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Veiled Politics Rethinking the Debate on Hijab

Fazila-Yacoobali, V.

Citation

Fazila-Yacoobali, V. (2003). Veiled Politics Rethinking the Debate on Hijab. *Isim Newsletter*, 13(1), 63-63. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16917>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Veiled Politics

Rethinking the Debate on *Hijab*

The ISIM roundtable on the politics of veiling practices came on the heels of the expulsion of two French school girls, Lila and Alma Levy, because of their decision to wear a headscarf that covered their ears, hairline and neck, followed by a photographic coverage in the Dutch *Volkkrant* Magazine of three young women in the Netherlands wearing a complete face veil, in addition to Europe-wide unease and debate on forming a policy regarding practices of veiling in public institutions. Given this heightened context, all presenters—sometimes drawing upon their research and comparative reflections from Muslim states and societies—focused primarily on the debate in Europe.

The presentations made by Annelies Moors and Linda Herrera focused on legal and educational debates concerning the (in)compatibility of face covering with notions of liberalism. Mayanthi Fernando, currently engaged in research on the Islamic revival in France, contextualized the French ruling on the Levy sisters, while Saba Mahmood presented her rethinking of embodied practices (such as veiling) amongst women in the *da'wa* movement in Egypt to raise issues for consideration in the European context. Drawing largely on Fernando and Mahmood's presentations, (see p.16 for an elaboration of the presentations by Moors and Herrera) I want to delineate three questions that emerged for rethinking the debate.

1) Can we understand the 'problem' posed by veiling practices in European liberal democracies as one emerging because of the secular character of the state, built upon a separation of state and church, a divide of public/secular and private/religious domains? Often in the media the contentions are represented in such a framework, and the Levy sisters were banned from school on the basis of a 1989 Conseil d'État ruling that their headscarves constituted religious insignia that was 'ostentatious' and 'proselytizing', and thus disruptive of the public/secular and private/religious divide. Fernando historicized the *laïcité* principle concerning the religious neutrality of the French state, arguing that the 1905 law, the basis for *laïcité*, followed a series of compromises between the French state and the Catholic Church. As most Muslim immigrants arrived in France after 1905, they were excluded from the kind of state concessions given to the Catholic Church. Fernando's description of the imbricated relationship between the 'secular' state and 'religion' is certainly not unique to France. Mahmood pointed out that Muslims are repeatedly singled out in liberal discourse for not respecting the separation of public/secular and private/religious domains, although the very articulation of public and private is built on history and relationships of power in Western liberal democracies, and in general remains porous to this day. Thus, in order to rethink the debate on the veil, why it emerges as a 'problem' at all, it is necessary to historically and critically understand this framing of state and society as well.

2) What are the gendered dimensions of this debate that challenge both feminist and liberal ideologies? All presenters emphasized that it has gone largely unremarked in the debates that legal rulings restricting veiling practices specifically harm women, for they then get excluded from education and employment. The veil has become so entrenched as a sign of Muslim women's oppression and subjugation to patriarchy that the very European feminists who have over the last decades critiqued the objectification of women's bodies for national symbolism and capitalist consumption, fail to question this view of the veil. It is after all no coincidence that it is women's bodies that have be-

The ISIM roundtable Veiled Politics (30 October 2003) aimed at rethinking the politics of veiling practices in the Islamic world and in Europe. The roundtable included presentations by Annelies Moors (ISIM), Linda Herrera (Population Council, Cairo), Saba Mahmood (University of California, Berkeley and ISIM Visiting Fellow), and Mayanthi Fernando (University of Chicago). The convenor was Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali (ISIM).¹

While Mahmood challenged the table to think outside the subordination/liberation framing of the veil, Fernando and Moors emphasized that it is patronizing to tell articulate and intelligent young women who have chosen to wear the veil that they are being oppressed, that it is being imposed upon them. This also makes it imperative to understand the decision of women who have chosen to wear some form of the veil in different ways.

3) Should religious subjectivity be analyzed in the same way as racial, ethnic or national identity? This is in some respects the most challenging question. Mahmood argued that although it was common to present functional and symbolic reasons for espousing the veil, such reasons were inadequate in explaining the meaning they had for women themselves in Islamic revival movements like the one she had studied in Egypt. When interpreted as a mere symbol of Muslim identity, the veil could be viewed as a dispensable practice, and not crucial to religious beliefs. In ethnic/national identity different symbols can embody an identity, such that a sari could be worn interchangeably with another dress—but the veil was not necessarily such an interchangeable symbol. Instead, she suggested that it be understood as not merely an expression of identity but rather an embodied practice meant to realize a virtuous life and interiority, and therefore both a necessary end and means to the making of religious subjectivity. Fernando drew upon Mahmood's proposition that we understand religious subjectivity in a fundamentally different way than identity politics to explain why French Muslims do not see any conflict between being a Muslim and a French citizen. Because identifying oneself as a Muslim is generally perceived as identifying with a subnational or post-national identity, it is considered dangerous to the cohesion of the nation as the foremost horizon of belonging. But if religiosity could be understood and conceived as different from and enmeshed in complicated ways with national identity, then the expression of Muslim beliefs in Europe could have a different social and political meaning in the debate at large.

Finally, underwriting much of the debate on veils has been the fear of radical Islam, and a growing equation of Islam with the oppression of women on the one hand and terrorism on the other hand. Rethinking the debate on veiling is one means of confronting this fear in an increasingly shared world.⁴

come the site of contestation over the place of Muslims in European society. One of the consequences of framing the veil as oppressive is that liberals also have been reluctant to support Muslim women's right to veil as a matter of freedom of religious expression. Constructed as subordinated, imposed religious beliefs, women who veil are therefore considered incapable of independent and rational thinking necessary to the making of a citizen-subject.

VAZIRA FAZILA-YACOOBALI

Notes

1. I would like to thank Anouk de Koning, Marina de Regt, and M. Amer for keeping notes of the discussion.
2. *Volkkrant Magazine*, 25 October 2003.
3. See for instance, *The Economist*, 25 October 2003, p.26.
4. For a reading list on the subject, please consult the ISIM website.

Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali is a post-doctoral fellow at ISIM
E-mail: v.zamindar@isim.nl