

# **Emancipation for Muslim Women Living in France**

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### **La emancipación de mujeres musulmanas en Francia**

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#### **Abstract**

Emancipation for Muslim women in France is an ongoing struggle expressed and examined through contemporary French and Francophone literature and film. In *Inch'Allah Dimanche (God-Willing on Sunday)* and *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin (Immigrant Memories: Maghrebin Heritage)*, French-Algerian filmmaker Yamina Benguigui illustrates the social, economic, and religious difficulties experienced by immigrants of the Maghreb to France following France's family regroupment law of 1974. These difficulties continue today and have contributed to an identity crisis that is preventing Muslim women from achieving emancipation. Leïla Djitli addresses the notion of identity crisis as it pertains to the experience of the Muslim immigrant woman in France *Lettre à ma fille qui veut porter le voile (A Letter to my Daughter Who Wants to Wear the Veil)*. Through her documentary-like approach, Djitli examines the feelings of exile that contribute to identity crisis. This paper will analyze France's recent Muslim immigrant history from the Algerian War to present day through these works as it pertains to the role of identity in emancipation. The analysis will consider Western feminist and Islamic feminist perspectives as well as the French position on secularism and its role in the French public sphere.

**Keywords:** Maghreb; Women; France; Laïcité; Emancipation.

#### **Resumen**

La emancipación para mujeres musulmanas en Francia es una lucha continua expresada y examinada a través de la literatura y el cine franceses contemporáneos. En las obras *Inch'Allah Dimanch (Inch'Allah domingo)* y *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin (Recuerdos de inmigrantes: la herencia musulmana)*, la cineasta franco-argelina Yamina Benguigui ilustra las dificultades sociales, económicas y religiosas vividas por los inmigrantes del Maghreb a Francia tras la ley de reagrupamiento familiar de 1974. Estas dificultades siguen hoy en día y han contribuido a una crisis de identidad que impide que las mujeres musulmanas logren su emancipación. Leïla Djitli aborda esta idea de crisis de identidad en cuanto a la experiencia de la inmigrante musulmana en Francia en su obra *Lettre à ma fille qui veut porter le voile (Carta a mi hija que quiere llevar el velo)*. A través de su estilo documental, Djitli investiga los sentimientos del exilio que

contribuyen a esta crisis de identidad. Este trabajo analizará la historia reciente de los inmigrantes musulmanes en Francia a partir de la Guerra de Independencia de Argelia hasta hoy día a través de estas obras y como éstas pertenecen al papel de la identidad en emancipación. El análisis considera tanto las perspectivas feministas occidentales y musulmanas como la postura francesa en cuanto al laicismo y su papel en el ámbito público francés.

**Palabras clave:** Maghreb; Mujer; Francia; Laicismo; Emancipación.

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Three specific events in French history have contributed to the modern Islamophobia that Muslim women in France, whether immigrants or French-born, are victims of today. At the Battle of Tours in the eighth Century, Charles Martel stopped the Islamic advance into Western Europe and set the tone for France's relationship with Islam for hundreds of years to come through anti-Muslim propaganda. Then, during the French Revolution, the French government severed its ties with the Catholic Church and created an officially secular state, which continues today, as France formally recognizes no religion in the public sphere. Finally, the 132-year-long French colonization of Algeria ended in a bloody war for independence that lasted from 1954 to 1962 (Bourget, 2010). Today, "Maghrebin women suffer from multiple layers of oppression, as Muslims, as North Africans, as immigrants, and as women" (Killian, 2006: 9) stemming from France's complex cultural history. Contributing to the oppression is the representation of women in contemporary culture as explained by Killian: "Muslim women suffer from particularly weighty historical representations and derogatory images. Westerners typically view Muslim women as the ultimate 'other' because they are of a different nationality, race, and religion, and because they are female" (Killian, 2006: 9). From the Battle of Tours to the decolonization of Algeria, Islamophobia has been present in French culture. The secular values of the French Republic that were initially meant to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church have become a way for France to codify racism into law. The so-called secular values seem to most intimately affect the lives of the roughly five million Muslims living in France today (Bourget, 2010) and form a roadblock to the emancipation of Muslim women through the denial of the opportunity to achieve self-actualization. Between the "one million *pieds-noirs* forced to abandon their homes and identity in Algeria" (Hargreaves, 2005: 203), the wave of Algerians that also left Algeria for France in the years following the Algerian war, and growing Muslim immigrant populations of other former colonies, France faces many challenges related to migration, transnational markets, and multiple identities (Keaton, 2006). The films and book discussed in this paper are artistic expressions that attempt to process the anxieties of the population of Muslim women living in France who have not yet achieved emancipation.

In her film *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, French Algerian filmmaker Yamina Benguigui depicts immigrant life in France in the 1970s through the experiences of the film's protagonist Zouïna. The story is semi-autobiographical, as it represents the personal experiences of the women of Benguigui's mother's generation in the 1970s following France's 1974 family regroupment law that allowed Algerian women to join their husbands who had been working in France during the post-war reconstruction (Portuges, 2009). The opening scene shows Zouïna's painful departure from her family in Algeria with her children and her mother-in-law as she gets on a boat to join her husband Ahmed in France. When Zouïna arrives in France, she struggles to find happiness in her new world where she is clearly an outsider and where her religion, her customs, and her appearance isolate her. The solution to Zouïna's problems is to embrace the new culture and to leave her Arab and Algerian customs behind. Benguigui takes a total anti-Arab culture stance in favor of French culture, suggesting that the way for immigrants to survive in France is to completely assimilate.

Benguigui depicts nearly every aspect of Zouïna's home culture as negative and even harmful and depicts French culture as desirable and ameliorative, reflecting her view that emancipation for immigrants is achieved through assimilation. Zouïna's customs, such as preparing coffee in the backyard and planting mint at night, are perceived by her French neighbors as extremely bizarre. Her inability to read or write in French and her helplessness at the market, where it becomes evident that she does not understand how to use French currency, make her vulnerable to exploitation by French capitalists. For example, a traveling salesman shows up at Zouïna's home and tells her that she has won a prize. He convinces her to sign a form that commits her husband to having to make payments on an expensive vacuum cleaner, an action for which Ahmed later brutally beats her. Zouïna's vulnerability is further exacerbated by the repeated verbal and physical abuse she receives from both her husband and mother-in-law, as well as their strict order that she never leave the house except for short trips to the market.

The film portrays Zouïna as a damsel in distress, an abused woman in need of saving from her life in which she enjoys no freedom and is controlled by her husband and mother-in-law. She is completely alone, isolated from her family, her language, her customs, and her religion. Her only refuge is on Sunday afternoons when she sneaks out of the house with her children when her husband and mother-in-law are out, which is the source of the film's title: *God-willing on Sunday*. A real opportunity to escape her circumstances comes to Zouïna through the character Nicole Briat, the young liberated divorcée and symbol of the modern woman in 1970s Europe. Nicole's role in the film is as Zouïna's friend but more importantly as her teacher or her inculcator of *francité* or "Frenchness." Nicole educates Zouïna in the values of French society and modern culture, bringing makeup to Zouïna's house and chatting with her about divorce and dance. The friendship between the women is rather superficial, for Nicole does not once inquire as to how Zouïna is adjusting to life in a new place. The depth of their conversations is limited to talk of makeup

and parties, as though making Zouïna entirely “French” is just a project for Nicole. By the end of the film, Zouïna has completed her transformation into *francité*. The process culminates in the film’s final scene in a moment of feminine empowerment as defined by Western feminist values. Ahmed and the mother-in-law stand outside the house and see Zouïna and the children arrive on a bus from one of their Sunday outings. Zouïna says to Ahmed, “I will take the kids to school tomorrow,” an appropriate ending for a film with a narrative of the empowerment of the female Maghrebin immigrant through assimilation.

Benguigui’s specific artistic choices in the portrayal of Arab and French culture in the film reflects the cultural imperialism of the French Republic and its attitude towards immigrants. Benguigui illustrates the perspective that “[immigrants are] made French through social structures and through French national education,” as is the experience of Zouïna and her children in the film. However, the “historical and expressed objective” of the “Frenchification” of Zouïna’s family “remains franco-conformity—an arrogant assimilation toward the national identity in keeping with the interest of national unity” (Keaton, 2006: 3). In forcing “franco-conformity,” particularly upon women, a devaluation of the non-franco aspect of identity occurs which is a form of oppression. Franco-conformity takes the form of oppression in the denial of the freedom expression of identity. Through its promulgation of *francité*, France ultimately creates “negative images of nonwhite femininity” that in effect “take a way minority women’s power of self-identification” (Killian, 2006, p. 9), pushing Muslim women to the far edges of otherness.

Benguigui’s attitude towards assimilation as expressed through the “Frenchification” of Zouïna in the film is also consistent with many members of those of Benguigui’s generation. Benguigui’s portrayal of Zouïna’s path to perceived emancipation through modern Western feminism represents the process by which many Maghrebin women became French following the French Algerian War. A similar view is also expressed in Leïla Djitli’s *Lettre à ma fille qui veut porter le voile (A Letter to My Daughter Who Wants to Wear the Veil)*, by the opinions of a mother (Aïcha) who is a member of Benguigui’s generation. Aïcha and her daughter, Nawel, represent two generations of Muslim women living in France with markedly different experiences that come from different cultural memories. Aïcha and Benguigui’s generation vividly remembers post-war tensions and ethnic riots, a generation was desperate and willing to give up its home culture in order to be “French” and truly saw this process as an investment in the well-being of future generations living in France. Aïcha and Benguigui see emancipation as not having to wear the veil and having the same rights and freedoms as other French people, which Aïcha explicitly discusses in the text. For Aïcha, the veil is a relic of the past, of a life that she left behind in Algeria when she and her family immigrated. Aïcha’s mother further illustrates the tension and difference of experience between generations when she explicitly says, “if you wanted to raise your girls like Muslims, we should pack our bags and go back to Algeria” (Djitli, 2004: 24). Aïcha even explains in the letter

that the veil imposes certain social behaviors such as not making eye contact, not shaking hands with men, not going to cafés, and at times, not leaving the house at all (Djitli, 2004: 32).

Highly emotional memories resurface for Aïcha when Nawel announces that she wants to start wearing the veil. Nawel states that wearing the veil “is [her] identity” and that she “does not want to hide it anymore” (Djitli, 2004: 8), emphasizing her desire to express her identity in a way that feels the most natural to her. Nawel represents young French women today who want to wear the veil for different reasons from their mothers and grandmothers. These young women are struggling to reconcile aspects of their identity and cling to the religious and cultural customs that their mothers and grandmothers left behind in order to pave the way to what they perceived as a better life for their children in France. The supposedly “better life,” however, seems to favor only the aspects of identity of which the state of France approves.

In her film *Mémoires d’immigrés: l’héritage maghrébin* (*Immigrant Memories: Maghrebin Heritage*), Benguigui explores the Algerian immigrant’s experience in France since the French Algerian War. Through a series of interviews with men, women, and children, Benguigui connects memories of the past with the experience of the present. The film is divided into three parts of equal length in which Benguigui traces the movement of Algerian workers who immigrated to France following the war. The three groups interviewed, *Les Pères* (*The Fathers*) and *Les Mères* (*The Mothers*), and *Les Enfants* (*The Children*), highlight generational differences in immigrant experience as it pertains to terms such as *intégration* (integration) and *assimilation* (*assimilation*). The older generation seems to have an idea of integration that means giving up traditions from *la-bas*, or from back home. The younger generation wants to live in France in a way that does not completely erase aspects of Algerian identity. The younger generation communicates feelings of otherness marked by a desire to retain aspects of Algerian identity. All of the groups express a certain pain associated with assimilation and integration, or attempting to become French.

In 1989, three high school students in France sparked an international controversy by wearing the veil at school “despite French authorities’ insistence that religion has no place in schools” (Killian, 2006: 21). This event, known as the Islamic Veil Affair, occurred during the bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution, stirring up longstanding tensions and national sentiments about what it means to be French. In 1994, another instance of girls wearing the veil at school occurred and “spread until school officials refused to allow more than 100 Muslim girls to attend public school” (Killian, 2006: 21). The 1989 affair has spurred the creation of secular laws in France including the banning of the veil in schools entirely as of 2004. Wearing the burqa is entirely illegal in France and is punishable by a fine of about \$200 and a “civics lesson” (Beardsley, 2011). In 2008, France denied citizenship to Faiza Silmi because she wore the niqab, though “government commissioner approvingly noted in her report that she was treated by a male gynecologist during her pregnancies”

(Bennhold, 2008). The ruling stated that Silmi “[had] adopted a radical practice of her religion, incompatible with essential values of the French community, particularly the principle of equality of the sexes” (Bennhold, 2008). The notion that women in France cannot express their religion and be French at the same time ethnic exacerbates ethnic tensions in France today.

The testimonies of young women interviewed by Patricia Keaton echo the sentiments of Nawel, Aïcha’s daughter, as well as those of *Les Enfants (The Children)* of *Memoires immigrés: l’héritage maghrébin (Immigrant Memories: Maghrebin Heritage)*. Today’s young French women of Maghrebin descent are experiencing an identity struggle markedly different from that of their mothers and grandmothers. Across France but in Paris especially, Muslim youth have become “targets and effects of identity politics, educational inequality” (Keaton, 2006: 1). Muslim communities in the outskirts of Paris are seen as “blighted public housing projects that risk becoming little more than feeders for prisons” (Keaton, 2006: 2). These social currents stand in the way of self-actualization for young Muslim French women. Mariama, a young French woman of Malian origin, states that “I was born French, but for me, the way I see it, it’s only in France that I’m French because our parents are foreign. But [in France] you have to be French. You have to be French to do anything here, like at school, or how you’re educated. But in my head, I’m a foreigner” (Keaton, 2006: 1). Fatima, of Algerian origin, says that “Me, I find myself totally integrated in France, so I feel at home everywhere. Given that I was born in France, that I speak French, that my culture is French, that I learned French history, France is my country... My identity is French of Algerian origin, of Muslim religion” (Keaton, 2006: 1). These quotations illustrate the feelings of otherness experienced by the younger generation of Muslim French women living France, different from Zouïna’s experiences and Nawel’s experiences. The girls’ feelings occur in response to stressful social anxieties associated with Muslim youth living in France today. As Keaton explains, Muslim youth are “seen by the [French] public as manifestations of social ill and not perceived as French” (Keaton, 2006: 2). In light of recent terrorist attacks around the world, including growing anxieties related to public fear, “politicized rhetoric conjures an imaginary hydra of immigration,” the ultimate threat to France’s coveted national identity (Keaton, 2006: 2). Thus, a social stigma surrounds youths of non-European origin who “assert that they are French and expect to be treated as such in their country” (Keaton, 2006: 2).

For Muslim women the process of Frenchification presents as a violation of the female body, for “the 2004 law banning the headscarf in French schools is a symbolic solution to the problems of violence and integration in France, and importantly, is enacted on women’s bodies” (Killian, 2006: 11). Through the creation of a law that denounces the culturally based and personal expression of modesty of physical appearance, Muslim women are denied autonomy over their own bodies. In other words, the French government is assuming responsibility over the bodies of Muslim women by forbidding them to express their own idea of modesty in public. In any



other Western country, laws do not specifically target this Muslim cultural value nor do they affect men in the same ways that they affect women.

Zouïna's life illustrated through *Inch'Allah Dimanche* reflects the Republic's commitment to inculcating *francité* into its immigrant population. In the eyes of the Republic and through the lens of the filmmaker, immigrant women are viewed as both "barriers to assimilation" because of their determination to cling to traditional ways and as "vehicles of integration into dominant society" (Killian, 2006: 11). Zouïna converts from a "barrier of assimilation" to a "vehicle of integration" in *Inch'Allah Dimanche* and represents the widespread oppression of women who are forced to choose one aspect of their identity over others in France today.

Conflicts following Algerian independence and the extensive identity crisis that French citizens of Algerian descent face today have contributed to ethnic and religious tensions in France. Muslim women in France are victims of discrimination that is coded in the language of the values of the French Republic. France, the country of Simone de Beauvoir and of modern Western feminism, tries actively to create laws that in the eyes of the state protect Muslim women from their own traditional and religious practices. Despite these efforts in the name of the Republic, the laws are oppressive and are exacerbating tensions. A study from the At Home in Europe initiative of the Open Society Foundations called "Unveiling the Truth: Why 32 Muslim Women Wear the Full-Face Veil in France" reveals that Muslim women who wear the veil do so as a result of a personal choice and that their husbands and families would in fact prefer if they did not wear for reasons concerning safety (Irving, 2013). Most of the women state that they wear the veil as part of a spiritual journey in order to deepen their relationship with God and look to the actions of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad for guidance. As a result of their personal choice, these women report that they have suffered physical brutality and verbal insults most severely since the turning point for the issue in 1989. As a consequence of the violence to which they are subjected, they prefer to spend a limited amount of time outside the home and in the public sphere. The testimonies of these women suggest that the *mixité* laws, which relate to the integration of men and women in the public sphere, have had adverse effects on their own population but also on French society as a whole. French efforts to regulate secularism, to force women to abandon their religion and thus their identity in the name of the Republic, undermines the values of the Republic and prevents these women from achieving emancipation from otherness.

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