ABSTRACT

Public discussion and media emphasis since 9/11 (2001), switching racial discourse from diverse racial signifiers to Islam, has been found to bear down heavily upon Muslim women. This essay will examine the use of women and the female body in Islamophobia as it is evidenced primarily in Ireland, critically analysing it through the framework of Said’s Orientalism, the Racial State of Goldberg, and Yuval-Davis’ thesis of women as the reproducers of the nation.

SINCE THE TERROR ATTACKS in New York on 11 September 2001 a discernible shift has taken place in Western racist discourse, from the identification of the victims’ national origins and skin colour to their religion. That Islamophobia (anti-Muslim intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination) is a distinct expression of racism is understood from the interchangeability of “race” and “religion,” where addressing intolerance is concerned, by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). While it is evident that this growing hostility to Islam and Muslims in the West is, at least in part, a response to the murderous terroristic actions of Islamic extremists, perfectly innocent people who are identified as Muslims are being increasingly singled out for harassment and racist abuse. Muslim women in particular, as numerous studies across Europe have found, have been victimised in this climate of paranoia, mistrust, hatred, and fear.

Even though counterterrorism is often cited as the pretext for the state and institutional animus towards the hijab and other traditional Islamic female apparel, in Western countries already experiencing mounting social tensions over immigration and diversity, the War on Terror is a war against terrorists who, by virtue of their undertaking, disguise themselves to blend in. Legislation against the veil under the guise of security and the rise in gendered Islamophobia seems, prima facie, quite arbitrary and surplus to requirements if the intended target is in fact the perpetrators of terrorism. It is for this reason that the present discussion will examine, in the context of Ireland and Britain (insofar as Irish society is informed by British trends), the targeting of Muslim women and the use of the Muslim female in Islamophobic racism. In the process of this discussion the ideas of David Theo Goldberg’s Racial State, Nira Yuval-Davis’ Gender & Nation, and Edward Said’s Orientalism...
will be used to construct a heuristic devise through which to better understand gendered Islamophobic racism, and attempt to uncover the motives behind it.

James Carr’s 2014 report for the Hate and Hostility Research Group at the University of Limerick, *Experiences of anti-Muslim Racism in Ireland*, found that Muslim women – the majority of whom were “Identifiably Muslim”⁴ – were twice as likely as Muslim men to be subjected to discrimination in public places.⁵ The report lists, among other things, the *hijab* (head covering) and the *niqāb* (facial veil), both articles of female religious clothing, as elements of Islamic *identifiability*, and it is interesting to note that of the 22% of Muslims surveyed for the report who reported being the victims of violent assaults, the forceful removal of the *hijab* was reported to be part of the attack.⁶

As the “most conspicuous sign of Islamic feminism” – and indeed femininity – “in the West,” the veil makes Muslim women who choose to wear it *more visible* in countries where such religious and traditional garb is not the norm.⁷ This increased visibility, coupled with the fact that many migrant women struggle with a language barrier,⁸ increases their vulnerability to abuse. In the various European and North American discourses on security and integration a great deal of public debate has been generated over the Muslim women’s dress, and interestingly, as Amikam Nachmani points out, *traditional* male Islamic attire is no less likely to attract unwanted attention “than a Scotsman in a kilt.”⁹ Whether this concern over fabric is about national security or the perceived need of migrant communities to integrate, the social, political, and media emphasis is on women.

During the State of Israel’s most recent military incursion into the besieged Gaza Strip in July and August 2014, in an attempt to galvanise international support for its actions, Israeli embassies across Europe launched the “Israel is the last frontier of the free world” social media campaign. This campaign consisted of a series of mock-ups of iconic national female images (Dublin’s Molly Malone statue for Ireland, the Mona Lisa for France, and the Little Mermaid for Denmark) decked out in *burqa* and *niqāb* and emblazoned, in Ireland, with the threatening slogan: “Israel Now Dublin Next.”¹⁰ Here the intention was clear. Israel hoped to gain sympathy, if not support, for it unpopular invasion of Gaza by appealing to the gendered Islamophobic racism that has been fomenting across Europe over the past few decades. Again it reproduced the false equivalence of Islamic terrorism and Muslim women, and again the focus was on Muslim women.

Largely this ploy backfired in Ireland, and the public backlash forced the Israeli embassy in Dublin to remove the offensive image from its Twitter feed. Yet Israel had not made a mistake in imagining that the sexualisation of its own anti-Muslim racism (consider the “Bibi, finish inside this

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⁴ James Carr, “Experiences of Anti-Muslim Racism in Ireland” (report for the Hate and Hostility Research Group, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland, July 2014), 5.
⁵ Carr, 3.
⁶ Carr, 3.
⁸ Nachmani, 67.
⁹ Nachmani, 71.
time!” poster and others produced in Israel during the same war) was being mirrored across Europe, and in Britain and Ireland. Neither Britain nor Ireland have gone down the legislative route of banning any particular form of Islamic dress, but this does not mean there is no public support for such. Writing for the Irish Independent in July 2010, following the Assemblée Nationale’s decision to ban the burqa in France, Mary Kenny noted of Britain’s position:

“The Liberal-Conservative administration has made it clear that banning any form of dress is, as a spokesman loftily puts it, “rather un-British,” and runs contrary to the customs of a “tolerant and mutually respectful society.” Maybe so: but a poll by YouGov last week found that 67pc of the British population want the burqa banned, and pronto.12

Calls for a ban on the burqa have not been absent in Ireland. Joe O’Callaghan, a former Lord Mayor of Cork, suggested that Ireland should follow the example set by France and Belgium in banning the burqa. On reporting this story the Journal.ie conducted its own online poll wherein some 48% of respondents agreed that the burqa should be banned in Ireland.13 Certainly, in respect of this discussion, the significant social media support – with British and Irish “likes” – for banning the burqa cannot be ignored; the largest of which on Facebook has over 45,000 followers.14

It is conceivable that Israel’s overt connection of gendered or sexualised Islamophobia and the threat of Islamic terrorism, in the context of its war in Gaza, floundered in Europe because the present mask of Europe’s gendered Islamophobia is rooted not so much in the terror threat discourse but in that of liberalism and women’s rights. Phyllis Chesler, while being herself an American contributor to the debate is situated centre stage in the liberal feminist discourse, insists the burqa is emblematic of “Islamist designs on state power and control of political, military, social, personal, and family life,” and that it is “a flagrant violation of women’s most basic human rights.”15 Admittedly her argument that the burqa is a misogynistic ethnic custom and an Islamist political statement to which Western states are pandering under the misguided acceptance of it as a religious requirement16 is more palatable, more salient, and therefore more reasonable than that of Israel’s war propaganda. Her position echoes that of Ireland and Europe’s own liberal feminism.

As convincing as this argument sounds, it is predicated on a number of assumptions that expose a deep flaw in liberal feminist thinking apropos of the burqa. Sarah Down brings this line of reasoning back to the question of agency and simple logic. She observes that the legitimacy of such

11 Muftah, “Israel’s War Against Gaza’s Women & their Bodies,” Muftah, http://muftah.org/israels-war-gazas-women-bodies/#.VwBz4fkrLIV  
12 Mary Kenny, “Ban the burqa – and bring us back to the Middle Ages,” The Irish Independent, July 19, 2010, Opinion Section.  
16 Chesler, 45.
calls for a ban are established on the assumption that the wearing of it is not a matter of choice, and therefore those who wear it, in their inability to exercise free will, are without agency.\textsuperscript{17}

It also assumes a replication of socio-political conditions in tolerant Western countries of those of oppressive Islamic states. Chesler is right in pointing out the repressive measures employed against women in Iran and Saudi Arabia for failing to meet strict Islamic dress codes,\textsuperscript{18} but in Ireland, as is the case in the rest of Europe, liberal legislation protects the rights of every individual to dress as they please (with some exceptions pertaining to nudity and indecency in some places). Carr's previously mentioned report revealed no evidence among Muslim women in Ireland of coercion in relation to religious dress. In fact quite the opposite was found. Many of the women interviewed for the study even indicated that the assumption of their oppression contributed to their sense of victimhood as the racial and religious other in Ireland.\textsuperscript{19} The assumption that no one would wear a hijab, a niqāb, or the birqa freely assumes Muslim women are oppressed and without agency;\textsuperscript{20} an all too common assumption made on their behalf that has caused many Muslims in Ireland to demonstrate what Carr labels “oppression fatigue”\textsuperscript{21} – apathy towards the patronising and racialised caricature of oppressed Muslim women.

In reality, therefore, what exists in Europe is a specific anti-Muslim, Islamophobic racism that obfuscates itself in either a façade of security or a disingenuous liberal feminist language of rights and liberation. That both of these, apparently well-meaning, fronts end in the targeting of Muslim women in order to address the perceived threat from an Islamist patriarchy obviates the presence of a hidden agenda. Nachmani raises the interesting point that behind and beneath this veneer there is the same old racism; the tensions arising from diversity and immigration, where the rhetoric of Muslim immigration as a “Trojan Horse” for the Islamisation of Europe is not uncommon.\textsuperscript{22} We shall return to this motif of the Trojan Horse below, but first this discussion will begin the process of exploring this gendered Islamophobia through three specific theoretical lenses, namely those of Orientalism, the Racial State, and Yuva-Davis' thesis of women as the reproducers of the nation.

After brief consideration of the current discourses, Edward Said underlines for us the impossibility of the scholar’s detachment from his or her circumstances of life.\textsuperscript{23} This is to say that no present or prior contributor to the discussion is neutral. Non-Muslim European conceptions of Islam are inextricably linked to Europe’s long cultural memory of the Islamic World and its cultures. Even as late as the mid-seventeenth century Judeo-Christian civilisation, from which modern liberalism evolved, was under pressure from the progress of Islamic civilisation to the south in North Africa and

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\textsuperscript{18} Chesler, 39-40.
\textsuperscript{19} Carr, 7.
\textsuperscript{20} Down, 378.
\textsuperscript{21} Carr, 7.
\textsuperscript{22} Nachmani, 47.
\end{flushleft}
in the east at Vienna. Since the fall of Constantinople Islam has presented itself to the European imagination as an existential threat.24

Said suggests that Western colonial projects, which were never able to reduce the political and cultural power of Islam in their colonies, dealt with this by knowing Islam – instrumentalising the Orient qua the Islamic World through the power tools of the Western academy. What inevitably resulted was a knowledge of the subject in Western terms, which in the same terms could be considered subjugated.25 This cleaving of the subject open, making it completely accessible to European scrutiny,26 culminated in the logic of the Suez Canal by which,

A land barrier could be transmuted into a liquid artery, so too the Orient was transubstantiated from resistant hostility into obliging, and submissive, partnership.27

European colonialism, in its use of this power by knowledge, successfully achieved the effective categorisation of subject and master peoples into which the signifier of race came to play an important role in ideas of power and hegemony. According to Goldberg’s Racial State theory the constructs of racial difference in the context of colonialism, through the white European hegemonies, formed and informed people – both the masters and the subjects – who were inculcated within these structures.28 Having been formed by the apparatus of colonialism and its control over the threat of heterogeneity with “restriction, regulation and repression,”29 people interiorised this dynamic of the racial state and so, free of this mechanism, reproduced it themselves. It was in precisely this manner that this racial hegemonic statist thinking outlived the colonial environment in which it was formed and is reproduced still in modern Europe.30

The emergence then of the modern European state, after colonialism, has been a development in which ideas of race and racial superiority and inferiority have been integral to its self-imagination and ongoing power relations. Yet the post-colonial age, along with industrial and economic change, has brought with it a previously unknown mobility that has brought the populations of former subject colonial others to the mother country, creating heterogeneous states. It is this challenge, posed by racial difference, which Goldberg argues the racial state now attempts to answer.31

With regard to this change, the hegemony of the former colonisers is maintained, heterogeneity denied, through various structural mechanisms of repression, denial, and erasure of the claims to equality of the racialised other.32 Until recently these mechanisms, which were reproduced by individuals of the racial ruling class, as well as by social and cultural institutions, and the state, were deployed against racialised others as they were defined by their natal origins and colour. The

24 Said, 74-5.
25 Said, 78.
26 Said, 83.
27 Said, 92.
29 Goldberg, 31.
30 Goldberg, 108.
31 Goldberg, 11.
32 Goldberg, 33.
advent of War on Terror has affects a shift in this, as previously noted, to Muslims; the racialised religious other.

As has been discussed above, this focusing of racist attention on Muslims (on Islam and Muslims as an unpacified Orientalist threat to Europe and as a racial challenge to the racial state) has concentrated on Muslim women. In Ireland (as Carr has shown), and across Europe, Muslim women have borne the brunt of anti-Muslim racist discrimination and sometimes violence. To shed more light on why Muslim women have been especially singled out for such treatment we shall turn now to Yuval-Davis’ articulation of women as reproducers of the nation and the aforementioned intolerant “Trojan Horse” rhetoric.

“As the biological ‘producers’ of children/people,” Yuval-Davis writes, “women are also, therefore, ‘bearers of the collective’ within [national] boundaries.”33 Muslim women, migrants and native born, living as strangers in the Western racial state are perceived as the living embodiment of this “Trojan Horse” – or Trojan Mare as the case may be. The term ‘stranger’ here is important, as Yuval-Davis highlights: Not only is this dangerous stranger the rapist in the racist myths of the other, but rape is used too against women from racialised groups who challenge the hegemonic collective.34 This disturbing dynamic is made possible because the position of the victims outside the boundaries of the hegemonic nation has the effect of stripping the nation of social responsibility towards them.35 It can be understood here that, in this environment of vulnerability to attack, the veil takes on the significance of an identifying boundary signifier.

Rape then, as a means of attacking the reproducer of the dangerous stranger, nicely repositions the targeting of the hijab, the burqa, and the niqāb as a Western hegemonic rape fantasy; perfectly conforming to Said’s insistence that everything should be laid bare to the coloniser’s gaze.36 Much the same metaphorical connection can be made with the “Trojan Horse.” As women, as the mothers of the nation (and the threat), are construed as “wombs,”37 so too is the wooden horse a womb; containing within it the seeds of civilisational destruction and all the modern overtones of viral spread. Within the strictures of the racial state, where policy requires the reproduction of “good stock”38 and public opinion insists “There ain’t no black in the Union Jack,”39 the language of assimilation can only be used as yet another impossible demand as a means of oppression.

In summation, the Islamophobia present in Ireland conforms to a media-driven shift that has happened across the West from an old racism which’s focus was in foreign origins and racial markers to an identification of religion (Islam and “the Muslims”) as a threat. The apparent misdirection of this racism’s emphasis on Muslim women and the veil has been explained in terms of a need for greater security – the requirement of identification – and in terms of liberating women from illiberal

34 Yuval-Davis, 51-2.
35 Yuval-Davis, 51.
36 Said, 83.
37 Yuval-Davis, 28.
38 Yuval-Davis, 32.
39 Yuval-Davis, 54.
foreign patriarchal oppression. However, neither of these concerns fully meets reality. Neither Muslim women nor the veil represent the reality of a threat from terrorism, and the assertion that Muslim women wear the veil because of their oppression by Muslim men ignores entirely the freedom and agency of Muslim women living in the West.

Discussion of anti-Muslim racism must take into account the historical relationship between Europe and the Islamic World. The emergence of Europe in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period was set against the rapid and successful spread of Islamic civilisation as a formidable cultural force; a social, cultural, and political power Europe – even through its colonial adventures – has never been able to quell. For this reason Islam has remained in the European (and therefore Western) imagination as a potent existential threat, and the arrival of an increasing Muslim presence in the West in recent decades has done little to reduce this Kulturkampf and fear. Moreover, colonialism has played a significant role in solidifying the racial state as a means of maintaining white European hegemony in our multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural modernity. This system of control has exposed Muslims and other ‘foreign races’ within Europe to the measures of state oppression, repression, legislation, and censure that are daily re-created in the sons and daughters the hegemonic society produces.

Muslim women find themselves the focal point of this structural and popular vitriol precisely because they are women; the womb of the virus and the reproducer of the threat. It makes no sense to target them under the pretence of security because women are not the problem, and attempts to explain the discourse of legislating against their religious and tradition clothing fails singularly to take into account the freedom of Muslim women in the West. Rather, the focus of Islamophobia on women presents itself as a constructed us and them, with a reduced sense of social responsibility, in which an effective war against their women will ensure the hegemonic position of our way of life in light of the exteriority of a threat from the Islamic World and the interior threat of Muslims living here.


Kenny, Mary, “Ban the burqa – and bring us back to the Middle Ages,” The Irish Independent, July 19, 2010, Opinion Section.

Muftah, “Israel’s War Against Gaza’s Women & their Bodies.” Muftah. http://muftah.org/israels-war-gazas-women-bodies/#.VwBz4fkrLIV

