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# Muslim Diaspora in Western Europe: The Islamic Headscarf (*Hijab*), the Media and Muslims' Integration in France

CHOUKI EL HAMEL

*The hijab, an Arabic word that is related to Islamic proper dressing, has become a buzzword in contemporary French popular discourse. In the Islamic tradition, both men and women are required to dress modestly. Women traditionally cover their hair, a practice called hijab. This hijab (Islamic scarf) seems to have created a controversy in France in recent years, and the French media have exploited the matter even further. Even scholars seem to have abstracted the cultural/religious symbol from its proper context. The controversy of the hijab in France therefore has actually revealed more about the character of the French society/mentality than about the Muslim community. I intend to use the controversy over the hijab to question and challenge the conventional reading of the integration of the Muslim Maghreb people into secular French society. I will explore the concept of integration and the way this integration functioned as a source of privilege as well as a source of discrimination. I will use the debate over the hijab to further investigate the interplay of religion, immigration and citizenship in France.*

Notre métier n'est pas de faire plaisir, non plus de faire du tort, il est de porter la plume dans la plaie. (Londres, 1929, p. 6)

For my own part, when I hear the African evil spoken of, I will affirm myself to be one of Granada, and when I perceive the nation of Granada to be discommended, then will I profess myself to be an African. (Africanus, 1896, p. 190)

## Islam and France<sup>1</sup>

With the emergence of Islam as a significant force in French society, one might expect to find nuanced and objective accounts of the various immigrant com-

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munities and their particular forms of Islam. Contrary to the notion of the homogeneity of the Islamic culture championed by Samuel Huntington (1994) and Bernard Lewis (1990), particular forms of Islam or variations in the interpretations and the applications of Islam, although not entirely different, are certainly differentiated by specific social and cultural constraints.

Among France's 56 million people, an estimated five million are Muslims, mostly of Maghreb descent (Arab and Berber). The majority are members of families that migrated to France from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and black African countries such as Senegal and Mali. More than 30% of the Muslim population in France are second-generation (Esposito, 1999, p. 607). Bruno Etienne affirms that 'statistically Islam is the second religion in France, but socially it is practiced by a group of people that is dominated, unprivileged and reduced to political silence' (1989, p. 203). At the first level of connection between Islamic religion and French society, one must first consider the differentiation that arises out of the diverse nationalities of Muslim immigrants in France. Certainly one must interrogate and situate the various practices and interpretations of Islam within their national and ethnic contexts while also taking into account the place that Islam plays in the construction of a particular national identity. Furthermore, if one moves beyond the issue of national or ethnic identification, one is struck above all else by the diversity of the realms of social activity invested directly or indirectly by Islam. Contrary to popularly held conceptions, the sectors where Islamic law is exercised are neither all embracing nor entirely defined. Moreover, even in areas where religious Islamic legislation does appear to hold sway (as in the law of inheritance, for example) there remains space for a diversity of applications taking into account the social, familial, sexual or political makeup of the societies which put it into practice. For example, Tunisia is perhaps the most advanced country in the Arab world regarding civil liberties. It is the only Arab country in which polygamy and repudiation are forbidden, whereas in Afghanistan the conservative Taliban refuse to recognize women as full, equal human beings deserving of the same rights and freedoms as men. Under the Taliban regime, women have been forced since 1996 to wear a *burqa*, a body-length covering with only a mesh opening to see and breathe through. It is therefore not accurate to perceive Islam as a uniform organizing principal for all groups and societies who adhere to the Islamic faith.

We should call into question the very usefulness of a concept which claims to envelop all forms of religious experience within the sacred which is itself difficult to delimit. Outside its most central ritualized practices (Qur'anic obligations, namely, the five pillars of Islam), Islam is often shaped in accordance with the social and ideological cleavages of societies which at the same time unconsciously incorporate religion into their social relations. This observation can be extended to include relations between men and women, and the religious and the social within any given immigrant community. Indeed, the fluctuating interaction between religious practices and representations on the one hand and social function on the other forbids the construction of any definitive, global image of Islam. Each society or micro-society projects more or less of Islam in its activities, in its beliefs and in its norms. Muslims face a lot of

pressure to abandon their religious rituals and their faith. One sees this particularly clearly in the observation in France of the Islamic festival Eid El Kabir (the slaughter of a sheep during the feast of the Sacrifice). The actress-turned-animal-lover Brigitte Bardot, who for more than a decade led a campaign to condemn the slaughter of sheep, thinks that there are too many Muslims in France (Bardot, 1999). Her statements accentuated the already xenophobic and racist sentiments against Muslims in France. In June 2000, Bardot was fined by a Paris court for inciting racial hatred (*Le Monde*, 2000, p. 12).

In every case, beyond the problem of attaching the correct religious significance to the act we must also examine the ways in which social and economic influences of all sorts have shaped an Islamic ritual practiced in France. It is clear that France refuses to accept any ideological group and is thus intolerant of all signs that seem incompatible with its culture. Muslims must understand the reality of the secular state and need to define an appropriate approach and attitudes in the context in which they place themselves. Most Muslim immigrants in France have been shaped by political and cultural structures of their nation, so they feel tied to their linguistic or ethnic origins.

The Muslim associations range from moderate line to hard line, from those who preach separation to avoid the 'corruption' of the Islamic soul to those who preach interfaith harmony and promote Islam's compatibility with secularism. It appears that mainstream Islam is inclined towards the latter idea. Among the whole Muslim population it is reported that about 700 young women wore the *hijab*<sup>2</sup> to school (*Le Monde*, 1994d, p. 10). We may without risk of injury think of Islam in France, often even more than in the countries of origin, as constituting something of a spectrum, a continuum of diverse practices and levels of commitment extending from religious to even their very rejection or mere absence. In this context the definition and delimitation of the realm of religion becomes an issue of acute importance.

As a colonial power, France nurtured and exploited societies whose Islam was apolitical while at the same time making sure to thwart any efforts to breathe new life into an Islamic Empire. Political Islamic trends nevertheless sprung from the very depths of a popular activism, which the French imperial state could not defeat. Today many political Islamic groups still feel indignantly aggrieved at France and keep the memories of the French colonial injuries alive. More than 40 years after the independence of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia from France, migrant workers from these respective countries, the largest Muslim groups in France, have made the connection between the iniquities of having been subjects in the colonial era and the inequalities of being immigrants or new citizens in France. Consequently, Maghrebini immigration has not only caused a social problem; it has become above all a national and a state question (Najir *et al.*, 1985, p. 9).

In his study of Islam in France, Bruno Etienne, a French professor of political science, states that the obstacle that Islam represents is as much political as religious, because Islam refuses secularism (1989, pp. 201–11). So how could France accommodate Muslim people? This debate appears to coalesce and congeal around the legal and institutional issues posed by the immigration of large Muslim communities in France. I must point out that the question of how

Islam may be incorporated into the French Republic has been repeatedly posed but never adequately resolved since the French colonization of Algeria in the 1830s. In the current framework, therefore, we find ourselves at something of an impasse, with scholars and politicians talking at each other from almost interchangeable positions. The object of these discussions is not just the immigrant communities but the French nation itself which is experiencing what might be called the phenomenon of Islamicization. Unfortunately, the depths of this process have been only very partially mapped.

### The Context of the 'Jihad Culture'

The resurgence of Islam throughout the 1980s, contemporary with the great political, social and military upheavals which convulsed the Islamic world from Rabat to Beirut to Kabul, was connected to a new ideological incarnation of Islam: fundamentalism, a label which can be both vague and confusing (see the work of Kepel, 2000). In 1979, the Iranian Revolution Islamic Republic of Iran was founded; and the liberation struggle of Afghanistan from occupation by the Soviet Union, largely due to efforts of the so-called *mujahidin* (Muslim militants), were two major events validating the political aspirations of many practicing Muslims in the world. In 1980, Hizbollah was founded in Lebanon; Islamic *jihad* was founded in Palestine by Muslim Brotherhood. In 1981, Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt was assassinated by militant *Tanzim al-jihad*. In 1982, Hafiz al-Asad of Syria leveled the city of Hama to put down the opposition movement led by the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1983, Islamic law was implemented in Sudan. In 1987 was the crackdown on Tunisia's Islamic Trend movement by Habib Bourguiba's government (1957-1987). The *Intifada* was declared in Palestine and Hamas was founded. In 1988, the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* became Tunisia's leading opposition group, performing impressively in national elections. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa*, calling for the death of Salman Rushdie, the English author, because he was offended, a feeling shared by many practicing Muslims, by the way Islam was portrayed in Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*. In the same year, *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) in Algeria swept municipal elections; Tunisia refused to allow the Renaissance party (formerly MTI, or *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique*) to participate in elections in order to keep religion and politics separate. In 1990, the Islamist party won 32 out of 80 seats in the Jordanian Parliament and a member of Muslim Brotherhood was elected speaker of the national parliament; the FIS won municipal and regional elections in Algeria, coming to power through democratic process, rather than revolution. In 1991, the FIS won parliamentary elections in Algeria. In 1992, in Algeria, the military regime prevented FIS from coming to power, canceling results of democratic parliamentary elections. The Algerian government crackdown on FIS led to a civil war, which has claimed over 100,000 lives. In 1993, the bombing of World Trade Center in New York City was tied to Shaykh Umar Abd al-Rahman. In 1995, the Refah (Welfare) Party in Turkey won enough National Assembly votes to make its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey's first Islamist Prime Minister. In

1998, Refah's party was declared unconstitutional and thus banned from political activity and seized by the state.

These events have provoked concerns in the west. They made the news and caught people's eye in France despite the fact that the media presented them with a threatening confusion. Islam is represented in the west as a 'jihad culture'. It is therefore seen as a pernicious virus that needs to be halted. Edward Said states in his book *Covering Islam*: 'Islam gave proof of its fundamental intransigence. There was, for example, the Iranian revolution: neither procommunist nor promodernization, the people who overthrew the shah were simply not explainable according to the canons of behavior presupposed by modernization theory' (1997, p. 31). The French press treated the Islamist figures and events with a hostile attitude, because for them the retreat into Islamic religion was irrational behavior and even primitive. But if we investigate and contextualize all these Islamic political movements, the Islamic uprisings and the Islamic militancy mentioned above we would have a different understanding not only of Islam but also of the people who profess it. The utmost concern in the 'Islamic societies' is to improve their lives. All the so-called 'Islamic countries', in which the so-called *jihad* took and is taking place, are known to have unpopular, undemocratic, despotic and oligarchic regimes.

### **The Islamic Headscarf as a Religious Signifier**

The discourse of the dominant French culture about Islam and Muslims seems to be consistent and systematic in the negative portrayal of the image of Muslims, and it is reflected in policy-making, as we shall see. But no subject about Islam and Muslims received more attention, aggravated attitudes, provoked more fear and anger and more broadened the divide that separates France from its five million Muslim residents than the controversy of the *hijab*.

In 1989 Ernest Chenière, the head of Gabriel-Havez College (junior high school) in Creil, north of Paris, ignited controversy when he outlawed headscarves at his school, where about half of the 873 students are children of Arab immigrants. According to Chenière, the girls' attire emphasized religious differences in an ethnically diverse atmosphere and could be interpreted as an attempt to convert others to their religion. French law forbids proselytism in public schools. Interestingly, in 1993, this principal became a Gaullist member (RPR) of the National Assembly, a spokesperson campaigning to legally ban the Islamic scarf in all learning institutions. Was Chernière really motivated by the principles of secularism or was secularism just a disguise for his resentment against the 50% Muslim students in his school?

Since then, the incident has grown into a public debate in the intellectual community and among political parties, with the issue of religious freedom pitted against French secularism (laws separating church and state). Controversy over the *hijab* worn as an act of modesty by many Muslim women has been raging for a decade now. This bitter deadlock started what has been described in *Le Monde* newspaper as 'a national psychodrama' with the Muslim community seeing itself as the victim of institutionalized racism, and most officials and teaching unions claiming the question is being exploited by Islamic

fundamentalists who manipulate students for their own ends (see *Le Monde*, 1994d, p. 10).

In 20 September 1994, a directive of the minister of Education, known as the 'circulaire Bayrou' banned the *hijab*. The French education minister, François Bayrou, ordered head teachers to ban girls' Islamic headscarves and any other ostentatious signs of religious faith in state schools (*Le Monde*, 1994b, p. 13). The restriction, after a five-year controversy, will be seen in the context of the government's recent clampdown on Islamic extremists in the wake of Algerian Islamist movement. Bayrou's order went against a 1992 ruling by the State Council, which said that banning of the headscarf amounted to a restriction of civil liberties. But the education minister argued that he was against any signs which separated students or were considered to be linked to proselytism. This alleged proselytism of the Muslim girls and the alleged intransigence of their parents were considered as a threat to the principles of secularity and neutrality (*Le Monde*, 1994d, p. 10). The ban, which officials said would not apply to 'discreet' outward signs, like the Jewish kippa, or a golden cross worn by many Christian students, rekindled a furore which was defused by the previous socialist education minister, Lionel Jospin, when he advised teachers to negotiate an agreement with parents. Many families say they will not allow their daughters to attend classes if they are forced to bare their heads. Guy Le Néouannic, general secretary of the Fédération de l'éducation nationale (FEN), suggested 'Perhaps it would have been preferable not to accept any religious symbol at school, whether they be headscarves or crucifixes, or the kippa' (*Le Monde*, 1994c, p. 12). M. Boubakeur, the dean of the Mosquée de Paris, who doesn't see the *hijab* as an obligation, thought that the 'Bayrou's circulaire' was unjust to single the Muslims out among other monotheistic religions regarding their religious symbols (*Le Monde*, 1994a, p. 13). Nine French Muslim associations including the Union des organisations islamiques and the Fédération nationale des musulmans de France said in a statement: 'If the minister's declarations were put into effect, what alternative would France's Muslims have but to withdraw their children from public schools' (*Le Monde*, 1994c, p. 12)? The Muslims did not understand why the school system that has always tolerated crucifixes or yarmulkes was now against the *hijab*. In my interview with a dozen or more Maghrebins men and women going to the noon Friday prayer in Paris, I gathered a collective practicing Muslim protest against the banning of the *hijab*. All of them thought it was shocking that France had singled out the Islamic scarf to be ostentatious among all other religious symbols such as the kippa and the cross. They affirmed that the *hijab* is the Islamic traditional dress code and not ideological. Even secular Maghrebins, who represent the mainstream of the immigrant body in France, thought similarly. They all generally sympathized with the practicing Muslims by saying that the practice of the *hijab* is their culture. Although some of them criticized the tradition of the *hijab* as outdated, they were nevertheless against its banning. They considered it an act against human rights.<sup>3</sup> Why has the *hijab* provoked such polemic? How do religious symbols and signs of cultural differences become manifest and even a loaded issue? The *hijab* is not just a shawl anymore. It has had meanings and connotations imposed on it by the media and the dominant culture that range

from backward, religious, Islamist, extremist, proselytism and, importantly, it is seen also as a sign of inferiority, oppression, passivity, and docility. The French media and their political officials have determined how one sees the *hijab* in France: the media demeaned the scarf when French newspapers such as *Le Monde* pictured the *hijab* in caricatures that were deliberately exaggerated to produce grotesque effects in the reader's imagination. The French media have yet to present it in its basic form as a traditional and cultural dress code for the Muslim women. Rather they presented it to allude to the emergence of fundamentalism in France and warn against the rise in social status of the Islamists through school. Why is the *hijab* so much resented? Why were the cross and the kippa not included in this ban? The claim to protect secularism would have been more justifiable if Islam was not singled out. The ban of the *hijab* seems to have been a clear expression of the growing resentment against the Muslim community in France, an effort to undermine its growing activities and its ties with the Islamists in other countries. A commentary published in *Le Monde* said, 'The wearing of the Islamic scarf has often become an arena of combat for radical Muslim fundamentalists who are fighting secularism, testing the resistance of French society in the immensely sensitive area of the school' (1994d, p. 10).

The media made generalizations in a selective and a reductive process that have had negative effect on the perception of Muslims in France and elsewhere: (1) the media showed that this is how Muslims treat their daughters and train them into proselytism; and (2) these people are in 'our' country and could turn into fundamentalists applying the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) in France, therefore injecting fear: an Islamic threat to liberal values. The *hijab* then becomes a representation of Islam through the media, designed to show religious inferiority and irrationality.

### **Islamic Identity and the Question of Integration**

In the Third Republic (1871–1946) schools were decreed secular, free and obligatory in order to build the French nation around the idea of *laicity* which was designed to make public schools available to all children. But during that era there wasn't any significant Muslim immigrant community in France. Now, after more than 60 years there is a second generation of Muslims in France. The laws are made to serve people, including minorities; therefore France has to accommodate the new cultural demands of a significant and crucial community in France that originated from the Maghreb. Why has the understanding of Islam been such a very difficult thing to achieve? French government has a policy of cultural and spiritual dialogue with the Muslim and the Arab worlds. This has produced schools and institutes such as IMA (l'Institut du Monde Arabe) which regularly organizes seminars and conferences and publishes books dealing with Islam and the Arab world. Their role contradicts the superficialities that have shaped the French public image of Islam and Muslims. The experts and objective scholars had a lot of work to do to deconstruct the accumulation of intellectual trash and statements such as the 'monolithic Islam', 'Islamic mind set' and the oppressiveness of the *hijab*, which were forged by right wing writers and popular journals and the media. The rise of the right wing has forged racist ideas and



xenophobic discourse against immigrant communities (see Bulmer and Solomos, 1998, p. 823). The incident of the *hijab* has given new importance to the issue of immigration and ethnicity/race. The ethnic and religious categories became infused with essentialist characteristics: 'Islam: the *jihād* culture'. The National Front, Jean Marie Le Pen's party, which advocates the expulsion of immigrants and preserving an authentic national French culture, is more popular than ever. The National Front vote has increased steadily since 1981, growing from 0.3% of the electorate in 1981 to 9.9% in 1988, and almost 15% in the first round of voting in 1997. Bayrou's policy brings into question the issue of integration. It treats Muslims as displaced people temporarily residing in France. When Husseyin Konus, a Turkish Imam, had been in France when he proclaimed that the law of Allah had to be obeyed before the laws of the Fifth Republic, he was deported on the orders of Charles Pasqua, Interior Minister (Le Monde, 1994d, p. 10). What would have happened if a Christian minister/priest or a Jewish rabbi had said similar things?

Islam is an identity for many North African immigrants in France not in only the religious meaning to have a sense of history and direction for their lives. More importantly, it is a social bond for these people who live the common experience of marginalization. Identity is about belonging, emphasizing what the Maghrebin immigrants have in common with some people and what set them apart from others. Identity gives the Maghrebin immigrant through Islam a sense of personal location in the global diverse and western society of France, and provides him/her with some stability in a harsh environment through emphasizing particularity and variety; it also defines gender and social relations. Some Muslim women rediscover faith and identity through the *hijab*. In reality the French interact rarely with Muslims, only academically or for a gathering around couscous and sweet 'thé à la mente' listening to Ray (Algerian) music. The French assimilationist model seems to lack its true meaning. This limited interaction is rooted in the colonial relationship. In the colonial period in Algeria, Frantz Fanon observed that 'in the large population centers it is altogether commonplace to hear a European confess acidly that he has never seen the wife of an Algerian he has known for twenty years' (1965, p. 41).

These Muslims in France found themselves living with a variety of contradictory identities as Arab or Berber, black or white, religious or secular, westernized or traditional, man or woman, immigrant or citizen, and so on. All these elements often represent a struggle for allegiance. Tahar Ben Jelloun thinks that the struggle of North Africans in France is more complicated than the identity problem. He proposes: 'It's a problem of paternity or, more accurately, of maternity: the France that witnessed the birth of [North Africans] is behaving like an embarrassed stepmother, unaffectionate and unjust' (1997, pp. 143–44).

From this perspective the secular Christian national identity is a form of collective identity. The defense of this identity against the threat of Islamism gets into the most clichéd nationalism and produces racist attitudes toward Muslim immigrants. What we are witnessing here is that the dominant culture is policing the non-dominant culture to insure the cogency of the dominant culture and label the non-dominant Muslim group as subversive. The *hijab* was seen as challenging to the French cultural homogeneity. The debate about the *hijab*

generated identity politics that provided space for Muslims to assert their voice and experience in France. Identity politics has allowed the silenced and marginalized to focus on the Islamic elements that constitute their identity. Some Muslim groups or associations especially the militant groups refuse any close contiguity with the dominant groups. They emphasize their own separateness. Maghrebin immigrants (especially the working class newcomers) who found themselves because of the feeling of exclusion questioning their identity may become self-consciously Muslims, giving importance to every thing Islamic where before it may have been negative to be visibly religious, to wear the headscarf or other 'Islamic' garments such as the *litham* (face cover), *Haik* (a square cloth covering the face and the whole body) or *Jellaba* (a long hooded cloak) (see Bulmer and Solomos, 1998, pp. 826–27). Mohamed Arkoun, who offers new analysis of Islam, expressed his concerns about the lack of understanding of Islam in the west. He argues: 'Islamic culture, in fact, is not reducible to the stereotypes articulated by the Christian religion and European cultures ever since the thirteenth century' (Arkoun, 1994, p. 1). He emphasizes that the struggle is not only directed to deconstruct the western misrepresentations, but equally against political Islam. He says: 'Muslim apologists together with Islamic militants have transformed what is, in essence, an ideological specificity constructed by the western scientific study of Islam into historical and doctrinal "authenticity" that only Islam has' (1994, p. 1).

The French secularism carried out in Bayrou's policy gave mixed signals to the Muslim community in France. The Muslims were deceived by French hospitality and integration. They found instead of religious freedom, which was supposed to be sanctioned by a secular law, a biased regime in which the Muslims were the target of discrimination and xenophobia. The incident of the *hijab* and the debate it has generated revealed what the dominant French opinion is of Arabs and their religion. The media and their experts essentialized Islam and the 'Muslim race' and dehistoricized difference. They confused what is historical, cultural and political for biological and genetic traits. Therefore the media is abstracting the 'the *hijab*' from its historical and cultural and political settings.

### **Feminists' Positions**

Colonialism and the westernization of the Islamic world gave rise to new meanings of the *hijab*. During the independence movements in the 1950s the *hijab* became a dual symbol for the westernized feminist movement: it symbolized seclusion and oppression for the Islamists and for most laywomen it symbolized resistance to colonialism and westernization.

Leila Ahmed in her thoughtful study about Women and Gender in Islam rightly said:

[The *hijab*] attests to the fact that, at least as regards the Islamic world, the discourses of resistance and rejection are inextricably informed by the languages and ideas developed and disseminated by the West to no less degree than are the languages of those

openly advocating emulation of the West or those who, like Frantz Fanon or Nawal El-Saadawi, are critical of the West but nonetheless ground themselves in intellectual assumptions and political ideas, including a belief in the rights of the individual, formulated by Western bourgeois capitalism and spread over the globe as a result of Western hegemony. (1992, pp. 235–36)

The secular feminist movements in the Muslim world which emerged in the context of western imperialism connect the veil with the seclusion of women, and this seclusion ensures the status of men as the provider and the guardian of the women and seems to westerners to be a direct consequence and deviation from the master's relationship to the slave. In this context, Fuad Zakaria, a well known Egyptian modern interpreter of Islam, states clearly his position against the traditional fundamentalist view on women:

The contemporary Muslim fundamentalist view of women implies a duality: overt praise and flattery and covert humiliation and degradation. Their teachings in this regard are essentially to perpetuate the degraded and marginalized state of women which is made to appear as the most emancipated and honourable. (Zakaria, 1988, p. 29)

Nawal El Saadawi, a prominent Arab feminist voice, perceives the veil as a symbol of subjugation. In most of her writing, she articulates clearly her emphasis on unveiling the mind of women:

The call to liberate the mind, or to raise the veil from the mind (...) is an essential for the liberation of the Arab person, man or woman, but especially woman. For she is ruled by two authorities (inside and outside the home) which deprive her of her rights over her own mind and body and from becoming the moving force behind her own deeds. (El Saadawi, 1988, p. 21)

Most secular feminists advocate the fundamental importance of the individual, self-reliance and personal independence. These principles are in opposition with the deep-rooted Islamic traditions of the notions of family and extended family. In espousing the western family and male–female relationship models gave rise to conflicting beliefs and confusing practices. There exists not only this division among men and women, but also a sort of schizophrenia in between the interpreted laws and practiced traditions that women are subjected to and the morals of gender equality that the *Qur'an* promotes and outlines. There is the idea of the woman being the subject of a man's desire, while there is the interpretation of the Islamic law which required the veiling of women. Fatima Mernissi, Moroccan sociologist, representing a western feminist discourse in her book about women and Islam, believes that 'the *hijab* is a response to sexual aggression' and 'a method of controlling sexuality' (Mernissi, 1994, p. 182). This started the man's career with far more social, political and economic leverage than women had enjoyed during the time of the Prophet. The *Qur'an* says that men and women are equal, yet when many women in Islamic societies

have gone beyond the scope of the family, they have been chastised for doing so. This promotes further ambiguity regarding the position of women in Muslim societies. In her book *Islam and Democracy*, Mernissi explores how the sacred texts of Islam are used both by feminists and defenders of democracy as well as the fundamentalists who oppose them (see Mernissi, 1992).

The Islamist women disagree with the position of the secular feminists who see the *hijab* as a symbol of male domination and female subservience. The Islamist women see it as a symbol for struggle against encroaching materialism and imperialism and more importantly a symbol for their identity that is rooted in their own tradition.

The *hijab* should also be perceived as a class symbol. The discourses on the *hijab*, Islamic or secular, go further to discuss issues related not only to the dress codes, but also to family structures, individualism vs. family groups, unisex society and sexually segregated society, modernity and tradition and imperialism and resistance; these discourses reflect political class interests. Traditionally the rulers and the mercantile aristocracy were the standard bearers regarding the dress code. They have introduced since the seventh century through their harem the *hijab* (in the meaning of covering the whole body even the face with a *litham*) to most women of the society. In the contemporary Islamic world, the middle class sets up standards for social behaviors regarding gender issues and the dress code. In the twentieth century, middle class women unveiled themselves as a symbol of gender equality and most of the time under the insistence of their husbands who meant it as a symbol of modernity. In 1923 Egypt, the famous unveiling of Huda Sha'rawi, a central feminist activist (1879–1947), was an affirmation of the will of women to be considered as full citizens. Many scholars, westerners and Arabs, considered Sha'rawi's act as an important symbol of female emancipation (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 174–79). A caveat: the veil was mostly an issue for the wealthiest women in Egyptian society, since only most of them wore it. In Morocco, I remember being told by my parents that in the 1950s and the 1960s women, especially Berber women, who in the countryside did not use the veil (here meaning a *litham* 'face cover') when they came to the city to visit or to dwell adopted it as a symbol of urbanization and modernity. What is ironic is that in this era the westernized middle class women of the cities started to come out with no veil. This type of the veil (as a face cover) is disappearing in Morocco and most Muslims admit now that the veil as a face cover is not an Islamic requirement but the *hijab* is and it must be worn as an act of modesty.

Pro-*hijab* Muslims in France acknowledge that the Muslim children do not choose the *hijab*, but they argue whether the Christian children choose to wear a long skirt rather than pants, and go to church every Sunday. They also ask whether the Jewish boy chooses to wear a kippa.<sup>4</sup> Obviously the culture of the religion is not chosen. In sum, the Muslims I interviewed wondered why the Muslim children in France are expected to choose their cultural and religious symbols for their identity. For them, this is a clear denial and a real resentment against Muslims and Islam. Once again the Muslim people have been misconstrued in a neo-Orientalist discourse. It is a fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslim children do not conform to the Islamic traditional dress code. If we

trust the statistics, it is reported that an estimated number of 700 young women students wore the *hijab* to school (*Le Monde*, 1994d, p. 10). Yet, the popular western discourse sees the Islamic symbols and especially the *hijab* as a sign of backwardness of the Muslim society. It is not my aim here to discuss in depth the question of the *hijab* from a feminist perspective or to investigate the male dominance among Muslim people which is a crucial issue of inquiry by itself, but I am interested and concerned here with the interplay of 'race', religion, immigration and citizenship, because the debate was not about equality of Muslim men and women in France but was and still is rather about the question of identity and equality between the French Christian citizens and immigrant Muslim citizens.

The discourse on the *hijab* is not new in France; it is deeply rooted in the colonial discourse. For the French in the colonial period the veil demarcates the North African society and its feminine component. In the words of Frantz Fanon:

This enabled the colonial administration to define a precise political doctrine: 'If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity of resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight'. It is the situation of women that was accordingly taken as the theme of action. (1965, pp. 37–8)

In the words of Fanon, speaking as an Algerian of the French mentality: 'We want to make the Algerian ashamed of the fate that he metes out to women' (1965, p. 38).

## Challenges Ahead

Bayrou's policy proved that France is still reluctant to accept Islam as part of the west. France remains, for the moment, a place Muslims come to seek work and have dual directional transactions between their homeland and their host country. Up to the present when such Muslims die, they usually prefer to be buried in their country of origin—despite the existence of Muslim cemeteries in France. But what will the situation be when the same issue arises for their children or grandchildren? Will they have any country other than France? To what degree and in what form will they be Muslims? Does not the principal issue for Islam in France rest in its capacity to lose or reproduce to change or exchange itself in the generations that are to come?<sup>5</sup> The second-generation immigrants can be seen as 'producers of diasporic cultures and identities'. The Maghrebins have negotiated a collective identity. In a way they are global because they transcend 'the national and the traditional' (Soysal, 2000, p. 11). Thus it should not come as a surprise that the Maghreb youth in France listen to rap music as much as they listen to Ray music.

Difficulties in integration in the host/residence society made most of the immigrant working class focus on planning their lives in two countries: to work hard in the host society and retire with a nice pension in the country of origin.

Some feel torn apart that they cannot live a decent life in a socially and culturally difficult environment and they cannot go back home and if they do it would not be as expected. The governments of the Maghreb seem to be less concerned about the fate of their émigrés, even though they are much interested in their hard currency. It is the savings of hard labor the émigrés send to their homeland to build houses, help their needy relatives or invest in businesses. The choice is clear the émigrés have to find ways through which they adapt to life in France or go back home and face harsher conditions. The difficulties of adjusting in the French context stimulate a great romanticization of home to which the Muslim immigrants cannot go back. The feeling of exclusion and disintegration has stimulated the immigrants to focus on their *arabité* and their religious belonging. The result is a divisive diversity in France.

France has adopted what seems to be a fair model to integrate non-Europeans in its society as full-fledged citizens. This model is known as the 'assimilationist model' which in fact is an old colonial discriminating model. In reality, it does not mean integration, because it does not mean political representation and participation of Muslims or recognition of Islam. Muslims need recognition for their religion for their existence. Differences cannot be erased under the process of integration. Why must the past life of the Muslim immigrants be annulled, and why at the same time must a special category called 'origine' or background be added to the qualifications of every immigrant? No matter what the economic status of the immigrant, he/she is always reminded of the background. This background finds meaning in the diaspora. The diaspora is the location where the dispossession and the dislocation of the Muslim immigrants can be understood.<sup>6</sup> I am using the concept as an analytical category to capture the lived experience of the Muslim immigrants. It is a community of people who were dispossessed in their country of origin politically and economically and whose majority was forced to leave the homeland to search for a better life elsewhere. Most of the Maghrebins found themselves mainly in France as a first choice because of the availability of work and the familiarity with the language and culture as a result of the French colonial presence in the Maghreb. France admitted them because it needed male workers and cheap labor for its economic growth.

The immigrants left part of themselves behind and have started a new life in the arrival/host/residence country. They therefore live a dialectical dilemma. As Tahar Ben Jelloun puts it speaking of the Maghrebin émigré:

In France, he dreams of the country left behind. In his own country he dreams of France. Between a host country that is hostile and a native land that is indifferent, he carries his bag full of objects and illusions. That is his way of defending himself. (1997, p. 173)

Thus, these immigrants have a double attachment in culture and rights as resident/guest workers/citizen and sometimes double citizen, and they also have dual directional transactions in economic activities. Thus this diaspora can be seen then as a double space. This paradox is reflected in a conflict in citizenry and autochthony, in rights and identities, in local and global discourses.

The concept of citizenship as belonging to the national collective has been challenged. The ethnic composition of France is increasingly changing since the 1960s, the great independence era in Africa. The discourse on human rights has increased. International organizations such as UNESCO have increased an awareness of the rights to one's own culture. Collective identity has been perceived as a human right. This has encouraged, enforced and legitimized forms of solidarity (see Soysal, 2000, pp. 5–9)

In mobilizing their identity the Muslims use global discourse. Two sets of dynamisms are in conflict. There is no conformance between the territorial definition of citizenship and the nationalist definition. It is a 'negative citizenry' for Muslims. The model of citizenship that the nation state has installed does not take into account the cultures of the immigrants' experience. The immigrants don't see themselves fully integrated in the society and therefore they focus more on their background. We are witnessing a process toward which some changes may and should happen in the way the model of citizenship was constructed: it must respond to the new challenges to accept, respect and include inconsistencies.

Conceptualizing the Muslim immigrant community as diaspora is part of the global discourse of identity. In the global discourse, the Muslim community finds legitimacy for their demands to recognize their cultural distinctiveness and group rights. By means of this claim they are creating a category outside the formula 'us vs. them', a category that transcends national belonging. However, it must be noted that the focus on inconsistent or exclusionary practices may increase the rigidity of the cultural category, which will meet resentment from the dominant culture. This latter through its apparatus will make more restrictive immigration policies. The crucial remedy to this dilemma is for the Muslim immigrants in France to ask: 'Who have we become?' instead of 'who are we?' or the sole emphasis on 'From where do we come?' They must avoid relying on the ideas of Muslim scholars from the homeland and to think for themselves to produce Islamic thoughts in European setting. There is a need of a rethinking and reassessment of Islamic texts and doctrines and some Muslim thinkers have already begun this process such as Tariq Ramadan and Soheib Bencheikh. Ramadan, a Muslim author based in Geneva, and grandson of Hasan al-Banna, founder in 1928 of the Muslim Brotherhood, is one of the great advocates of a European Islam (Ramadan, 1999). Soheib Bencheikh, the grand *mufti* of Marseille, represents the progressive Islam in France. He has denounced Islamic fundamentalism and offers a new form of Islam that is complacent with France's secular society. He is also in favor of a democratic representative council of Muslims in France through which the state could have a meaningful dialogue with its Muslim community (Bencheikh, 1998).

Amin Maalouf, Arab and French writer, attempted in his recent book *Les identités meurtrières* (*Murderous identities*) to understand and define some of the identity-driven phenomena that is being experienced currently, especially the whole issue regarding the question of identity that is nurtured by religion. He concludes that 'each of us should be encouraged to assume his own diversity, to conceive his/her identity as the total of its various elements rather than to confuse it with a single identity, elevated as an extreme sense of belonging and

an instrument of exclusion, often an instrument of war' (Maalouf, 1998, p. 205). Thus, new approaches and innovative methods to counter the western 'imaginary', which is full of negative stereotypes and misconceptions promulgated about the Muslims, Islam and the Maghreb from which a significant and a historically crucial community in France originated, are needed to help us understand and recognize our global diverse world. Muslims should find in their language and in their culture what could help to build a common civilization and harmony.

## Conclusion

The debate of the *hijab* led to a negative policy towards Muslims because the banning of it is an infringement of personal rights and freedom of religion. Even though France has signed the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees religious freedom, the ban has showed the intolerance of France towards Muslims and increased a disrespect of the religion and the culture of Islam.

The French policy regarding the question of the *hijab* was suppressive and has increased the alienation of the Muslim community and complicated the process of integration in a civil just society. Even for the majority of Maghrebins who are not religious (some even atheists) they are perceived as Muslims associated with what this religion is imagined to be. Islam in France in the media and public discourse is a 'racial' category; therefore, the media valorized the very ground of the racism and cultural prejudice that objective responsible intellectuals are trying to get rid of (see Bulmer and Solomos, 1998, p. 828). I believe that the school is the best way through which to teach people to live in harmony in diverse community with respect for differences, be it Islam, Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism. Perhaps the school should have a specific curriculum that includes the teaching of Islamic culture. Even secular values, Bayrou's main concern, should be taught by persuasion rather than coercion. Muslims who are concerned about their religion in France could learn to accept to be ruled by a non-Islamic law government and assume certain obligations towards a meaningful integration. When confronted with problems of incompatibility of the teaching of Islam and the laws of France, it is common sense to expect three principles—social justice, human rights and gender equalities—to be the backbone of the debate for all parties.

## Notes

1. It is not my attention to investigate any Islamic radical group. I am fully aware of the existence of network of *jihad* in France and Europe (see Sfeir, 1997). These small groups such as *Takfir* do not represent the Muslim population in France. Such groups articulate the economic and social discrimination and uncertainty that most Muslims face in France in a very radical way. Kepel (2000) calls them Salafiste jihadist with ultra-rigorous reading of the Islamic teaching which in reality is not accepted by the majority of Muslims. I have therefore interviewed mainly the practicing Muslims with no affiliation to any political or proselytizing group. I was interested in the voice of these Muslims who believe that they are misrepresented by being perceived through the lens of these radical Muslims.



2. For more information about the *hijab* and its origins, see Fatima Mernissi's *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*.
3. Most of my interviews were conducted in Paris in the spring of 1995.
4. My interviews in Paris.
5. The new phenomenon in France and all Europe is the presence of Islam. The increasing number of Muslims is changing the religious composition of France.
6. For more discussion on Muslim diaspora in Europe, see Riva Kastoryano (1999).

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