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Voices and Veils

*Feminism and Islam in French
Women's Writing and Activism*

Anna Kemp



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VOICES AND VEILS
FEMINISM AND ISLAM IN FRENCH WOMEN'S WRITING AND ACTIVISM

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Voices and Veils

Feminism and Islam in French Women's Writing and Activism



ANNA KEMP



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INTRODUCTION



In February 2004, I was browsing the aisles of a large Parisian bookseller. The French headscarf affair was at its height, and the national media was filling vast stretches of airtime and spilling great quantities of ink over the question of whether or not Muslim schoolgirls should be allowed to wear their headscarves to class. Judging by the books on display, the French publishing industry had quickly followed suit. In the windows and on the show tables were dozens of essays and pamphlets offering analyses of the controversy, alongside an assortment of titles on the more general subjects of Islam, immigration, integration, insecurity and terrorism. As this variety of topics suggested, the public interest in the *affaire du foulard* stretched far beyond the question of headscarves, to cover a wide range of issues all loosely connected, in the public imagination, to the presence of Islam in France. But despite the large selection of titles, there was one particular set of images that appeared on book covers with striking frequency: those representing Muslim women. Scanning the display tables, I was struck that these images fell, broadly, into two categories. On the one hand there was the generic image of the veiled Muslim woman, her face either entirely concealed by an Afghan burkha or reduced to a pair of kohl-rimmed eyes, while on the other, there were images of young unveiled women of North African origin, smiling and dressed in Western style clothes. Whereas the former tended to appear on the covers of books dealing with the issue of the veil, Islamic extremism or Islam in general,¹ the latter most often appeared on the covers of testimonies by French women of Muslim origin that described the author's struggle for emancipation from the religious and cultural traditions of their parents or communities.² Two images: the Muslim woman as Westernized and emancipated, and the Muslim woman as veiled and oppressed. The message was implicit but clear: France and the Western world were in harmony with humanist and feminist principles, while Islam was defined by its perceived oppression of women.

These two contrasting representations of Muslim women dominated not only Parisian bookshelves but the debate as a whole. In fact, the public appetite for tales of women's emancipation from religious and cultural tradition seemed insatiable. There was a proliferation of television documentaries and articles on the appalling treatment of Muslim women in the so-called *terres de l'islam*, and women who had escaped the veil or who were seen to have resisted sexism within their communities were invited onto chat shows to talk about their ordeals. But despite the scale and range of the debates, there was one glaring absence. Where were the *voilées*, the veiled girls, themselves? Where were the women whose lives would be directly affected by the outcome of the affair and why were they not invited to participate in the discussions? With very few exceptions, French Muslim women who, like

the schoolgirls, claimed that they wore the headscarf of their own accord, were nowhere to be seen. Between the image of the emancipated Westernized woman and the iconic Afghan burkha, there was little room for women who claimed to be fully French, Muslim *and* feminist.

This study has emerged from a desire to identify and investigate the writings and discourses of French Muslim women whose voices were actively excluded from the affair and continue to be marginalized in public debate.³ Since February 2004, I have sought out literary, sociological and journalistic writing by French women of Muslim origin, or by Muslim women writing in French, that offers alternative perspectives on the experiences of Muslim women in France and beyond, and complicates dominant analyses that imagine the West defending women's rights against an Islamic menace. Though marginalized, boycotted or excluded from mainstream publishing and debate, these voices are formulating compelling critiques of mainstream discourses and suggesting new possibilities for feminist collaborations in both a French and a global context.

There has already been significant academic interest in the phenomenon of *beur* women's writing, that is, novels and autobiographies written by young French women of North African immigrant origin.⁴ Most of this criticism deals with texts written in the 1980s and 1990s and, as the *beur* tag suggests, the work is often considered in relation to the politics of the time, in particular to the *beur* movement. The *beur* movement, as I shall explain more fully in the second chapter, invested hope in the French model of integration and the egalitarian values it is supposed to embody and was mobilized by a desire, on the part of the children of Maghrebi immigrants, to be accepted as *des Français comme les autres* — as French as everyone else. However, the political climate has changed in recent years and continues to develop rapidly. Since the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, France, like many other Western countries, has witnessed an accelerating hostility towards people identified as Muslim and has further integrated 'Islam' as a core reference in debates on immigration, integration and national identity. As I shall later argue, this 'Islamization' of debates has been paralleled by a 'gendering' of debates whereby the perceived status of women is taken as definitive proof of the supposed stagnation of Islamic culture and the superiority of the French cultural model, injecting new life into colonial constructions of the Muslim woman as symbolic of the West's relationship to Islam.

This altered climate is reflected in the work considered in this study, most of which has been published in recent years. Broadly speaking, much *beur* women's writing of the 1980s and 1990s, though often critical of French society, invests faith in the process of integration that, it is hoped, will emancipate young Muslim women from the oppressive cultural traditions of their families, and allow them to enjoy the same freedoms and privileges as their white, middle-class French counterparts. Many books produced today continue to conform to this model, and (as the frequency of reprints indicates) they satisfy a significant public demand. However, there are also a number of writers who distance themselves from this formula and some of the presumptions around which it is structured. These writers tend to be disillusioned with the promise of integration and more overtly critical of

it. They show greater awareness of the ways in which their words may be framed and exploited in support of an agenda that they have not chosen and they develop compelling counter-narratives of their own. They also pay more explicit attention to their identity, not only as the descendants of immigrants, but as Muslims, and take into account the ways in which the global political context affects how others perceive them and how they perceive themselves.

The writings of these authors and activists will be the focus of the latter half of this study but, in order to appreciate the nature of their resistance, it is necessary to begin with a consideration of what they are up against. Part I of this book will consider French feminist representations of Muslim women, tracing a genealogy of ideas from the nineteenth century onwards, with a view to dissecting its disavowed ethnocentrism and the role this plays in perpetuating neocolonial structures of power. The first chapter goes back to the early days of French feminism to examine representations of Muslim women in writing by French women of the colonial era. A good deal of popular and critical attention has been paid to British women's travel writing, such as the letters of the eighteenth-century aristocrat Lady Mary Wortley Montagu,⁵ but rather less attention has been paid to the writings of French colonial women. However, as I shall argue, French colonial women's writing testifies to the crucial role women played in France's colonial project. French women did not merely visit the colonies as tourists or to shop for fashionable Oriental goods; many invested tremendous energy in France's 'civilizing' mission, in particular with a view to 'liberating' their Muslim sisters. The complicity between feminist and colonial discourses that emerges from these texts produces what I shall call a 'colonial feminism' that imagines an idealized French womanhood in opposition to a vision of Muslim-Arab women as the embodiment of female oppression and that ultimately betrays its feminist agenda to work in the service of French imperialism. In the second chapter, I shall analyse dominant representations of Muslim women produced during the recent *affaire du foulard*, arguing that it is possible to identify an enduring colonial legacy that constructs Muslim womanhood as the antithesis of French feminist values, while consecrating a certain notion of French femininity as an ideal to be emulated. 'Colonial feminism', as I shall demonstrate, was closely intertwined with colonial ideology and strategy. In a similar way, contemporary feminist discourses are entangled in a gendered model of integration that does not safeguard women's emancipation, so much as reassert dominant gender norms in the service of a nativist notion of French identity.

A historical perspective on present-day events seems appropriate, even necessary, given the republican establishment's tendency to gloss over more painful aspects of French colonial history, in particular the memory of the Algerian War of Independence and its aftermath. Paradoxically, France's oft-cited denial of its colonial history has, in recent years, generated substantial public interest around this very subject. In February 2005, for example, there was controversy surrounding the introduction of a law (later repealed) obliging schools to present the country's colonial exploits in a favourable light,⁶ and in September 2006 the dictionary definition of 'colonialism' came under scrutiny as, in the eyes of its critics, it laid too great an emphasis on the supposed benefits of colonialism for colonized peoples.⁷

Furthermore, France's disavowed colonial past has become a key reference for a number of dissident movements who demand not only that France acknowledge certain aspects of its history but that the republican establishment recognize an enduring colonial legacy that continues to determine its relationship to its ethnic and religious minorities.⁸ In a similar vein, the first part of this study will argue that contemporary feminists in France have, in several important ways, inherited directly from their colonial predecessors. This is not simply a French problem however. Though Part I will focus on the specificities of the French case, it will situate these issues in relation to more widely circulating discourses that construct Muslim women as victims and Western women as their models and saviours. Indeed, the notion that Muslim women need to be rescued by their white sisters has become an established part of Western neocolonial discourse. One need only think of the ways in which Afghan women's rights (championed by Laura Bush) became a crucial means of rallying public opinion behind the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

However, the concerns expressed in this book about representations of Muslim women as victims and the ends to which these representations may be deployed, in no way constitutes a denial of the appalling violence inflicted on many Muslim women by Muslim men both in colonial times and our own. The hideous crimes of the Taliban are well documented and, beyond the institutionalised misogyny of fundamentalist regimes, patriarchal interpretations of Islam have restricted women's freedoms to varying degrees around the world. It is not my intention to condone, out of a misguided respect for cultural difference, any form of gender oppression carried out (to the horror of many Muslims) in the name of Islam. Nor is it to suggest that non-Muslim feminists should simply leave their Muslim sisters to their own devices for fear of being accused of cultural imperialism (as my discussion of collaborations between non-Muslim and Muslim French feminists should make clear). Rather, this book will consider what happens when (often legitimate) feminist concerns for the welfare of Muslim women are recuperated to a politically conservative agenda that ultimately works in the interest of existing structures of power and against the feminist values it purports to defend.

Having considered the ways in which contemporary French feminist constructions of Muslim womanhood are informed by a colonial legacy, the second chapter will lead into a discussion of contemporary literary texts by considering how representations of Muslim women as victims or veiled threats shape the production and reception of writing by French women of Muslim or North African origin. Particular attention will be paid to autobiographical writing produced through a collaboration between a Muslim woman writer and a majority-ethnic French woman editor. Taking Samira Bellil's *Dans l'enfer des tournantes* [*Inside the Hell of Gang Rape*] as a case in point,⁹ I shall argue that, although such collaborations potentially provide valuable opportunities for marginalized women to tell their stories, more often than not they see the writer's story pressed into the service of dominant interests, denying her a voice at the very moment she is presumed to speak. In particular, I will look at how these collaborations construct the figure of the young, emancipated Maghrebi woman, or *beurette*, as the poster girl for a French model of integration that demands a high degree of conformity to French

(and more broadly, Western) cultural norms — norms that are, in many ways, far from emancipatory.

Part II of this book will then turn to the ways in which French Muslim women writers and activists are questioning the *beurette* stereotype and moving beyond the reductive parameters of mainstream feminist discourses. Chapters 3 and 4 will consider literary texts, specifically: *Ce pays dont je meurs* [*This Country that Kills Me*] by Fawzia Zouari,¹⁰ and *Moze* and ‘*Musulman*’ *Roman* [*‘Muslim’: A Novel*] by Zahia Rahmani.¹¹ These texts are very diverse in content and style, but they all communicate a distinct mistrust of discourses that force Muslim women into stereotypes and speaking positions that are not of their choosing, and reveal a powerful desire to carve out a space of agency in which they might negotiate their own sense of belonging. Indeed, ‘belonging’ is an important notion for these writers. Far from figuring their positions on the margin of society as sites of potential subversion (as some other examples of postcolonial writing tend to do), these writers are attuned to the pain of exclusion and emphasise the importance of finding a place from which to speak, however limited and unstable. As a result, the work of these writers does not easily lend itself to readings that privilege marginality and see emancipatory potential in the dismantling of categories of identity. Rather than reject notions of a secure and stable identity as necessarily falsifying and reductive, these writers emphasise the importance of fantasizing a sense of identity and being seen to belong, especially for those whose sense of self is under constant assault.

In a similar vein, French Muslim women activists do not reject, but seek to rehabilitate feminist and republican ideals. The discourses of these activists will be the subject of the final chapter. For this chapter, I travelled to Paris and Lyons where I interviewed Muslim and non-Muslim feminists and activists seeking to articulate alternatives to dominant narratives of emancipation. In their view, mainstream feminisms in France are both failing to represent the diverse experiences of French women, and failing to address the sexism that endures at the heart of French society, by constructing conservative notions of womanhood as an ideal for all to aspire to. Although Muslim women’s voices remain on the margins of mainstream debate and feminist activism, they are starting to forge a critique of the ways in which Western feminists’ obsession with the Muslim woman is ultimately self-defeating, while articulating models of feminist collaboration that have implications beyond the French context. In particular, these activists harness their feminist agenda to a practical ideal of citizenship as participation that resists both the false universalism of dominant French discourses of emancipation, and the isolating relativism of multicultural approaches to women’s rights. Between the images of the burkha-clad victim and the smiling *beurette*, new representations of Muslim women as actively engaged citizens and feminists are beginning to emerge, offering feminist and humanist ideals a real chance to renew themselves.

Notes to the Introduction

1. See for example, Chadortt Djavann, *Bas les voiles!* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); Régis Debray, *Ce que nous voile le voile* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); Michèle Vianes, *Les Islamistes en manœuvre* (Paris: Hors Commerce, 2004).