Muslim Women in France: Impossible Subjects?

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Introduction

Current discussions of immigration in France are saturated with sensational narratives about gender and sexuality. The wearing of Islamic scarves, polygamy, forced marriages, female genital cutting, and the sexual victimization of young Muslim women, for instance, receive intense and recurring attention from the French media. The cultural labour that these narratives perform, however, has elicited little scholarly scrutiny. In this article, I point out that sex and gender constitute central threads within anti-immigrant discourses that present Africans and Muslims as undesirable immigrants in France. The deployment of sex and gender within discussions of national identity, immigration, and racial/ethnic communities is not a new phenomenon. The fact that women and girls are being conjured up to capture the cultural distance between the French and their post-colonial others, therefore, must be read as a re-deployment of distant and yet singularly familiar discourses about the fatherland (la patrie), the nation, and the republic. The image of the overly fecund African mother, for instance, haunts discussions of the ‘immigration problem’ in France. Of late, the figure of a victimized and/or manipulated girl-woman has appeared regularly in national conversations about Muslim immigrants and their integration within French society. It is the latter figure that I explore in this article.

Whether constructed as agent or victim, whether understood as promoting or resisting ‘integration’, the migrant woman emerges as a key element in the racialization of immigration and citizenship in France. In Le Sol et le Sang: Théories de l’invasion au XXe siècle, French demographer Hervé Le Bras analyzes the emergence of an ideology of (immigrant) invasion in France in the 20th century. Le Bras points out that the immigrant, in France, presents a Janus face: ‘that of the worker and that of the dweller. One hides the other: we only see the worker during periods of economic growth and only see the dweller during economic crises.’ However, Le Bras fails to notice that the face of the immigrant-dweller, today, is more often than not the face of a woman.

In my work on undocumented immigrants in France, I often argue that women who are immigrants themselves or the daughters of immigrants are discursively hailed and materially locked into a narrow range of roles and positions. Once located in these slots, they function as tropes for certain migrant communities’ failure to integrate into French society. I suggest that these roles and positions are neither natural nor freely chosen and yet provide normative and socially approved scripts for migrant women trying to carve out new spaces and meaningful lives in the locales they now inhabit. I also argue that old notions of African and Muslim women drawn from France’s colonial imagination are rearticulated into the current context of post-colonial population movements.

The discursive and material effects of these constructions are many. First and foremost, they conjure up and place the very concepts of the ‘domestic’ and the ‘traditional’ (the discursive spaces occupied by the migrant Woman) in contrast with the ‘public’ and the ‘modern’ (that occupied by the French Woman). In the process, both terms of these binaries (domestic/public; tradition/modern; immigrant/French) are anchored as common-sense notions and naturalized in everyday parlance. Once these binary structures are in place, it becomes almost impossible to think about social actors outside the dichotomous understandings and frameworks they establish. In turn, these articulations place certain migrant women at the centre of anti-immigrant and racist developments in contemporary France and render them particularly vulnerable to such developments.

Here I argue that – against the backdrop of international economic transformations, the construction of Europe, and increased national anxieties – narratives of the-migrant-woman-as-victim insidiously rely on tropes of innate violence and queerly raced sexualities that construct certain immigrants as impossible subjects. Discursive constructions of foreigners as ‘impossible citizens’ date back to the beginnings of the French republic. This has been brilliantly demonstrated by Sophie Wahnich in her work on hospitality and
national belonging in the context of the French revolution. In this article, I also analyze these narratives as traces of France’s colonial project.

**Ni Putes Ni Soumises**

In this article, I examine the media success and the heightened visibility of one immigrant woman, Fadela Amara, and the organization she has spearheaded, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither Whore Nor Submissive), to illustrate the construction of impossible subjects in contemporary France. I connect my discussion of Amara and of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* to that of the French law on *laïcité*, which forbids the wearing of ostentatious religious signs in French public schools, and to a broader analysis of gendered processes of racialization within French immigration politics. Finally, I conclude this analysis by pointing to new forms of citizenship and modalities of belonging that are the very products of the contradictions I explore in this article.

I would never have imagined we could do it. To bring together on March 8, 2003 more than 30,000 people in the streets of Paris, most of them from the suburbs, behind our slogan *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*. I would never even have dared to dream of such success.

Thus opens Fadela Amara’s book-length essay *Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Breaking the Silence: French Women’s Voices from the Ghetto)*. Fadela Amara’s recognition of the unthinkable quality of the success that her organization and its political platform have encountered in France is also where I want to start. Indeed, the success of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises (NPNS)* is a surprising phenomenon – at least at first sight – in the context of French immigration politics at the beginning of the 21st Century. Amara, a young French working-class Muslim woman born of Algerian immigrant parents, has now become a household name in France. Even those who might not know who she is certainly have heard of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*. Though this is an interesting development, Amara is not the first French woman of Muslim heritage to write a book or even to lead a strong grass-roots organization. In fact Amara’s organizing success is built on a long tradition of immigrant, women, and youth community activism and must be understood in connection to this tradition.

It has been widely noted that NPNS and its leader have sustained exceptional public visibility since the national march organized by Amara in 2003. The march started and ended in Paris (on March 8) in the demonstration referred to in the quotation that opens this section of the paper. According to journalist Chérifa Benabdessadok:

She receives the support of an impressive list of public figures and organizations […] As far as communication and information are concerned, we can’t even count the number of shows (TV and Radio) to which the leaders of the movement have been invited or the number of articles published in the media, of all political leanings, in the national press as well as in the NGO publication circuit.

Amara was not a particularly well-known figure before 2003; however, she is no newcomer to the French anti-racist political scene. Indeed, Amara has been involved in anti-racist politics since the early 1980s when children of North African immigrants (*Beurs*) organized a series of marches demanding their real integration into French society. The first march (the march for equality and against racism), which they organized in 1983 started in Lyon and ended in Paris in a massive demonstration. Amara recounts that, like her friends, she joined the march when it passed through her home town, Clermont-Ferrand, but did not attend the national demonstration in the capital city. She further explains that she did not join in the planning of the next march (December 1984) because she could not identify with the priorities and the machismo of the male organizers: ‘I preferred investing my energy in my own neighborhood, where my women friends and I put together a plan to fix up housing that had fallen in disrepair.’

In 1986 Amara became a member of the French anti-racist organization *SOS Racisme*. She found the organization more welcoming of women activists like herself. Furthermore it provided her an established structure to conduct the kind of local politics she favoured. In 1988, within *SOS Racisme*, she worked on the development of *a Maison de Potes* (a neighborhood solidarity house). In 1989 she participated in the creation of a woman’s commission within the *Fédération Nationale des Maisons de Potes* and in 2000 became president of the federation.
It is through her work at the Clermont-Ferrand solidarity house in the 1990s that Amara started to notice a change in the gender relations within her neighborhood and the emergence of new forms of male oppression where young men in these neighborhoods enforced certain codes of morality and forms of behaviours that had been on the wane when Amara herself was an adolescent:

The next step was to extend this male power from the older brothers to all the young men in the projects. Their surveillance was systematically directed against the ‘tribe of young women.’ Now the honor of each family and of the project was in the hands of these young men. Since the honor consisted in preserving women’s virginity, these young men became the collective guardians of this treasure.14

Amara locates these disturbing changes in her own neighborhood but more generally in the French banlieues – these are the same banlieues that were the site of social unrest and rioting in the fall of 2005 (and again as I am getting ready to send this article for publication, November 2007).15 As social injustice increased, Amara suggests, young men enraged at their exclusion and rejection from mainstream French society embraced and became the new enforcers of traditional patriarchal relations within immigrant families. Amara and her followers then locate NPNS within a ‘feminisme des banlieues’.16 They point out the double if not the triple oppression experienced by immigrant women (and especially their daughters) who inhabit these suburbs.

However, they are neither the only nor the first ones to do so. Immigrant women organizing since the 1970s have continuously addressed the particular location of immigrant women (and their daughters) at the intersections of multiple axes of oppression. So, how can we explain NPNS’ ability to garner so much political support and to sustain the kind of media visibility that they have since their eruption – with their catchy slogan – on the French political scene?

One could argue that the success of Amara and NPNS is simply a case of being in the right place at the right time. Indeed, NPNS came to visibility at a time when issues related to deep social breakdown (la fracture sociale) in the French republic, the role and place of the ‘second generation’ within immigrant communities, and the emergence of radical Islam organizing in the suburbs, were very much on the political front burner. NPNS’ basic premise that young women living in the projects located in the banlieues are often the victims of violent forms of patriarchal control including gang rapes (the infamous tournantes) and physical harassment, and that these incidents are on the rise, has resonated within French discussions of social breakdown, insecurity, immigration, and youth.17 One could also suggest that NPNS benefited from its close connection to SOS-Racisme and its related Socialist party political and media apparatus. And it probably did.18

In this article, however, I want to suggest yet another reading of Amara’s success. By looking at the tropes circulating in the NPNS political platform, I point out that the NPNS narrative is one that – unfortunately – reinforces very problematic understandings of immigration, Islam, and especially of young Muslim men and women in France. Indeed, this narrative opposes ‘enlightened’ (meaning well-integrated into French society) but victimized women to ‘backward’ Muslim men. Men who cannot (will not) integrate into French society. These understandings, I argue along with others, scapegoat young Muslim men (and by extension Islam in general) for the current ailments of the republic and obfuscate other reasons for the social breakdown that is really at the core of these discussions.19

We women who are living in suburban neighborhoods and who come from many origins and faiths, believers and nonbelievers, appeal for our rights to liberty and to emancipation. We are socially oppressed by a society that confines us in ghettos that have become sites of poverty and exclusion. We are crushed by the machismo of our neighborhood men, who in the name of ‘tradition’ deny our most fundamental rights.

A National Appeal from Neighborhood Women (Trans. Helen Harden Chenut)20

In her introduction to the English translation of Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Breaking the Silence), Helen Harden Chenut writes that the movement is ‘aimed at shattering the law of silence within the Muslim community concerning violence perpetrated against women by a minority of young men who assumed the role of morals police and guardian of their family’s honor.’21 However, several observers in France have already challenged this interpretation. Horia Kebaza, for instance, pertinently questions the cultural reading generated by Amara, summarized by Chenut above, and widely circulated by the French
Indeed, Kebaza suggests that if there are specific forms of violence against women that exist and grow within neglected neighborhoods, they are more likely the product of social exclusion than cultural (or religious) belonging. The violent practices observed in such locales are but exaggerated forms of gender inequalities at play in the French society at large, where, she reminds us, one in ten women have experienced some form of domestic violence.

To focus our attention on the unequal status of women in the neighbourhoods, and on men who symbolize by themselves masculine domination, presents a double particularity: that of minimizing women’s inferior status in our society (illustrated by the various situations of discrimination in the labour force or in the political arena), and that of disqualifying a culture and an identity (arab-Muslim-maghrebi) judged too visible or loud, and way too remote from republican values. [This is the] Ultimate contradictory injunction toward a population whose naturalized foreign status would be irreducible to integration … creating in the process the very conditions of a ‘communitarianism’ that [France] condemns in advance.

This gendered and racialized construction of the arab-Muslim-maghrebi does explain to a certain extent the popular appeal of NPNS. This construction is politically useful in many ways. First it obfuscates the material and ideological forms of racial and gender stratifications that lie at the core of the Republic. A collective of intellectuals, academics and activists, Les Mots Sont Importants (‘Words Matter’), point out the fact that one of the ideological effects of NPNS has been a collective forgetting of the structural gender inequalities that are foundational to the French republic. The collective reminds us that, in France, income disparities along gender lines are endemic, women hold the vast majority of emplois précaires (those jobs that offer little employment security and no or sub-standard benefits), and represent only 10 to 15% of top economic and political leadership positions. In other words NPNS, by focusing on ‘ghetto’ sexism, helps France ignore Republican sexism.

The other ideological effect of the media visibility of NPNS is the reinscription in public discourse of lingering colonial ideas about hierarchal schemes of cultures and civilizations. These discourses use the figure of the Muslim woman (in this case young women of North African parentage) and of its antithesis, the young Muslim man perpetrator of violence, to assess the cultural competency of a whole community. This deeply gendered narrative effectively racializes the Muslim community in France.

On one hand, barbarians: boys for the most part. On the other, girls: citizens and republican … One more time, one time too many, young [Muslim] men are being equated without distinction with violence, delinquency, anti-Semitism and terrorism.

The cumulative effect of sensational sexualized accounts of women being violated, mutilated, and coerced is disastrous. They repulse, titillate, and fuel the racist imagination. They also provoke a retrenchment on patriarchal and heteronormative notions of home, family, and sexuality. While young Muslim men are to be feared because of their delinquent sexuality (and politics), Muslim women must be liberated, and all women are in need of protection. The ‘veiled woman,’ is a stock figure in these narratives and needs special attention here.

‘L’Affaire du Foulard’ and the French Law on Laïcité
It might be useful to put Fadela Amara’s own trajectory in relation to the emergence of a national narrative about ‘the daughter of the North African immigrant’ in France. The success of NPNS, as I argued earlier, is due, in part, to its ideological reiteration of a familiar (and politically useful) narrative: certain immigrants and their families as unable and/or unwilling to embrace French culture. It must be noted, however, that this notion is counterbalanced by a parallel focus on immigrant women and daughters of immigrants as privileged agents of integration: ‘On one hand, barbarians: boys for the most part. On the other, girls: citizens and republican.

This has certainly been the case of the media coverage of the beurettes. The beurettes appeared in the media in the mid-1980s in stories suggesting that they, unlike their brothers, were doing well in school and were embarking on trajectories of success and integration. The beurette then is an educated ‘modern’ woman, a woman who moves into public space and attests to the actual and potential success
of the republican model of integration. She also points to the failure of her brother and casts him as culturally incompetent: unable (unwilling) to become a French subject notwithstanding the fact that both are often born in France and are indeed French nationals and citizens. While the *beurettes* were central in media coverage of the ‘second-generation’ of North African/Muslim immigrants in the 1980s, by the 1990s they were slowly being replaced by the figure of the veiled woman.

In 1989 three young Muslim women were expelled from a public high school because they refused to remove their Islamic scarf inside the school. What became known as the ‘headscarf incident’ and the controversy surrounding it mainly focused on the inability of certain immigrants to ‘melt’ into French society and the waning integrative power of French republican institutions. These young women and others like them (constructed as either willing or manipulated agents) came to symbolize the notion that some immigrants were unable and/or unwilling to embrace French republican and secular principles.

While addressing in depth the potential or actual resistive strategies these constructions elicit lies beyond the scope of this article, they cannot be underestimated and are worth noting here. In fact, it is the very possibility of certain immigrants’ subversive interventions such as nay-saying to hegemonic integration and assimilation scripts that a loud and relentless Republican chorus renders inaudible. In spite of these possibilities, dominant discourses about some immigrants’ otherness rooted in their inability or unwillingness to fit in are dangerous and fuel growing anti-Muslim sentiment in France. Indeed, the ‘headscarf incident’ and its discursive ripples established Islam as one of the main roadblocks to the successful integration of post-colonial immigrants in France. Fifteen years after the initial incident, the issue of the *hijab* is back on the front burner in France. In March 2004 a law was passed to forbid ostentatious signs of religious belonging in schools. The Islamic scarf was undeniably the main target of the new law and has rekindled the debate on France’s *laïcité* principle, its republican tradition, and its relationship toward the French Muslim community.

The debates that preceded the passage of the law remained fairly abstract and basically focused on the symbolic impact of religious signs – and most specifically Islamic scarves – within French public space. In 2003 a research team (*la commission Stasi*) commissioned to study the issue declared that ostentatious religious signs were indeed contradictory to the secular principles of the French educational system. *Hijabs*, in particular, represented the rise of radical Islam in France and the oppression of women within Islam in general. Both were deemed unacceptable within the bounds of a Western secular and democratic nation like France. Interestingly enough, the Stasi commission did not bother to interview young women who were wearing the scarf. In a speech she made in 2004, Christine Delphy pointed out a working assumption of the Stasi commission, which reflected a republican consensus on the issue; these women were not worth listening to since they obviously were either coerced or manipulated into wearing such a blatant symbol of their own oppression.  

Many feminists in France aligned themselves with the dominant republican line of argument and supported the passage of the law. Taking a strict, principled, and abstract position about women’s rights and gender equality, these feminists (like Amara and *NPNS*) are fueling problematic constructions of the Muslim community in France and of Islam in general. By opposing a modern secular space (the republic) they inhabit to the traditional religious space Muslim women who wear the scarf occupy, they also contribute to the false understanding that certain subject positions are produced outside modernity. Nacira Guénif-Souilamas and Eric Massé remind us that, in fact, young women who wear the scarf, young men who perform extreme forms of masculinity in the *banlieues*, along with *beurettes* and other children of immigrants, are all products of modern France.

**Conclusion**

The idea that Muslim women of immigrant parentage are either victims of tradition and religion or vectors of integration circulates widely in France. In both cases, women (as well as gender and sexuality) are conjured up to render problematic the presence of certain immigrants within the French national space. Whether bearers or breakers of tradition, women are called forth precisely to raise the spectre of a ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ that stands in the way of the successful integration of African and Muslim immigrants and their children.

The hyper-mediatization of issues such as the *hijab*, forced marriages, gang rapes, female genital cutting, and honour killings tend to construct these young women as prisoners of religion and the private/familial sphere. Even stories that document young women breaking away from ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ end up reinscribing problematic ideological structures. I am not suggesting here that these painful realities do not
exist in the lives of migrant women (or their daughters) and should not alarm us. What I am pointing out is that dominant narratives in France tend to focus on certain women and certain realities and not others.

Indeed, (African/Muslim) migrant women are being constructed in ways that emphasize and reinforce their victim status and their domestic roles in the family. These constructions locate them primarily in the sphere of the private and the ‘traditional.’ In a complex and contradictory logic, migrant women emerge as symbols of ‘tradition’ and backwardness, and at the same time are locked in material realities that reproduce and maintain the very processes that the French imaginary has constructed as radically foreign. In a similar manner young men (especially those of North African descent) are being constructed as dangerous outsiders while being materially locked in dead-end social spaces. French sociologist Eric Macé captures this dual logic when he writes about the ‘ingredients’ that led to the 2005 social riots in the banlieues:

The ingredients I am referring to, in the French context specifically are the highest youth unemployment rates in Europe, racist discrimination and profound urban ghettos, and – since the beginning of the 1990s – the stigmatization of banlieues youths. Portrayed as foreign to French society by an increasingly alarming (alarmist) discourse, these youths have been constructed as a menace through the following steps: first they were equated with thieves; then with rapists in the banlieue gang-rape crisis; then – in the context of the Islamic scarf in schools – with men who veil their women; and recently with scum that needs to be cleaned up with high-intensity water hoses. A bit much, isn’t it?

Overall, the invocation of ‘queer’ gender/sexual practices to racialize whole communities echo a colonial past where discourses of sexuality, racial thinking, and nationalist rhetoric intersected in the construction of the bourgeois/national subject and its others. Such processes of subjectification articulate hierarchies of power and locate individuals and collectivities differentially in relation to the French State and its promise of universal inclusion and integration. They authorize the development of new forms of exclusion and discrimination. Interestingly, they also produce ‘impossible’ (and here I mean unruly) subjects and political practices that emerge from the very contradictions of the Republican tradition.

Whether manifested through street riots as we have seen in 2005 and 2007, through sans-papiers hunger strikes and site occupations, through ‘indigenous feminist’ voices, or through Ms. Amara’s attempts at shaking the system from the inside, immigrants and their children are bound to disrupt the status-quo of immigration politics. Whether these efforts are fruitful in the long run remains to be seen. Paying attention to the messy strategies (including forms of resistance and accommodation) that emerge from ‘impossible’ subject positions, however, alerts us to an array of political engagements and modalities of belonging that immigrants and their children use to seek justice and claim their place in France today.

By highlighting sexuality and gender and the ways they are invoked to legitimize the ‘lesser-than’ status of immigrants, I place this argument within a growing body of immigration analyses at the intersection of feminist, post-colonial and queer studies. By focusing on discursive and material practices, I also unravel some of the complex gender, racial, and sexual technologies of power that inform current French politics of immigration.

Notes


2. Racialization is used the way Omi and Winant define it ‘to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously unclassified relationship, social practice or group.’ In Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1980s . New York, London:
1. Amara explains that she was not able to march in Paris because of her father's disapproval.

4. The children of immigrants from Africa – who often are French themselves – are still considered and referred to as immigrants (immigrés). Needless to say, this constitutes a violent discursive denial of their legal and lawful belonging to the French nation.


9. *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* refers here to both Amara’s book and to the organization that she spearheaded. The movement’s name was coined in March 2002 in the National Appeal from Neighborhood Women.

10. Adding to her name recognition, Fadela Amara is now part of the Sarkozy government. As State Secretary under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Amara is in charge of urban and community politics (secrétaire d’Etat auprès de la ministre du logement et de la Ville, chargée de la Politique de la ville). Critical analyses of Amara’s political trajectory are bound to analyze her nomination as a further illustration of her co-optation by French republicans in general and now the French state in particular. Most interesting though, is that she is serving under the direction of Christine Boutin whose right-wing politics combine anti-feminist, anti-gay and anti-immigration elements. For a discussion of Boutin’s role in the anti PaCS campaign in France see my ‘Bodily Metaphors, Material Exclusions: The Sexual and Racial Politics of Domestic Partnership in France,’ in Arturo Aldama (ed.), *Violence and the Body*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, pp. 94-112.


12. Amara explains that she was not able to march in Paris because of her father’s disapproval.


15. French *banlieues* are more similar to inner cities than to suburbs in the United States. They are geographically located on the outskirts of larger urban centers. Immigrant families are overrepresented in the *banlieues*, which now stand as blatant signs of *fracture sociale* – the deep structural inequalities (economic, educational, cultural) that are now experienced by people living in France.

17. Fadela Amara herself links the beginning of NPNS to the violent murder of Sohane Benziane in 2002 and the publication of Samira Bellil’s *Dans l’enfer des tournantes* (2002). The eighteen-year-old Sohane had been set on fire by gang members in a Paris *banlieue* because she refused to conform to the new gender norms of the suburbs. Bellil and the personal testimony about the gang rapes she suffered at age 13 became ‘the symbolic center’ of the movement (36).

18. One can only remember the similar rapid rise and ample media exposure of Harlem Désir, one of the founding members of SOS Racisme. (1248 – Mars-avril 2004), pp. 52-63.


20. *Nous femmes des quartiers de banlieues, issues de toutes origines, croyantes ou non, lançons cet appel pour nos droits à la liberté et à l’émancipation. Oppressées socialement par une société qui nous enferme dans les ghettos où s’accumulent misère et exclusions. Étouffées par le machisme des hommes de nos quartiers, qui au nom d’une « tradition » nient nos droits les plus élémentaires. L’appel des états généraux de la Sorbonne (January 2002)* (1248 – Mars-avril 2004), pp. 52-63.


23. Enquête Nationale sur les Violences Faites aux Femmes (ENVEFF) directed by Maryse Jaspar shows that violence against women exists with the same intensity regardless of social class and cultural background (2005).


29. *Beur* and its feminine (and diminutive) form *Beurette* are expressions that came out of French *banlieues* culture where youth used a speech form called *verlan* where words are turned around.


31. Intervention de Christine Delphy au meeting ‘Une école pour toutes et pour tous’ Le Trianon, Paris, 4 février 2004. Delphy is one of the few feminists in France to have publicly opposed the law and its related effects on Muslim communities and girls in particular.


34. The agency invoked here is not conceptualized as a simply willed or a chosen position. Rather, borrowing from Judith Butler’s work on iteration in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), this analysis is attentive to the power relations and reiterative processes (both discursive and material) that produce ‘impossible’ subjects and subversive political practices. Through repetition, common sense and normative ideas about France, French nationals, and immigrants (assimilable and unassimilable) are produced. ‘And yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of the norm.” (10) It is in this inevitable instability that new forms of citizenship and new modalities of belonging are produced.