

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND THE HIJAB IN GENDER DISCOURSE AND POLITICS IN THE NEAR EAST: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IRAN AND FRANCE

Abstract

Gender discourse in the Near East and its diaspora is complex and multifaceted, with Islamic feminism and the practice of wearing the hijab being, in my view, particularly intricate and significant issues. Islamic feminism, which emerged in the late 20th century, seeks to achieve gender equality through the reinterpretation of Islamic religious frameworks, while the hijab has transformed into a symbol that, depending on the context, embodies freedom, identity, resistance, or oppression. In this paper, I focus on the cases of France and Iran because, despite their ideological differences - secularism in France and Islamism in Iran - state policies often restrict Muslim women's agency and self-expression. Accordingly, the central question of this paper is how state ideology shapes gender norms and women's rights, particularly in the context of the politicization of the hijab and the influence of Islamic feminism.

Key words: Islamic feminism, hijab, gender discourse, women's agency, secularism, Islamism, state ideology, gender politics.

The Emergence of Islamic Feminism

In the 1990s, a movement began in the Near East that offered women a new path to fight for gender equality through the reinterpretation of Islamic religious texts, particularly the "Quran". This approach is based on the belief that the original vision of Islam included gender equality, but later patriarchal interpretations distorted this vision. The ethics of early Islam were rooted in human equality, however, men in power gradually created systems that marginalized women.

The significance of this movement lies in its encouragement of women to use religious texts to defend their rights, which is particularly important in societies where Islam shapes cultural and political identity. This approach allows women to pursue their struggles within the framework of Islam, granting them the freedom to challenge patriarchal structures. It also responds to critiques of Western feminism, often perceived as a manifestation of colonial influence, offering a distinct, localized vision of gender equality (Winter 2006: 285).

For example, in Yemen, women, through rereading the Quran, discovered that their rights as Muslim women were far broader than what their society's traditional norms allowed. This process enables women to realize their potential and challenge social constraints. In contrast, this approach faces challenges. Some argue that focusing solely on religious texts limits a comprehensive analysis of patriarchy, which encompasses not only religion but also the state, class, culture, and other social factors. Others contend that the movement is

sometimes co-opted by religious fundamentalist groups, reducing its political effectiveness and objectivity. Nevertheless, it offers women a unique way to voice their concerns within the Islamic framework.

Islamic feminism often encounters state intervention. For instance, in Tunisia, the 1956 family law reforms, which strengthened women's rights, aimed to bolster central state authority against tribal patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, these reforms were imposed top-down, without an organized feminist movement. In contrast, in countries like Morocco and Algeria, where the state relied on tribal and kinship networks, family legislation remained more conservative, hindering the development of Islamic feminism. These examples illustrate how state political strategies shape the boundaries of women's agency and religious interpretations.

The Multifaceted Significance of the Hijab

The hijab, as one of the most visible symbols of gender discourse, takes on varied meanings in the Near East. It is not only part of Islam but also of other cultures and historical periods, challenging the notion that it is exclusively tied to Muslim women. Historically, the hijab was used as a marker of social status in various societies, including Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Assyrian cultures. In early Islam, in the 7-th century, the hijab was primarily worn by the Prophet's wives as a sign of their special status. It was only in the 9th century that stricter interpretations emerged, requiring all women to wear it, reflecting the gender stratification of that era.

The state in the Near East plays a decisive role in defining gender norms and women's rights, often using Islamic feminism and the hijab to assert national identity and political legitimacy. In the postcolonial era, as states sought to consolidate power, women's roles became a symbolic tool in the process of "nation-building" or "modernization." For example, in Turkey, Kemalist reforms in the 1920s promoted the removal of the hijab as a sign of secular modernity, reflecting the state's attempt to distinguish itself from its Ottoman past. In contrast, after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, mandatory hijab-wearing became an embodiment of the Islamic ummah (community), where women, as "mothers of the nation," were defined in relation to men's "protector" roles (Hoel and Shaikh 2007: 118) These decisions highlight how states use gender policies to advance their ideological agendas, often at the expense of women's interests.

During the 20th-century anti-colonial struggles, the hijab gained significant political symbolism. In Turkey and Tunisia, women publicly removed their hijabs to express national resistance against colonial powers, associating the act with modernity and emancipation. On the other side, these actions often served nationalist goals rather than enhancing women's autonomy. For instance, in Tunisia in 1929, Habiba al-Mansari's removal of the hijab was part of a nationalist call to reject colonial Orientalist stereotypes, though it did not lead to full gender equality.

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the rise of Islamic movements, particularly after Iran's revolution, voluntary hijab-wearing became a symbol of resistance against Western influence and materialist culture. This was not a "revival" of tradition but a modern political statement reflecting women's active role in shaping Islamic identity. However, Islamic feminism's attempts to use the hijab as an expression of freedom were often subject to manipulation by political forces, as seen in Turkey, where Islamist groups used the defense of hijab rights under human rights rhetoric while rejecting democratic values.

Thus, the hijab's meaning is diverse. For some, it is a means of freedom and self-expression, compatible with modernity while reflecting respect for values. For others, it is a tool to simultaneously protest gender inequality and conform to social norms, such as securing the right to work in public spaces. Yet, for some, the hijab remains a symbol of oppression, categorizing women as "subordinate" by requiring them to cover their bodies. Regardless, the hijab's relevance to ongoing political processes in the region is undeniable.

The Interconnection Between Islamic Feminism and the Hijab

Islamic feminism and the “problem” of the hijab are closely intertwined, as both serve as means for women to express agency within Islamic frameworks. Islamic feminism relies on the reinterpretation of religious texts, while the hijab is often used as a symbol reflecting this vision. For example, in Turkey, women involved in Islamic political parties used the hijab as a sign of support for moral values and Islamic identity while rejecting practices like polygamy. Similarly, in Egypt, women in certain religious movements actively shaped their lives through hijab-wearing, expressing their faith and challenging the notion that they were merely submitting to patriarchal norms.

Despite the foregoing discussion, wearing the hijab voluntarily does not always equate with “emancipation.” In Turkey, some Islamic groups defend hijab freedom using human rights arguments but reject certain democratic values. Others argue that the hijab reduces women to a “hijabi” identity, limiting other forms of self-expression. These contradictions demonstrate that the hijab’s meaning depends on context: for some, it is an expression of freedom; for others, it is a sign of social pressure or restriction.

Impact on Gender Discourse and Global Geopolitics

The discussed issues significantly influence gender discourse in the East, as they challenge the stereotype that Muslim women are passive and oppressed (Charrad 2011: 223). Both phenomena are significant and carry positive implications, though they face challenges. Islamic feminism’s focus on religious texts sometimes limits its ability to address other causes of gender inequality, such as economic or political factors. In the case of the hijab, its meaning varies: for some, it is an expression of freedom; for others, it results from social pressure. The diverse forms of the hijab—from full coverage like the burqa to colorful headscarves loosely draped—illustrate that its meaning cannot be reduced to a single definition. Each hijab carries a unique story, reflecting individual choice, social norms, or political circumstances.

Global geopolitics also shapes the political significance of Islamic feminism and the hijab. Post-September 11, 2001, Western discourse often portrays Muslim women as “oppressed,” justifying military interventions (e.g., in Iraq and Afghanistan). These Orientalist stereotypes, which view Islam as a monolithic source of oppression, complicate Islamic feminism’s efforts to define its agenda. For instance, Islamic feminists who draw on the Quran’s equality principles often find themselves caught between being labeled as carriers of “Western” ideas or dismissed as proponents of “fundamentalist” Islam. Regarding the hijab, its prohibition (e.g., in Turkey’s public spaces) or mandatory enforcement (e.g., in Iran) often serves geopolitical identity construction rather than women’s freedom.

France: Laïcité, Xenophobia, and the Hijab Ban

In France, where Islam is a minority religion, the hijab has become a marker of the boundary between the “West” and “Islam,” particularly after September 11, 2001, when stereotypes of Muslim women’s “oppression” gained traction. The 2004 law banning “conspicuous” religious symbols, including the hijab, in public schools was based on laïcité, France’s secular principle separating church and state. However, laïcité’s interpretation is ambiguous: for some, it means neutrality; for others, it implies the expulsion of religion from public spaces. Though the law ostensibly applied to all religious symbols (e.g., Jewish kippahs or Christian crosses), it disproportionately affected Muslim women, as the hijab is the most visible symbol.

The hijab ban was often framed as an attempt to “liberate” Muslim women, but paradoxically, it restricted their agency. French public discourse, particularly from politicians and the media, frequently portrayed hijabi women as “oppressed,” “voiceless” victims of “Islamic fundamentalism.” For instance, parliamentary speaker Jean-Louis Debré, supporting the ban, stated that public schools are “places of learning, not militant activity or proselytism.” This framed the hijab as a symbol of “Islamic extremism,” fueling xenophobic attitudes.

Muslim women’s voices were largely absent during the ban’s implementation. The Stasi Commission, tasked with studying *laïcité*’s application, heard from only one Muslim woman, Saida Kada, who described her involvement as a “farce.” Mass protests in Paris in 2003–2004, where thousands, including Muslim women, opposed the ban, demonstrated that for many, the hijab was a freely chosen expression of identity. Protest slogans like “My hijab is my dignity” or “France is my country; hijab is my life” emphasized the hijab as a fusion of French and Muslim identities.

Notably, the ban had a reverse effect: some Muslim women began wearing the hijab as a form of protest against secular ideology and xenophobia. Scholars like Inger Furseth suggest the ban increased segregation, as some Muslim families turned to private Islamic schools. This reveals that France’s integration policies were, in reality, assimilationist, limiting Muslim women’s freedom of self-expression. Islamic feminism in France, though less widespread, often focuses on defending the hijab as a free choice, countering the secular narrative that views it as a symbol of oppression.

Iran: The Hijab as a Symbol of Islamic Identity and State Control

As mentioned earlier, following Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, the hijab became mandatory, embodying the state’s Islamic ideology. In the pre-revolutionary period, removing the hijab was seen as a symbol of “modernization,” associated with Western influence (“Gharbzadegi” or “Western poisoning”). (Reza Shah’s 1937 “unveiling” campaign, which forced women to appear without hijabs in public, was often viewed as a manifestation of Western imperialism. In contrast, post-1979, mandatory hijab-wearing became a symbol of Islamic identity and resistance to Western influence.

A 1980 law requiring women to cover their bodies (except hands and face) was strictly enforced by the “morality police,” often using violence, including acid attacks on non-hijabi women. Ayatollah Khomeini, a key supporter of this policy, declared that women opposing the hijab were “poisoned by the West.” This policy restricted women’s agency, as hijab-wearing became state-enforced rather than a voluntary choice. However, some Islamic feminists, such as contributors to the *Zanan* magazine, viewed the hijab as a means of self-expression and empowerment, enabling active participation in public life, such as education or politics.

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the hijab gained additional symbolic meaning. Hijabi women were portrayed as embodiments of “Fatima,” the Prophet’s daughter, symbolizing family support and morality. Posters depicting hijabi women with weapons or supporting male family members promoted war propaganda and the idea of Islamic jihad. However, women were denied active combat roles, excluding them from the “martyrdom” ideal, underscoring their symbolic, state-controlled role.

Despite state restrictions, Islamic feminism in Iran sought to reframe the hijab as a tool for women’s agency. For instance, 1992 divorce law amendments granting women compensation for household work during marriage resulted from Islamic feminist activism. However, mandatory hijab-wearing often contradicted these efforts, as it was state-imposed rather than a free choice.

Ideological Similarities and Differences Between France and Iran

Despite ideological differences (secularism in France and Islamism in Iran) both states use the hijab to control women's bodies and identities. In France, the hijab ban, enacted in the name of *laïcité*, was often infused with xenophobic attitudes, marking Muslim women as symbols of "otherness." In Iran, mandatory hijab-wearing was presented as an embodiment of Islamic morality and national identity but similarly restricted women's agency. In both cases, state policies objectified Muslim women, using their bodies for ideological purposes while rarely amplifying their voices.

France's secular discourse views the hijab as a symbol of "oppression," while Iran's Islamist discourse presents it as an embodiment of "morality." Yet both approaches deprive Muslim women of the right to choose whether to wear or remove the hijab. Islamic feminism in both contexts seeks to overcome this binary dichotomy (oppressed/free, veiled/unveiled), emphasizing that the hijab can be a woman's free choice, neither contradicting secular values (in France) nor Islamic morality (in Iran).

The Impact of Contemporary Protests

Notably, Iran's 2022 "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, sparked by Mahsa Amini's death, underscores the hijab's significance as a symbol of state oppression and resistance. Women who burned their hijabs and cut their hair protested not only mandatory hijab laws but also systemic gender restrictions. This movement is also considered within the framework of Islamic feminism, as it redefines women's agency in an Islamic context (Enderyari 2024).

In France, though less widespread, similar protests in 2003–2004 against the hijab ban highlighted the hijab's importance as a free choice. These examples demonstrate that Muslim women, despite state restrictions, actively fight for their identities and rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Islamic feminism and the hijab play significant roles in gender discourse and politics, particularly in France and Iran, where state ideologies - secularism and Islamism - define the boundaries of women's self-expression. France's hijab ban, enacted under *laïcité*, and Iran's mandatory hijab policy, rooted in Islamic morality, both restrict Muslim women's agency, using their bodies for ideological purposes. Islamic feminism offers a path for women to challenge these restrictions, redefining the hijab as a means of free choice and identity expression. These phenomena highlight that gender discourse is not only religious but deeply political, underscoring the social-political complexity of the Near East and its diaspora.

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