VOICES BEHIND THE VEIL

Using Anthropology, Feminism, and History to Account for Why the French Banned Muslim Girls from Using Headscarves

By

Kelsey Keegan
Senior Anthropology Major

Franklin Pierce University
Rindge, NH 03461

This Thesis is in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Graduation With Honors in Anthropology From Franklin Pierce University
Introduction

The year 2004 was significant in many ways. While the world waited for the Olympics to return to its roots in Athens, some Arab countries in the Middle East changed history by moving toward their first democratic elections. However, amid all of this positive excitement, the French government passed a law that created a firestorm of controversy that continues to rage. On March 15th of that year, France’s National Assembly and Senate banned the wearing of headscarves and other religious symbols in educational settings. The law went into effect in September when French students returned to school from summer holiday. Those who arrived at school with headscarves were asked to remove the garment, and, if they refused, they were suspended and eventually expelled.

Although this law allegedly focuses on all religions, it has created much speculation about whether it targeted young Muslim women. Anthropologist John Bowen, author of Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves, associates the ban with France’s efforts to stigmatize Muslims. He gives examples of these, identifying attitudes and policies associated with “anti-Semitism, anti-Islamic fundamentalism, growing ghetto-ization [of Muslims] in poor suburbs, and [blaming Muslims for] the breakdown of order in the classroom” (Bowen 2007:1). As a result of my current anthropological studies and recent travels to Europe and the Middle East, Bowen's ethnography caught my attention and helped me "unpack" western Europe’s current religious politics.

I was briefly introduced to the social and political issues surrounding the burka and hijab in several of my undergraduate courses. I took courses that dealt with issues having to do with

---

1 A burka is a long garment that covers the body of a woman with a hood that covers her head.

2 A hijab is a head scarf that covers the hair of a woman.
human sexuality, the history of the 20th century, and archaeology and gender. Although these classes discussed the controversial subject of hijab, nothing was more valuable than the experience of traveling abroad in a Muslim country. During my junior year of college, I travelled to both Turkey and Egypt as part of my study-abroad experience. I was immersed in the beauty and reality of the Muslim culture, a culture that is often misunderstood and misrepresented by the American media and public.

Along with my travels in the Middle East, I also took a two-week excursion to Paris, France. Living in a small tent with several of my peers, we found that the French stereotypes were simply movie fodder and unrealistic. The French people greeted us with much hospitality and were more than accommodating, often translating street signs and maps, helping us navigate their metro system, and even offering to cook us fine French cuisine! The people of France were so engaging that when I returned stateside I decided to begin French lessons, to better communicate with many of my new friends and acquaintances.

Although English is the new business language of the world, originally French was the international language, and therefore it was not uncommon to hear it spoken widely in Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa where the French used to have colonies. In addition to the French language being prominent throughout the world, France has contributed many important values to modern nation-states. One example is a secular world view. The separation of Church and state is found in many modern countries today because people of the Western world, like the French, believe that religion threatens the individual rights of citizens.

France is historically known for tenaciously holding on to their traditional French cultural values, language, ideals, and customs. As the unification of Europe into the European Union makes it harder for countries to maintain their national identities, France continuous to offer its
secular ideals as something from which all Europe can benefit. Since the law of 1905, that prevents the government from sanctioning any one religion in particular, France has stood fast, making every effort to maintain its secular ideals as one of its key cultural values.

Although France prides itself on its efforts to remain secular, it has recently faced challenges as an influx of Muslim immigrants occurred following France’s withdrawal from its North African colonies. As this population grew in size, their cultural traditions, much different from France’s, became increasingly visible. This resulted in the 2004 law which banned the wearing of hijab in schools.

From a narrow perspective, one might assume that this law is the result of French Muslim cultural traditions being in conflict with French nationalism and their secular beliefs. Certainly Bowen explores this argument. The headscarf has become a symbol of anti-French values, and the French have taken a stand against it, while Muslim girls insist on wearing hijab, because it is a symbol of their cherished religious beliefs, which the French appear to be demeaning. The two groups seem at cross purposes.

Tricia Danielle Keaton’s takes another approach however. She uses a feminist framework to explain how Muslim girls, in what she calls the Outer Cities, deal with the collision of cultural, religious, and sexist expectations. On one hand, she exposes some of the sexist underpinnings of the typical Muslim family. These families are patriarchal by nature, and, from Keaton’s point of view, young women, in particular, are discriminated against. She points out that the 2004 law does not affect Muslim boys and men, but only Muslim girls.

3 Outer Cities are impoverished suburbs of major cities such as Paris.

4 Keaton emphasizes that it is difficult to generalize about ALL Muslim families in France.
At first glance, this same law may seem to offer sanctuary for young Muslim girls from oppressive, sexist Muslim traditions. Yet it does not always work out that way. In her book, *Muslim Girls and the Other France*, Keaton discusses how Muslim girls and women are dealing with sexist and racial discrimination in France (Keaton 2006).

Joan Wallach Scott takes yet another tack. She asks why the Muslim population has been targeted. In her book, *The Politics of the Veil* (2007), she argues that the immigration of Northern Africans into western European countries caused the French to confront their failed colonial history in Northern Africa. This in turn led to laws such as the one passed in 2004 which banned *hijab*.

In this thesis I examine how these three different thinkers account for the 2004 law. Using critical-thinking skills, I compare and contrast the data and the arguments of the theorists --- Bowen, the anthropologist; Keaton, the feminist; and Scott, the historian --- to identify the theory that I think best accounts for why the French outlawed Muslim “covering” by girls in schools.

**Methodology**

When I began to think of doing a senior thesis in Anthropology, I discovered that two main kinds of theses are possible: an empirical one where the researcher gathers original (primary) data at a field site and an analytical one where the researcher studies high-quality scholarly sources, (1) examining closely how the experts construct and present their data and arguments and (2) evaluating how good a job they do in accounting for the problem they are researching.

I am very interested in the Anthropology of France. As I mentioned above, I visited France, while studying abroad, and had a very positive experience. I would very much like to do an empirical piece of research in this country, and I may well do so if I go on to graduate
school. However, at this time, I am finished my undergraduate degree in Rindge, New Hampshire, so it is not possible for me to go to France. Thus, I have chosen to do an analytical thesis.

In preparing to write this thesis, I surveyed the literature on the 2004 French law. I was able to identify three very different schools of thought on the topic. I have mentioned them above. They are Bowen, an anthropologist; Scott, an historian; and Keaton, a feminist. In this thesis I analyze each of their works. First I describe and summarize how they account for why the French government outlawed “covering” by Muslim girls. Then, using critical thinking skills, I compare and contrast how they have presented their data and arguments. Finally, I go on to critique their works in general and identify the theory that I think best accounts for why the Muslim veil was outlawed by the French.

Bowen and Keaton collected empirical data. They used different kinds of methodologies, including participant-observation (one of the hallmarks of Anthropology), direct and indirect interviews, studying the media, and reviewing scholarly sources. Their data are tremendously rich with information, allowing me to compare and contrast their individual conclusions with some confidence.

Bowen’s main methodology was formal and informal interviewing. He completed many interviews for his 2007 ethnography, Why The French Don’t Like Headscarves. Much of his research was done before the September 11 tragedy in New York and before the 2004 law was put into effect in France, allowing him to describe the opinions of the French before and after these important events. He interviewed a wide range of acquaintances he met while abroad, including many officials and scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. He also relied on the scholarships of others to inform his work (Bowen 2007: 3-7).
Keaton’s feminist approach on the topic is well documented in her 2006 book, *Muslim Girls and the Other France*. Her lengthy and exciting research entailed participant-observation with young girls in their schools, many ethnographic observations, interviews, surveys, and journals compiled over almost 8 years. She spent her time in the economically-depressed Outer Cities, just outside of Paris. Keaton explains that these impoverished:

“...high-rise public housing complexes that are on the periphery of urban centers...risk becoming little more than feeders for prisons...” (Keaton 2006: 2).

She attended classes with her young informants, and she even gathered information from their files at schools, to better compare socioeconomic and familial information. Focusing on four girls, Keaton was able to maintain contact with them throughout the duration of her project; thus they are her main informants during her research. Keaton also worked with several other girls, who did not maintain contact throughout her research; but those interviews, formal and informal, help her to formulate her conclusions (Keaton 2006: 26-31).

In *The Politics of the Veil* (2007), Scott discusses the importance of understanding the historical contexts surrounding the ban of the veil.

“Without history we aren’t able to grasp the implications of the ideas being advanced; we don’t hear the resonances of words; we don’t see all the symbols contained, for example, in a piece of cloth that serves as a veil (Scott 2006: 8).”

Scott has been studying French history for 40 years. She describes her methodology as “close reading of arguments advanced in their specific political and historical contexts” (Ibid.: 8). She focuses on French history to understand the current ban, rather than on international history. For example, September 11 and the United States are not part of her explanation. Nor is the current Israeli/Palestinian conflict central to her study. She confines her analysis to France, believing that other countries’ situations are affected by their own unique set of relations
with Muslim cultures. She states that one cannot generalize. She stresses “the local nature of the imagined general conflict between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’” (Ibid.: 9).

France’s relations to their ex-colonies and immigrants from them are central to her explanation. Scott mentions that “Muslim voices” are not mentioned in her book, due to their under-representation during all of the hearings and rulings. Her study is informed by using many scholarly works, newspapers, and political documents. Her overall goal is to answer the question “why the veil.”

**The Law Against Hijab and Who is Affected by It**

In March of 2004 the French government passed a law that banned wearing conspicuous signs of religious affiliation in public schools. Article 1 of the law is key. It states:

“In public elementary, middle and high schools, the wearing of signs or clothing which conspicuously manifest students’ religious affiliations is prohibited.” (Scott 2007:1)

There is also a definition of “conspicuous.”

“The clothing and religious signs prohibited are conspicuous signs such as a large cross, a veil, or a skullcap. Not regarded as signs indicating religious affiliation are discreet signs, which can be, for example, medallions, small crosses, stars of David, hands of Fatima, or small Korans.” (Scott 2007: 1)

Scott notes that the law technically applies to Jewish boys wearing skullcaps and Christian children wearing large crosses; however, the law targeted Muslim girls, and it is against them that it has been applied (Ibid.: 1-2)

In modern France, the synonymous terms "headscarves", "veils", and "voiles" have all developed a negative stigma that is far from their original meaning. In order to fully understand the customs behind the veil, it is important to understand who “covers.” In France, before the law was passed, a survey found that only 14 percent of Muslim women polled wore hijab (Ibid.: 3). Le monde surveyed French teachers, and 91 percent of those polled reported that they had never seen a “covered” student in the schools where they teach, and 65 percent had never seen a
“veiled” girl in their class in their career (Keaton 2006: 181). Clearly the vast majority of Muslim girls in France, for whatever reason, had made the decision not to “cover.” And Scott goes on to note that most Muslim girls had assimilated to Western values and the way in which the French dress (Ibid.: 4).

Two sociologists, Francoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar, interviewed those French Muslim girls who “cover” about why they did so. Their research has led them to describe three different ways in which the girls used the voile, based on when they started to “cover” and for how long they did so. Some girls wore the veil during their pubescent years and into their adolescence. That is, they mostly wore a veil during middle-school and eventually abandon its usage in high school (Bowen 2007: 70). It is possible that the use of the veil helped them to adjust to the physical and emotional changes that accompany puberty. Other girls started wearing headscarves in their later years of high school, even into universities. These girls offered several reasons for “covering,” such as for religious reasons, for beginning post-secondary education, and for preparing to enter the workforce (Ibid.:71). A third group was made up of immigrant women who had worn a veil since birth in societies where it was the norm to do so. Gaspard and Khosrokhavar concluded that Muslim girls and women in France “cover” for very different reasons; thus, it is hard to generalize about the whole population.

How the 2004 law has impacted on the lives of Muslim girls, and how it will do so in the future, is under study. In May 2004 an ABC broadcast discussed the issues surrounding the veil with several French citizens. In this broadcast a young French-Muslim girl discusses her recent expulsion from her elementary school. Hilal and her mother are both Muslim and live in France. Hilal’s reasoning's for wearing the veil are purely religious, according to this interview, “It’s really important for me. It’s in my religion. It’s in the Koran (Williams 2004).” Encouraged by
other students and her mother, Hilal enrolled in a new school. However, non-Muslim parents protested her attendance. In response the school took action, and this young girl faces another expulsion as a result of pressures she may be too young to understand.

In the same broadcast, Thomas Milicent, a French lawyer who recently converted to Islam, defended young Hilal. He stated:

““This is very, very, very hard being a child and seeing that people who are suppose to teach you, to give you all the values for life, are fighting against you, are your enemy (Williams 2004).”

Milicent sees the new law as a ploy for reelection by government officials. He accuses them of taking advantage of this new law in hopes of gaining conservative votes. He says that these girls are paying the “political price” of government officials who want to be seen attacking an “invasion” by the Muslim population. But since most of the girls being affected were born and raised in France, Milicent questions whether these politicians’ position has any validity.

With the government’s ban and the increased pressures to enforce the law, many schools are forced to take action against the French Muslim girls. Munteha is a case in point. She is a 13 year old girl who was expelled from school for refusing to take off her headscarf. Her mother, Hatice, is exasperated.

“What I’m most afraid of is that they [the students] will not be able to do what they wish to do. I just feel that I prepared them for a future which is black with people around who don’t understand us (Williams 2004).”

Muslim girls who are expelled face futures without an education. This of course will affect their abilities to find the kind of employment they want when they are adults. In fact there are concerns that the anti-

Muslim women be denied jobs if they “cover?” Sabrina Neddone, a lawyer who studied abroad, says,

“I mean even for adult women like me. I am doing a PhD but I am conscious that it’s going to be very, very hard here in France to find a job just because I’m wearing a headscarf (Williams 2004).”

This leads us to ask several important questions, such as,
• What will happen to France’s unemployment rate if this law is held in place for many years?
• How much will a social safety net cost for these women?
• Will French-Muslims be forced to leave France to find work?
• How will this segregation affect France’s future?

John Bowen, Anthropologist: “It was never just about scarves.”

With the futures of young Muslim schoolgirls in question, anthropologist Bowen analyzes the French law banning the veil through a cultural relativist standpoint. His gaze extends beyond Muslim social issues, beyond racism and xenophobia. Rather he describes the 2004 ban as an extension of a 1905 law (Bowen 2007: 246). Since the passing of the laicité law of 1905, the French Republic has stood by its traditional French values as a way of maintaining a national identity and promoting cultural continuity for the posterity of the French people. Usually translated as "secularism,” laicité in the French Republic means something deeper. It is protection of the state and its citizens against the formidable power of the Church (Ibid.: 2).

According to Bowen, several important concerns led to the passage of the banning law. These are based on the philosophical assumptions surrounding laicité and what French society "ought to be." Bowen narrows these concerns into three categories that directly affect the modern French Republic: communal diversity and social networks, religious identities, and socio-economic class (Ibid.: 4-5). First, communal diversity and networking refer to the way that people from various backgrounds branch out and network with people like themselves. For example the burka or hijab facilitates Muslims networking with one another, as it acts as an immediate identifier. Thus, the French believe that headscarves are a very effective way for Muslims to develop a solid sense of Muslim community within the French Republic. This community has set itself apart from mainstream French society, and thus is suspect.
Bowen’s second point has to do with religious identities. Of particular concern to the French are the recent trends of international globalization and the radicalization of Islamism. As the global village shrinks, push-back from Muslim countries as modernization affects them and their traditions has caused the French concern. Bowen’s third point has to do with socio-economic backgrounds and class (Ibid.: 5). Many Muslim immigrants took refuge in (or were pushed into) France’s impoverished inner city developments, and the French recognize this and the way in which poverty and ethnic discrimination can lead to political and social unrest.

These three French concerns identified by Bowen are at the root of how he accounts for France’s passing of the 2004 law. These concerns all relate back to the secular ideals and traditions that have deep roots in France’s history, that make up France’s identity today, and that touch on France’s fears about what it is slowly becoming, both as part of the European Union and as part of a new, complex global village. Thus Bowen explains France’s immediate political decision to address these domestic and international anxieties by passing a protective law under the references of *lascie*. The headscarf became a convenient symbol of these external and internal forces threatening the secularist ideals held strong within the government and by the French people (Ibid.: 4).

Governmental debates about this commonly swirl around the ideas of *lascie* and how Muslims should “behave”,

“not in light of a firm legal and cultural framework, but in light of disappearing sense of certitude about what France was, is and will be. Hence the desperation; hence the urgency (Ibid.: 33).”

Bowen suggests that the French believe their traditional culture is under attack, and had this been any other religious group, symbol, or conflict, the French government would have placed the same amount of importance on initiating such a law. He succinctly adds, “It was never just about scarves (Ibid.: 66).”

Page 12
Bowen’s work suggests several questions concerning the legitimacy of the 2004 law.

- Will prohibiting the demonstration of foreign religious convictions and cultural traditions help to maintain a more French Republican lifestyle, even though communal diversity will cease to exist?
- Is there no place for "Islamism" in France, if "integration" is a one way affair?
- Should immigrants impoverished by the state sacrifice something more sacred than their financial future? In many ways the headscarves are the only thing left for these people to hold on to.
- Should *laciete* be used to eradicate religious and cultural differences, or should it act as a way to celebrate human diversity in France (Ibid.: 247)?

Either way, France is seemingly blind to the beauty of diversity, as it is steadfast in its protection of French Republican ideals and traditions.

**Trica Danielle Keaton - The Feminist**

The French pride themselves on honoring gender equality, and they associate Muslim culture with gender oppression. Keaton uses a feminist framework as she does in-depth ethnographic research on such controversial Muslim traditions as "honor killing, imposed veiling and seclusion, forced marriage, polygamy, repudiation, and excision"\(^5\) (Keaton 2006: 5).” The French believe that these kinds of acts threaten those individual civil rights that are taught in French schools.

At first glance the recent 2004 law aims at protecting Muslim girls against gender oppression that is found in the average French Muslim household. Traditionally Islamic culture depends on a strictly patriarchal kinship model, one that attempts to justify and defend the male gender role's dominance over the average Muslim family. Associated with Muslim patriarchy is gender segregation which involves keeping men and women separate. Women tend to be kept

---

\(^5\) Excision refers to female circumcision or genital mutilation, depending on how one perceives it. This tradition originated in the Nile Valley, but is now found in various parts of Africa. It is not technically associated with Islam, but culturally pre-dates this religion.
enclosed in a private, domestic space, while men are allowed full use of the public space. This has significant repercussions for women’s employment, autonomy, and political power.

In addition to gender stratification and segregation, several highly-publicized cases have caused alarm among the French. The French media reported the gruesome cases of a 59-year-old French resident, with African heritage, who was imprisoned for the genital mutilation\(^6\) of 48 girls in France. Another case documented the story of a young French girl who was held by her father in Senegal\(^7\) for a forced marriage. More brutal incidents have included the murders of several Muslim girls, and these cases involved important Muslim values such as "shame and honor, patriarchy, and machismo (Ibid.: 5)."

It is these concepts of a man’s honor and a woman’s modesty that are more valuable than the lives of the individuals. Thus, when violence occurs in Muslim communities, many cases go unreported to the authorities. In the case of a fourteen-year-old French Muslim student, Nazmiye, she began following French traditions and abandoning the traditional Muslim customs encouraged by her parents. She wore blue jeans and tennis shoes, leaving her headscarf at home in an attempt to integrate into French society. However, her family saw her non-traditional lifestyle as offensive and threatening to the their family values and to Muslim religion and culture. August 14, 1994, Nazmie was strangled to death by her brother, as her parents and other relatives watched on in approval. Her family’s reasoning’s entailed that she had "transgressed against the community's prohibitions and ridiculed her family's honor (Ibid.: 164)." Community members defended the actions of the brother, "...since it was a question of honor, it's normal that they would have killed their daughter (Ibid: 165)."

\(^6\) The author of this thesis has chosen to use the term genital mutilation.
\(^7\) Senegal was a French colony.
Sohane, an 18-year-old French Muslim who also chose to wear modern clothes, was brutally murdered as a result of adopting French traditions. Sohane was from an outer city in France, and she sought education and opportunities for jobs in a bigger city. However, these girls are often referred to as *putes*, translated to “whores” or “sluts,” by Muslim boys because they have chosen to abandon traditional Muslim values. October 4, 2002, Sohane was doused with gasoline and set on fire for refusing sexual advances from several teenage boys. Her defiance of Muslim traditions was the boys’ justification for her murder, the reason for the murderer and his friends to watch her roll on the ground in agony as she burned alive (Ibid.: XX).

Although the cases of Nazmayie and Sohane are horrible and brutal, many others are less dramatic; yet they prevent Muslim women from gaining the education and employment they want. In the case of Anita, a young girl attempting to complete her education, she did her homework in darkness at 3 am so that she had time to complete her other household duties before going to school. Anita was under forced servitude to her uncle and aunt, who required that her services and chores be done on time, every day. Her only freedom was at school, where she failed almost every class because of the extreme pressures at her uncle’s house. When interviewed, Anita expressed a mixture of pride and shame for being able to do so many household chores, as her friends at school did not have such a strenuous home life. By threatening Anita with a forced marriage in another town, her uncle and aunt kept her quiet about her servitude. Eventually Anita attempted suicide several times before turning to her only safe haven for help, the school (Ibid.: 167).

More severe cases of domestic slavery are documented regularly, as an estimated 2,000 women live as domestic slaves in France, where 98% of them are of African and Asian decent (Ibid.: 168). In her autobiography, *Une esclave moderne* (2000), Henriette Akofa discusses her
experiences as a domestic slave in France. Beaten, malnourished, cut off from the world, and subjected to worse punishments, Akofa suffered by the hands of two families during her domestic slavery. Her only hope came from a close by neighbor, who offered her amnesty and help; however, she was resistant to talk unless guaranteed that she would not be deported or arrested. These dangerous situations are what some Muslim girls in France are currently facing. Although not all Muslim women are brutalized and oppressed, many live in fear and servitude for most of their lives. Unfortunately most attempted interventions end badly, as the people who try to escape their imprisonment tend to "disappear" (Ibid.: 169). Anita and Akofa are two girls who were lucky that they had help so readily available, as most young girls never escape their servitude.

Within a feminist framework, the French position on gender equality and the 2004 law which outlaws “covering” can be seen as an attempt to liberate oppressed Muslim girls in France. The government and the enforcers can be perceived as heroes as they symbolically offer equal rights to Muslim girls in their families, schools, and job places. However, it has not worked out that way.

The 2004 law has caused Muslim girls to become even more outcast from mainstream French society than before. It has increased, not decreased, social stratification, gender inequality, poor-quality or no schooling, and diminished chances for good jobs. Before the law girls could avoid “covering” and remain practicing Muslims. However, the law has in effect put them in a double bind. Interpreting the law as anti-Muslim, many Muslim girls feel they must take a stand – declare themselves as Muslim to the outer world in the only way they know how – by “covering.” Then they are suspended from school, and eventually expelled.
Keaton asks in what ways can the transition into French society be made easier for Muslim girls? She reminds us that "human beings (lest we forget) live [in French Outer Cities]. They are people struggling to have better lives, people stigmatized by every negative category imaginable, and people battling against racialized barriers not easily documented in France (Ibid.: 194)."

As we move on to discuss the historical perspective on this problem, we are left with the following questions:

- If these young Muslim girls are expelled from school for wearing a headscarf, will these young women remain in low-skill domestic jobs, or worse, slavery?
- What kinds of jobs can such women expect to have in modern France?
- How many of vicious acts against such girls have gone unreported to the authorities who are seen as anti-Muslim?

Joan Wallach Scott: The Historian - “The veil was – for colonized and colonizers alike – an impenetrable membrane, the final barrier to political subjugation."

Scott approaches understanding why the French outlawed wearing hijab by first contrasting how the French approach diversity in comparison with how Americans view it. France prefers projecting the image of one unified culture as compared to a multi-cultural country, the so-called melting pot model promoted by the United States.

“France insists on assimilation to a singular culture, the embrace of a shared language, history, and political ideology….French universalism insists that sameness is the basis for equality.”

In fact the French census makes no mention of religion or ethnicity as such data could show a fractured and divided France (Scott 2007: 12).

Scott argues that there is significant diversity in France today, whether the French admit this or not. However using discourse analysis she shows how the French have created the myth of a homogenous culture where all are the same; all are equal. “Discourse” can be defined as an interpretation of empirical reality, where meaning is imposed on a phenomenon, usually by those...
who are in power. The phenomenon is usually “contested,” and by “contested” Scott means that there is no agreement between the powerful and the powerless about what is really going on (Ibid.: 7).

Scott believes that culture is not a cause but an effect or result of historical political discourses. And the roots of this particular discourse (Muslim girls and hijab) can be found in France’s history with its African colonies. The difference between “the traditional French” and “the non-traditional French” (better known as a classic case of “The Other”\(^8\)) was constructed by the French within the historical context of racism, post-colonial guilt, and fear. The end result of the political discourse was to interpret the headscarf as "an image of strangeness...danger to the fabric of French society and to the future of the republican nation (Ibid.: 10)." It became a symbol of Islamic radicalism and separatism, promoting the myth of Muslims as fixed, non-modern, patriarchal, and sexist, living in the outskirts of France's major cities. This Muslim myth readily contrasted with the myth of France as a republic representing secularism, gender equality, abstract individualism, and universal French norms.

The construction of this political discourse was a result of historical events dating from the early 1950s. France’s colony Algeria led resistance movements against the French rule, eventually leading to the Algerian War from 1954 to 1962. The National Liberation Front (FLN in French) promoted the image of themselves fighting for freedom and independence, while France claimed that by occupying Algeria, they were liberating the Algerian population from the “grip of [Muslim] traditionalism (Ibid.: 61).” The seven-year, bloody war that resulted brought Muslim women and their veils to the forefront of the political controversy. The veil soon became associated with “dangerous militancy” and the non-modernized Arabs who wore them. It was

\(^8\) The Other is usually described as a powerless, exotic outsider.
even used as a militant tactic in that the FLN used veiled individuals to move weapons and bombs past French security. Not able to understand the “backwards traditions” of the Arabs, France continued their push for modernity; however, these were not French people and their traditions and living arrangements were far different than what “traditional French” were used to. Before the war ended in 1962, Charles De Gaulle denounced the conflict and spoke publicly of how French efforts were not working:

“Try to mix oil and vinegar. Shake the bottle. After a minute, they separate again. Arabs are Arabs, French are French. Do you think that French society can absorb 10 million Muslims...If we integrate, if all the Arabs...were considered French, how would we stop them from coming to the metropole, where the standard of living is so much higher? My village would no longer be Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises, but Colombey-les-Deux-Mosquees. (Scott 2007: 61-62)”

In May 1962, De Gaulle negotiated the Evian Accords, finally liberating Algeria from France's occupation and its so-called "civilizing mission." For the French, the veil became a symbol of France's failure, humiliation and frustration. For the Algerians it morphed into a symbol of liberation and a future direction for their country. It carried with it:

"a sense of defiance, a refusal of the Western lifestyle...and an insistence on the integrity of a history and religion that have for so long been demeaned (Scott 2007: 67)."

Although new leaders who rose to power in Algeria had conflicting views about the significance of the veil, it had become a legitimate expression of religious belief. Thus while the Algerian government turned its focus to solving social and economic problems, the people were allowed to make up their own minds about whether or not to “cover.”

Tensions from the war were not over when the Evian Accords were signed in 1962 because under these new agreements, Algerians were granted special access to France. Also children born in France became naturalized French citizens. Alongside other immigrants from Africa, many men moved to France temporarily and became a source of cheap labor. Encouraged to

---

9 Some have compared this to the US’s defeat in Vietnam.
keep their homes abroad, many men actually brought their families over with them, causing France to create many social programs for this population. The immigrant children were provided with Arabic language classes, religious instruction, and public-school education. Ironically these differences, at first respected, eventually became the grounds for discrimination (Ibid.: 68).

When France closed its borders in 1974, millions of North African immigrants living in the outskirts of France's major cities began making their temporary settlements more permanent. The French saw their country as being overrun by its former colonial subjects. There were worried questions asked in the media and the government about whether Muslims were now colonizing France.

The Iranian Revolution that occurred from 1978-1979 only fueled the discrimination of the immigrants more, changing France's focus from economic and social concerns to security issues. Now Islam was seen “as a dangerous presence on French soil” (Ibid.: 69). The fact that Ayatollah Khomeini, an important Iranian religious leader, lived in Paris for years while in exile from the Shah’s Iran, only made the revolution seem closer to home when he returned in triumph to his country.

During this time the French media often misrepresented Iranian men and women covered in black chadors protesting on the streets in Iran. The French public came to associate this cultural garb with the Muslim immigrants in France. Although all followers of Islam often wear similar clothes, Algerians maintain a culture and identity all their own, which is distinctly different from that of the Iranians. Yet the French did not understand this. This misconception led France to conclude that all Islamic peoples are culturally and religiously similar, and their shared political ideals are vastly different from French traditions and ideals. Suddenly Arab men became the
focus of discrimination and hostility. They were seen as violent, out of control, and oversexed. Muslim women were seen as oppressed. Being a Muslim meant that the person lived in a patriarchal home, rather than in French households which were erroneously held up as paragons of gender equality and individualism (Ibid.: 71)

In 1987, fear of Muslim people resulted in a violent deportation of more than a hundred immigrants from Mali by the French military. Shackled hand and foot, their inhuman, public expulsion ordered by Interior Minister Charles Pasqua revealed the depth of French mistrust and dislike of their ex-colonial subjects (Keaton 2006: 20). The 2004 headscarf law can be seen as yet one more symptom of France’s inability to face the racism, power imbalance, discrimination in jobs, and high unemployment rates that characterize their dealings with North Africans (Scott 2007: 180-181).

As I review Scott’s arguments, several questions come to the surface:

- Will France ever be able to come to terms with the way they characterize their North African immigrants?
- Will the cultural misconceptions about Muslims that have taken root in France ever be able to be fully eradicated?
- Will hijab ever shed all the various historical, political, and religious connotations attached to it?

The veil in the French Republican discourse is understood as a personal and a religious commitment as well as a sign of political opposition. It suggests both domination and submission, seduction and terror, sexuality and modesty, something opaque yet something revealing, an expression of agency and a sign of victimization, a practical instrument of warfare and an expression of vulnerability (Ibid.: 89). Clearly it is dragging around a great deal of

---

10 The “over-sexed” characteristic may stem from the French believing that all Muslims are polygynous.
11 Mali was another French African colony.
cultural baggage, so to speak. Thus is the poignancy of the quote from Scott that makes up part of the title of this section of my thesis.

“The veil was – for colonized and colonizers alike – an impenetrable membrane, the final barrier to political subjugation (Ibid.: ).

Analysis Section

Similarities

In this section I discuss how the theorists overlap. Although none of them are totally in agreement, some strike common themes. I outline them below.

Keaton and Bowen are similar in that they identify a theme that can be considered feminist. Keaton believes that Muslim French girls are discriminated against in two different ways. In the first place they live in families that are characterized by patriarchal oppression. Although Keaton states that not all Muslim families are patriarchal, she describes many cases in which Muslim girls and women are confined, hurt, or killed because they do not subscribe to Muslim traditions. On the face of it, these girls might seem to be liberated by the 2004 law because then they would not be forced to “cover” (and perhaps be protected from other anti-female traditions too). They would be able to assume the dress of modern French women, and thus be “liberated” in Western terms.

Yet Keaton is able to stand outside Western feminist doctrines and culturally critique Western feminist positions. Thus she takes a cultural relativistic stance. For example, some Muslim girls may well feel that the 2004 law challenges their beliefs in Islam. Where the majority of Muslim school girls did NOT cover before the 2004 law was passed, afterwards Muslim girls reacted by demonstrating their commitment to their religion by dressing in traditional Muslim fashion.
Muslim girls and women in France were surely between “a rock and a hard place.” Either way they turned, men were telling them what to do. In patriarchal Muslim families they were told to “cover;” in modern France they were told not to “cover.” Either way, men were issuing the orders.

And it did not help for the French Muslim girls to note that their male counterparts were being treated differently than they were. Islamic men also wear specific clothing that identify them as Muslims – these being loose clothing, headdresses, and kufis (most notably worn by Osama Bin Laden). However, these types of clothing are not deemed threatening and dangerous, like the veil.

Bowen offers a less-nuanced and more stereotypical feminist argument. The Women’s Liberation Movement (MLF) denounced the veil as a sign of:

“...subservience whether consensual or imposed, in fundamentalist Muslim society...To accept wearing the voile is tantamount to saying ‘yes’ to women’s inequality in French Muslim society.” (Bowen 209)

Several other organizations, like the Family Planning Movement, agreed with the MLF saying that “covering” is a sign of “sexist discrimination incompatible with a secularist and egalitarian education” (Bowen 210). Michele Andre, State Secretary for Women’s Rights, added another objection, saying:

“the Republican school must not submit to pressures from fathers and brothers; freedom can only exist in a climate of mutual tolerance, which requires respecting rules, traditions, and the culture of the host country (Bowen 210).”

This quote is particulary notable because it reveals culturally-relativistic difficulties. The Muslim families living in France must balance between their own cultural traditions and those of the host country (France). Which should be privileged? Fundamentalist Muslim traditions or so-called modern French ones? Which should be downplayed? And who pays the price?
Bowen added that the media fueled the anti-veil, feminist sentiment when it lumped together “covering” with illegal excisions and polygamy that have been found to occur in the outer areas of France (Bowen 210). Both polygamy and excision are clearly outlawed in France. Adding “covering” to this mix only “muddies the water.” These three traditions are quite different and must be dealt with individually.

Finally, while Keaton focuses on women and feminism, Bowen’s emphasis is on gender equality in a modern nation-state. Thus we will explore his somewhat different orientation in the differences section of this analysis.

Bowen and Scott are similar in that they both recognize that cultural values such as laicite (secularism) are important to the French. Bowen stresses the importance of the secular/anti-religious values to the evolution of the modern French Republic – a Republic that has actively curbed the power of the Church so that it might compete economically and financially in the modern global village.

Both Bowen and Scott seek answers to questions about the 2004 law in the past. Scott uses the historical perspective to understand how the law was shaped by a variety of factors dating back to World War I when France was flooded with North African immigrants. Creating, what were thought to be, temporary communities that bordered major cities, most immigrants shared an Islamic ethnic background and Muslim religious values.

Scott sharply criticizes the French who, she believes, imported cheap African labor to work in France as long as they were needed, and who, she believes, expected them to disappear when the need for cheap labor also disappeared. This did not happen. The immigrants stayed and so did their French children.
Bowen also discusses this influx of immigrants and relates it to the 2004 law. When the temporary settlements became permanent and the children who were born and raised in France began requesting equal rights,

"That shift--away from an identity as immigrants and toward an identity as Muslims-- is a large part of what made scarves the source of scandal rather than fashion." (Bowen 66)

Both Bowen and Scott agree that after the Muslim protests in the 1980s, many immigrants saw the traditional "French" way-of-life as unattainable. Rather than trying harder to absorb French culture, the Muslim immigrants turned away from those who rejected them and more fiercely embraced Islam, demanding more religious activities, rituals, and Islamic dress allowed in public spaces. This, of course, only brought more attention to the visible differences between Islamic and French cultures, such as the rise in the number of mosques and the increased number of men and women wearing traditional Islamic clothing (Bowen 2007: 67-68).

Scott and Keaton are in agreement that the younger Muslim generation in the Outer Cities is publicly discriminated against and blatantly targeted. Scott notes that the French have constructed political discourses that have allowed them to create myths about both their own French society and Muslim society. They have mythologized French society as being homogeneous, secular, and gender-equal. It is also constantly changing/evolving. In contrast Muslim society has been objectified as fundamentalist-religious and gender-stratified. It is sexist and patriarchal. It is seen as unchanging and rigid, as compared to French society. Scott believes that neither of these political discourses are empirically accurate. They are just myths.

Keaton is not only a feminist, but is also an African American who is greatly interested in the African Diaspora. Many of the Muslim French are part of this Diaspora and suffer racist policies much as the African Americans in the US have suffered. African Americans’ recent history might date all the way back to the slave trade, but the North African French date more
recently to 1950-1960 which is when the bloody war took place that evicted the French colonial powers. Whether arriving in 1650 in the US or in 1950 in France, the reception of the Africans was the same. North Americans and French saw the Africans as outsiders, the “Other,” inferior. Their cultural traditions were despised and eventually laws were constructed to ban them. Their fate resembles the fate of African Americans in the US.

“As young people from the outer cities, they are typecast as violent delinquents, feared as terrorists in the making, and objectified as criminals—the fodder of prisons and the targets of racialized profiling, secular laws, and curfews that apply solely to their neighborhoods. While they are made to be seen by the public as living manifestations of every social ill, what they are not perceived as is French. Born or raised in France, the only country that they know well, they did not become French through any conscious social movement or through political demands (Keaton 2006: 2-3).”

**Differences**

In this section I discuss how the theorists differ. I outline some of the differences below.

Bowen’s position is that the French were concerned first and foremost about secularism. They worried about any religious threat to their hard-won victory over the powerful Medieval Church. The 2004 law would have passed against any religious threat to the modern French nation.

It is clear that if cultural values such as secularism are important, then one must ask why the French Muslims cannot adopt them? The Irish Catholics and the Swedish Lutherins managed to adapt religiously to the nation-state of America. Keaton argues that although Muslim people want to share a common national identity with the French, the possibility of acculturation remains elusive for them.

“Culture, those historically accumulated and socially formed, embodied, and transmitted ways of being and knowing, is a very real stake in this context, in which the authority to "name" or "constitute" who is French (and who is not) in an exclusionary fashion contributes to perceiving the "national identity" as being reserved for a selected group.” (Keaton 2006: 9)
In the 1970's and 1980's the young generation of France's immigrant population rallied and protested their exclusion from mainstream society. Their general idea was to bring about a new French identity:

"Not a product of one culture, but of multiple cultures who insisted on le droit a la difference (the right to difference) without being assigned different rights." (Ibid.: 10)

Although these attempts failed, the debate concerning this issue often arises in political discussions.

Neither Keaton nor Scott agree with Bowen’s contention that the 2004 law has to do with laicité. Both believe the 2004 law was not an act against any religion, but specifically discriminates against the Muslim immigrant population of France. Keaton goes farther, establishing that the law targets Muslim women.

Like Keaton, Scott questions the structure that really shapes France's national identity. She believes that the concept itself is "mythical; its power and appeal rests, to a large degree, on its negative portrayal of Islam.” (Scott 2007:7) As mentioned above, Scott suggests that Muslims are objectified as a "fixed culture", one that is protected from outside influences. In contrast, France is as an enduring “Republic” (Ibid.;7). Scott agrees with Bowen to a certain degree that this notion of "French national identity" is a myth.

Although Scott agrees with Keaton about the 2004 law being discriminatory, she disagrees with the Keaton’s feminist arguments. Scott claims that veils are only worn by a small portion of Muslim women because most Muslim women have “assimilated in some way or another to the Western values and dress of the countries in which they now live” (Scott 4).

Scott also brings up an argument with which none of the texts grapple. Westerners may well criticize Muslim societies for what they see as chauvinistic, sexist traditions as well as more general gender stratification. However, none attempt to come to terms with the rampant
FRENCH chauvinistic, sexist traditions as well as the gender stratification for which the French are known. Scott states that, “It is as if patriarchy were a uniquely Islamic phenomenon” (Scott 4).