. Describing women of the Orient in such “uncivilized” terms perhaps served to reinforce the legitimacy of French imperialism; in effect, intervention by those deemed civilized became a “necessary” form of anthropological discovery. In other words, France not only becomes the beneficiary of colonialist enterprise, but the West becomes the hero.

Susan Jeffords’s 1991 article entitled “Rape and the New World Order” details various paradigms in which Western political actors become the “hero” and Eastern regions (e.g. the Orient) become victimized, weak entities that need saving – as was the case in the Persian Gulf War, she argues. As long as military might has the opportunity to rationalize its pursuits as a form of “protection” of those deemed less powerful, the West will continue to partake in a form of Orientalism that reifies patriarchal norms of oppression, disguised as protection (p. 204). One way that this protection is manifested is by the portrayal of veiled women as victims.

Post-9/11 Discourse: The Veil as Rhetorical Tool

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks that destroyed the U.S. World Trade Center and killed thousands, veiled women were often employed as rhetorical tools to build public support for the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Dana Cloud’s 2004 article posits that the “clash” of Middle Eastern and U.S. cultures was exacerbated by the use of veiled women as verbal and visual ideographs, which linked women’s assumed oppression in these nations as the “white man’s burden” (Cloud, p. 285). Adriana Piatta-Crocker and Laman Tasch (2012) add that Muslim veils are increasingly perceived as indicators of radical Islam rather than indicators of religious freedom, thus, explaining the implementation of a controversial veil ban in Turkey as well as other European nations on political not religious grounds (p. 25-6). Former First Lady Laura Bush concurred in this political sentiment. In a speech addressing the Taliban, terrorism and brutality against women she stated that,

because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters

without fear of punishment... The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women (Bush, 2001, p. 1).

While a noteworthy sentiment from a woman known for advocating for women's education, this is a political narrative used before. As Ratna Kapur points out, these words have haunting resonances for anyone who has studied colonial history. Those who have conducted research on British colonialism in South Asia, for example, have noticed the use of "the woman" to rationalize colonial policies (2002, p. 211). As Spivak (1988) surmised, Orientalism is a process focused on "white men saving brown women from brown men" (p. 296-7).

However, Lila Abu-Lughod questions (2002) "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" which complicates the notion of what "saving" means when enacted by historically imperialist nations in the West. Furthermore, Roksana Bahramitash (2005) argues that "saving" does not assume that only men are the heroes, but that through Western feminism, brown women are now being saved by white women, reinscribing the problematic trends that Mohanty illuminated. Similarly, in France, it seems as though Sarkozy has claimed that yes, Muslim women do need saving in the form of a veil ban, sanctioned by the state.

Wendy Brown's 1995 book *States of Injury* chronicles how state laws that may be perceived as "well-intentioned" harm individuals further by portraying these targeted individuals as helpless and in constant need of governmental protection. France's "well-intentioned" veil ban is a salient example of this: women who would otherwise move freely in public wearing a veil, are relegated to the private sphere (unwilling to leave unveiled), creating what Angelique Chrisafis calls "house arrest" (2011, p. 1). True democracy, Brown argues, "requires sharing power, not regulation by it; freedom, not protection" (p. 4). Thus, tension arises between women who find the veil freeing and those who insist the veil is oppressive.

The documentary "Sous la Burqa" (Behind the Burqa), released in July 2011, explores this significant tension. The film highlights the first-person narratives of French citizens who wear burqas and niqabs, offering a refreshing representation in which women speak on their own behalf and articulate their own forms of agency. These women, through their own voices, dismantle many of the myths regarding veiled women. One 22 year old woman, shrouded totally by her burqa, claims that she chooses to wear a veil because it makes her feel "free" from the judging eyes of others, so that she is not concerned about how she looks (Rozenblum, 2011). While Western onlookers may see the burqa as uncomfortable or stifling, many women voiced how free it makes them feel. A 31 year old business manager of Algerian decent exclaims, "No! I do not want to be on show...I'm not a juicy piece of meat on display" (Rozenblum, 2011). As explained by sociologist and French scholar, Raphael Liogier, these veiled women are not only normal but "a cut above the run" due to their high level of education that often spurs routine engagement in business, social dialogue, and even feminism (Rozenblum, 2011). Exercising agency while concurrently wearing veils, these women complicate what a feminist might look like in the eyes of the West.

Performative Contradictions

Jürgen Habermas, in his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1990), critiques many of the poststructuralist scholars who challenge reason and truth, while concomitantly partaking in that which they dismiss. For example, he claims that Michel Foucault cannot escape these contradictions when looking at truth (p. xv). Foucault rejects the idea of truth as "that which is" in favor of "a thing of this world, produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint;"

therefore, Habermas would argue that Foucault's own "truth" in his writing and his lack of belief in conventional truth are contradictory. Similarly, as noted in the documentary "Sous la Burqa," veiled women are often only seen as oppressed victims under patriarchy's thumb. However, as one interviewee notes, "no one is forcing me to wear [the veil] but women are often fighting *to* wear it" (emphasis added). This challenges the notion that the veil is synonymous with victimhood. Moreover, some may struggle to recognize veiled women as women of agency, especially if it is perceived as a form of performative contradiction.

French legislators, seemingly informed by a performative contradiction, disavow veiled women as agents, employing what I argue is faux feminism. Based on a pretext of safety and gender equality, the ban is not feminist but rather stigmatizes Muslim women. Erving Goffman (1963) explains that stigma happens when a person's value is "reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (p. 3), highlighting why this legislation is so problematic in regards to the treatment of Muslim women and the promulgation of sexist Islamophobia. According to Elaine Sciolino's 2011 *New York Times* article, Westerners have become sensitive to the stigmatized image of "faceless Muslim women" due to its link to the threat of the Taliban. She argues that the French who support the veil ban feel that France's "civilizing mission" in the Orient was a noble one, but that Arabs are exporting their "backward ways" to France – and the veils are considered an example of this export (Sciolino, p. 1). Highly visible in the public sphere, the veils are "ruining" Western feminism, according to French sociologist Liogier (Rozenblum, 2011). He highlights that veils offer contradictory messages of oppression and victimhood to the West, but variations of empowerment and self-defined womanhood to those who choose to wear them. In other words, they represent a failure to promote First World feminism on a global scale, exposing the lack of translatability of Western feminism. Rebecca Ruquist, an American scholar living in France, agrees declaring that "the veil's presence reminds French people daily that that mission [of "civilizing" the Other] failed; [veils] are seen as a sartorial rejection of the values of the French republic" (as cited in Sciolino, 2011, p. 1). Thus, the veil ban attempts to relieve Westerners from having to repeatedly confront the "Other."

Sexist Islamophobia

Ruquist's explanation helps one to understand the contemporary contentious context in France regarding the visibility of the veil; however, this environment can turn violent. The banning of the burqa is "enormously popular" with the French public; therefore, women who are refusing to unveil are fined well over one hundred euro and are targets of discrimination (Langley, 2011, p. 1). Discrimination ranges from being ordered off buses to Islamophobic confrontations (Sparrow, 2011, p. 1). Dunn et al. (2007) define Islamophobia as "contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment...reproduced through a racialization that includes well-rehearsed stereotypes of Islam, perceptions of threat and inferiority, as well as fantasies that the Other do not belong" (p. 564). According to the 2013 annual report produced by the "French Collective Against Islamophobia," Islamophobic attacks in France doubled between 2011 and 2012 with women in veils as the principal target, accounting for 77% of the victims attacked (Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France, p. 5). Thus, the contemporary attacks in France demonstrate a unique scenario of *sexist* Islamophobia, since women are the primary targets due to a veil ban that is said to promote gender equality.

There is even evidence that the ban's enforcement is tightening to include hijabs, or headscarves. In fact, mothers who wear hijabs have been forbidden from participating in their

children's school events, and privatized childcare centers have dismissed employees who wear hijabs, which are akin to Catholic nun's habits, on the pretext that "headscarves could be a danger to impressionable young children" (Chrisafis, 2013, p. 1). The latter example demonstrates that the veil ban is having impact even in the private sector. Yet ironically, veiled women targeted by sexist Islamophobia have mobilized communicative protests and even disorderly riots to demand their right to make a choice about what they wear and object to France's discriminatory policies. In some instances, the veil has even been employed as a sign of solidarity among Muslim and non-Muslim women alike in Sweden (Sky News, 2013, p. 1) and Canada (CBC News, 2013, p. 1). Thus, women wearing burqas, niqabs, and hijabs are embodying what many would argue is an empowered, self-determined feminist stance. Yet feminism aside, some argue that veils merely hinder communication.

Critics argue that outside of religious and political agendas, one's ability to simply engage in communication with veiled women is impossible since facial expression, eye contact and facial recognition are essential for verbal interaction (Ekman, 1993, p. 386). In other words, if one cannot see a woman's face, communication with her is futile. Goffman (1967) refers to the adherence to society's expectations as "face," or a projected image specifically designed for the visual interaction with others. But a veiled French woman in the documentary "Sous la Burqa" reminds the viewer that "people have relationships all the time without faces because of technology – internet, phones...people don't even smile at one another passing on the street" (Rozenblum, 2011). Therefore, one could argue that due to technological advancements, perhaps we are less reliant on faces for expressive, social and nuanced cues now more than ever.

The film "Sous la Burqa," though, is arguably less powerful because the viewer cannot see the faces of the women speaking. While these women speak emphatically, with sharp articulation and upbeat intonation, something is lost in their facelessness. However, Said would argue that perhaps this interpretation exposes *my* role as Westerner, since Orientalism "is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible" in contrast to the West (1978, p. 22). Perhaps in a U.S. context specifically, where eye contact and strong handshakes prevail, I am conditioned to dismiss faceless dialogue as less impactful and even useless.

Western feminists are guilty of this dismissive perspective as well, which does not recognize veiled women's ability to incite feminist rhetoric. Bahramitash, in her 2005 article entitled "The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers," explains that postcolonial feminism has arisen as a social movement that has improved the status of women, particularly in Australia, Europe and North America. The gains have largely been earned in employment and legal domain; however, it is imperative to note that these changes tend to benefit mainly white, middle-class women (p. 226). For example, many women of color in the United States continue to suffer amidst poverty, violence, and racial discrimination, experiencing additional intersections of oppression beyond those experienced by white women with access to particular resources (see Crenshaw, 1991; Chávez & Griffin, 2012). But Bahramitash warns that this standpoint embodied by white liberal feminists (of privilege) can often lead to the notion that so-called Third World women "cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (p. 226), which exposes the limits of First World feminism and its lack of translatability for *all* women – especially those who wear veils while concomitantly exercising agency.

Analysis

Veiled Women with Agency

Three contemporary examples of feminism challenge the notion that veiled women lack agency. Princess Hijab is a contemporary graffiti artist in Paris who surreptitiously paints niqabs on advertisements in the Paris Metro system. Active since 2005, Princess Hijab let a filmmaker follow her on a late night graffiti “mission.” While speaking in French, which is translated by the filmmaker, this guerilla artist who remains anonymous (shrouded behind a hooded sweatshirt and long black hair) states that “I’ve created a character who only works at night...when I see an interesting billboard or model that I find visually arresting, I feel the impulse to ‘hijabize’ it” (Jazeera, 2010).

Her “hijabize” process involves her taking a thick, black marker and drawing a niqab on the person (male or female) depicted in the advertisement. She notes that “the niqab is very powerful—not just religiously, it has been used in fairy tales and is part of the collective memory. It represents religious observance, mourning and death; it can be luminous as well as dark” (Jazeera, 2010). While she insists that her work is not related to the veil ban, she stated that what most matters to her is “my self-determination and the creation of my own universe, but also being in contact with people that have different sensibilities” (Battersby, 2011, p. 1). She created the character of Princess Hijab long before the current veil ban legislation and subsequent debate, yet she draws parallels to her role as a fellow “faceless” agent of subversion. She states:

What’s interesting about the niqab is that it isolates the person wearing it, while at the same time here in the Western world, especially in France, it puts you in the spot light. That’s the contradiction, by wishing to disappear from the public sphere, you’re far more visible. You take possession of the public space. It’s an empowering piece of clothing, but it can also be frightening. I’m creating an artistic universe by giving my models a new visibility, a new point of view that can be disturbing. My work draws all kinds of reactions. Some are amused; they find it humorous—you have to make the niqab far less scary (Jazeera, 2010).

This excerpt highlights some poignant concepts and performative contradictions regarding the niqab. While many see it as means for women to disappear as victims within a public space, it is powerful in its ability “take possession of public space.” Yet Westerners are arguably the ones who see the veil as “frightening” and “scary,” as Princess Hijab notes, and thus associate it with extremist terrorism, brutalized women, or simply the “Other.”

Some of these negative connotations, however, are not entirely unwarranted, since there is data to support misogyny and violence against women in many Islamic nations, where the veil is worn. According to surveys administered in Egypt, Palestine, Israel and Tunisia, it is projected that one out of three women is beaten by her husband (Douki et al., 2003, p. 165). However, not unlike other cultures, there is often an indifference about domestic violence since it is perceived as private. And some people fear that burqas are ideal for covering bruises and other indicators of abuse, especially in regions where domestic abuse is prosecutable (Boyer, 2013, p. 1). Douki et al. argue that the Koran is often used to justify violent responses to a wife’s “misbehavior;” however, upon closer analysis, the Koran shows that “wife abuse, like genital mutilation and ‘honour killings’ are a result of culture rather than religion” (p. 165). More broadly, Islamic “culture” is often linked with violence.

As Erik Bleich (2009) articulates, terrorist attacks by Muslims in the U.S., Britain, France and Spain between 1995 and 2005 reduced Western public perceptions to “immigrant equals Muslim equals criminality equals violence” (p. 366). He argues that this perception is correlated to the staggering number of Muslims in European prisons. While the prison data is not exact, he suggests that in some French prisons near banlieues (suburban housing projects), over half of the prisoners are Muslims – even though they make up only 7.5% of the population (Bleich, 2009, pp. 365, 364).

Nawal El Saadawi, famed Egyptian feminist, physician, and author, notes that “terrorism, racism, the veiling of women, honour killing, female and male genital mutilation, religious wars, struggles over power, land, trade and money all existed long before Islam arrived” (2010, p.123). While she asserts that the backlash against women’s rights is a global issue and not specific to the Arab region or Islamic countries, she does highlight a shift, especially in Egypt, when fundamentalist Islam rose and thus, women fell in the name of “fighting the infidels, the non-believers” (p. 121). It was at this time that women were told to cover their “*shameful face*” (p. 122, emphasis in original). The many female doctors, like Saadawi, were now being relegated to separate balconies at conferences, as men began to adopt striking beards “carrying beads in one hand and the Qur’an in the other” (p. 122). In alliance with Western powers, Islam was used to fight communism. After the Soviet Union fell, however, Islam became the adversary because “the capitalist patriarchy system cannot live without an enemy, as God cannot live without Satan” (Saadawi, p. 122).

Upon the publication of her first work of non-fiction, *Women and Sex*, Saadawi was promptly dismissed from her high-ranking position in Egypt as the Director of Public Health in 1972. In 1988, she was put on a state sponsored death list by fanatical religious groups who called her books “heretical” – yet they admitted to having *never read them* (p. 13). She argues that this view exposes the problem of not just Islam in Egypt but religious observance on a global scale. Saadawi argues that “blind worship” of religious texts is a significant problem, which leads to blind fanaticism, blind racism etc. She states that “fanatical religious political leaders bec[o]me stars in the so-called free democratic elections and in big media all over the world. Religion is a political ideology” (p. 13). Hence, the highest ethical description of a citizen around the globe is “God-fearing” (p. 12). She articulates that this problematic blind faith leads to practices such as female genital mutilation and veiling, which are simply indicative of a larger slave system and “not related to a certain race, colour, country or continent” (p. 143).

In her 1987 book *Beyond the Veil*, Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi highlights “the way Islam uses space as a device for sexual control” (p. xvi). Yet, like Saadawi, she notes that Islam is not entirely unique, since many cultures use various “devices” to control women in particular. For example, the legal system in the U.S. has a reputation for blaming victims of sexual violence. Similarly, why must we blame and criminalize women wearing the veil if they are supposedly “victims”? As I argue, global sexism combined with the lack of transnational feminism negates a nuanced understanding of female experience and female agency – especially outside of the Western paradigm. Moreover, the U.S., Britain, and France, for example, have not attained gender equality and struggle to admit women’s capabilities in various capacities. A transnational feminist approach would allow for a dialogue *with* women, rather than interpretations *about* them that would allow space to discuss women’s choices – a dialogue that is fomented by women such as Princess Hijab.

Princess Hijab’s art illuminates some of these significant cultural clashes allowing for discourse. On one hand, veils are seen as dark oppressive “prisons” for women; yet, on the other

hand, Muslim women who choose to wear them note how freeing they are (Rozenblum, 2011). Additionally, women who choose to wear them want to be seen as individuals rather than objectified bodies; therefore, they use veils as the opportunity to retract their image from public consumption in order to be less visible. The irony, that Princess Hijab mentions, is that this invisibility is largely impossible since the veil is immediately recognizable as a stigmatized, “unwelcome” item, which is now officially criminalized in France. Therefore, I find Princess Hijab’s role as making the niqab “less scary” particularly salient as a rhetorical act. She argues that her role is that of artist, and that her impetus is not linked to any religious or even feminist causes. However, I find her work uniquely subversive, forcing commentary about Western hypocrisy. That is, femininity is often portrayed in Western popular culture in gratuitously sexual ways to serve the male gaze (see Mulvey, 1975), which Princess Hijab illuminates through her graffiti art. Additionally, this exposes preconceived notions about what feminism “looks like” (e.g. veiled women are not seen as feminists when they may be). Lastly, by remaining anonymous herself behind a hooded sweatshirt and long black hair, Princess Hijab is free to perform – demonstrating that showing one’s face is not a necessary component of agency.

However, might her “faceless” persona be violating the ban? Must she show her face? Similarly, internationally recognized French musical duo, Daft Punk, don full-face masks during their public appearances. At the U.S. Grammy awards in January of 2014, they earned top honors with their international hit “Get Lucky.”³ However, they never spoke or revealed their identities – rather they were silent behind their futuristic helmets. Would this behavior be illegal in France? If it is protected on artistic grounds, why is the veil not protected on religious grounds? France proclaims its commitment to secularism, but these are questions that warrant further analysis to explore the Islamophobic underpinnings of the “general” facial covering ban and its inconsistent applications. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in defiance of France’s secularism, proclaimed that “the ideal of a society where no visible public signs of religion would be seen – no crosses around necks, no sidelocks, turbans or veils – is a politically dangerous one” (Rowan, 2006, p. 25). Furthermore, Princess Hijab as a subversive performer embodies several of the tenets that Muslim women are ascribing to: one’s public role as citizen and individual is more important than how she looks.

Unlike the “faceless” Princess Hijab, Zahra Lari is very visible. Zahra Lari, the first female figure skater to wear a hijab (headscarf covering her hair) on the ice, demonstrates her agency in unique ways while also celebrating the sparkle and drama of on-ice garb. Also referred to as a princess, this “Ice Princess in the Hijab” is the first skater from the Gulf, the United Arab Emirates to be precise, to compete in an international competition. Subsequently, she made history by doing so on April 16, 2012. She explains that “in my country women don’t do much sport and even less figure skating,” demonstrating why her role as rhetorical figure and international athlete is noteworthy (Canazei, 2012, p. 1). Additionally, her public presence challenges misconceptions that veiled women lack agency, physical strength, competitiveness and individualized fashion etc.

Although she often stands out in contrast to other athletes’ bright and flashy skating costumes, she states that “I skate with the hijab; my costume is in line with Islamic tradition.” But Lari states that other skaters do not discriminate against her, but are rather “very nice” because “people are open. It’s not a question of an exhibition, but of sport and my father is in agreement” (Canazei, 2012). Lari, a 17 year old whose mother is American, admits that it took

³ “Get Lucky” was also famously performed by the Russian Internal Affairs Departmental choir during the Opening Ceremony for the 2014 Sochi Olympics (Zeitchik, 2014, p. 1)

her father a long time to let her compete because he saw skating as “his daughter dancing in front of a male audience,” but he later realized she was “beautiful on the ice.” He adds that “she’s covered, she hasn’t done anything anti-Islamic” (Canazei, 2012, p. 1). However, many could argue that she is adhering to the rules and wants of her male superior (i.e. her father), reinforcing the idea that those who wear hijabs only do so because they are forced. However, feminist bloggers disagree.

One feminist blogger, among the many buzzing about Lari, says that “I think she is a feminist hero... She became the first woman in the world to compete in international figure skating in a hijab. In my book, that is more noteworthy than being the first woman to land a quadruple axel” (McGuire, 2012, p. 1). Furthermore, Lari wants to “encourage girls from the Emirates to achieve their dream too and not let anyone tell them not to do sport, not only figure skating but all sports” (McGuire, 2012, p. 1). But most significant, Lari does not seem to feel obligated to give an explanation as to why she wears the hijab. Like Princess Hijab pointed out, Lari is highly visible due to the Orientalist nature of the French veil ban, yet Lari reinforces that her role is that of *athlete* not as a political or religious body on display, which arguably fulfills her role as a woman of agency. Coincidentally, I find her title among feminists as a “hero” particularly interesting, in light of the Orientalist notion that the West, in its military might, occupies the role of “hero” (Jeffords, 1991, p. 204). Lari’s role challenges the misconception that all Muslim women are victims, and this became especially visible recently in Egypt.

During the recent and ongoing Egyptian revolution and upheaval, women played a hands-on role (Kirkpatrick, 2012, p. 1). Egyptian women, the majority in hijabs, protested alongside men and became visual manifestations of subversion (see PBS, 2013). Women’s roles became particularly powerful in how they were depicted around the world through photographs and visual rhetoric that recognized their role in the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak and later the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood. However many post-revolution women in Egypt are recognizing the paradoxical position of women in the “new” Egypt. Emboldened by the revolution to claim a voice in public life, many Egyptian women are finding that they are still dependent on the protection of men and that they are not yet seen as actors but as symbols of repression, reinforcing the historic framing that they are victims. As Samira Ibrahim confesses, after being detained and assaulted by Egyptian male military personnel, “changing the patriarchal culture is not so easy” (Kirkpatrick, 2012, p. 1) a sentiment not unique to Egypt. Furthermore, this paradoxical space that Egyptian women occupy is indicative of what many French veiled women experience.

French sociologist Raphael Liogier argues that the French veil ban targets women due to the “subconscious national misogyny” that stems from the West’s inability to control women (Rozenblum, 2011). He posits that this misogyny fuels laws in which male leaders contend that “we know better” than inferior women. He also finds that France perhaps sees itself as “very progressive” but in fact, is not. In the documentary film, “Sous la Burqa,” Liogier reminds the viewer that women did not get the right to vote in France until 1945; women’s suffrage in France *began*, however, in the 1780s. This exposes that France struggled to recognize the value in women’s opinion and their ability to vote; similarly, France is arguably missing the opportunity to see veils as expressions of *freedom*, rather than items with the ability to usurp male authority.

Mernissi (1987) explains that change often leads men to clutch tradition. She argues that the “Muslim world” had to confront change in the form of human rights, technology, international economic dependency, shifting boundaries, and aggressive transnational corporations (p. xvii). On top of this, women’s progressive claims were disturbing to the status

quo because they “augured and symbolized what the future and its conflicts are about: the inescapability of renegotiating...boundaries, thresholds, and limits” (p. xvii). As Yuval-Davis (1992) proposes, freedom for women and their bodies, whether Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Muslim, “spells ‘social disaster’” (p. 285). Therefore, over the past century, if a woman wanted to unveil, some men insisted that “society’s fabric would dissolve if the mask is dropped” (p. xviii). Furthermore, amidst change many seek tradition because “tradition” often demands male supremacy.

Western nations like France also cling to patriarchal traditions. Perhaps fear of losing power to women explains why so few Western women secure leadership roles—far fewer than even “Oriental” nations. For example, in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Turkey, women have been elected to the highest political offices (Bahramitash, 2005, p. 228). This is not true in the United States. 60 percent of Iranian students in higher education are women (p. 228), which is analogous to the numbers in the U.S (Department of Education, 2011), demonstrating that perhaps Western perceptions of the Orient are misguided or presumptive.

Conclusion

As Bahramitash (2005) argues, Western women and men are missing valuable opportunities. By being preoccupied with the victimization of veiled Muslim women, Western feminists in particular are missing the opportunity to highlight the many ways that Muslim women have been agents of change in the public sphere. Western feminists should recognize that France’s veil ban is a tool to reinforce hegemony. By naming feminism and equality as its rationale for the veil ban, French Parliament is using First World feminism to reinforce the idea that only one plausible vision of civilized female empowerment exists. Therefore, it is imperative that one recognizes how Western ideas of “feminism” and “freedom” are imposed on other women, disregarding the complexity of female identity occupying different standpoints.

Furthermore, this article worked to explore how the veil has been interpreted and utilized as a rhetorical tool for rationalizing Orientalism, Islamic tradition amidst change, and the dismissal of Muslim women’s agency. By applying Said’s framework, I highlighted the threads of Orientalism that have emerged in the veil ban controversy, under the pretext of post-9/11 safety as well as feminist sanctioned equality. Lastly, I exposed how Western feminism, that is, First World (white) feminism is not a fully translatable concept, particularly when applied to women of different cultural standpoints. Rather, more scholarship dedicated to Muslim women’s agency in recent contexts is needed to dismantle the idea that a “typical Oriental” woman is a veil with no voice. Rather than addressing violence against women or promoting more salient feminist policies, Nicolas Sarkozy has seized the opportunity to appropriate hints of feminism in the name of gender equality to foment support and rationale for the discriminatory, sexist and Islamophobic veil ban. By enacting this brand of *faux feminism*, he and other Western leaders further inscribe Muslim women as oppressed victims in need of “saving” by the white, Western “hero.”

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