



# Brown Women Saving Brown Women — Setting New Narratives of an 'Acceptable Voice'

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

Based on gender-centric issues, this paper identifies 'the other' as women either as colonial subjects or as Muslim women in the modern world. In this definition of 'the other', I contend that 'the other', aren't and weren't voiceless and the inability to acknowledge these voices is because of the existing version of what is an 'acceptable voice'. This definition of an 'acceptable voice' is supported through the colonial quest supported by imperial feminism and knowledge production. Hence, to acknowledge the voices of 'the other', the meaning of 'acceptable voice' needs to be decolonized.

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On the 17th of August 2022 Beheshta Arghand, a 24-year-old hijab wearing Afghani woman spoke to a Talibani spokesperson in a televised interview on Tolo News in Afghanistan. The interview made headlines across the world. While I was watching the interview and was in awe of the courage of this young woman, I remembered a recent dinner table conversation with some friends, where we were discussing the issue of ban on the *hijab and veils*.<sup>1</sup> Some of us equated it to a matter of right, individual choice, and the right to religion and culture. However, one of our friends said that somehow, she firmly believes that Muslim women with this specific notion of modesty, prescribed through culture and religion, must be acting under some form of oppression and hence need emancipation through legal and policy interventions.

Thinking back, it's easy to acknowledge the power of colonial narrative in this conversation to see how a certain image of an emancipated woman has found deep roots in our collective consciousness. This consciousness allows us to create a narrative wherein the world is seen through the prism of Western and non-Western world. Where people, more specifically women of the non-Western world become 'the others'.

This systematic narrative about 'the others' has resulted in a 'washed over' manner of thinking about 'the other' as a docile. An oppressed homogenous population that needs saving from the evils of their own culture and the oppression of the culture-specific patriarchy. This discourse has resulted in their voices not being chronicled at all or considered to be non-existent because the history did not consider these voices to be acceptable.

Without going into details about cultural relativism, this paper intends to argue that 'the others', have always spoken, even as colonial subjects or in a post-colonial world identified as 'the other'. I present evidence of this, to argue that the inability to acknowledge these voices is because of the existing version of Western feminism that seem to be a dominating presence in conversations regarding gender quality and women's emancipation. Hence, while 'the others' can speak, for them to be heard, the meaning of what is an acceptable voice means needs to be changed.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I use the term 'the other' for women as colonial subjects and Muslim women in different parts of the world who have been and are fighting this narrative.

From a methodological perspective, this paper focuses on a mix of academic discourse and empirical findings used in earlier studies. More specifically, this paper focuses on Indian and Algerian women as colonial subjects and thereafter includes French Muslim women for a contemporary analysis of the premise of this paper. As a researcher trained in legal studies working in the field of comparative secularism, I use a combination of social science and my knowledge in legal developments on the issue to support my arguments. In terms of the structure, the first part deals with the colonial moral authority on women's bodies as justifications of colonialism. In the next part, I address the question of what constitutes a voice. In the next section I elaborate on 'the other's ability to speak, I do so by using 'the veil' as an instrument of showing agency and resistance to conclude that there is a need for decolonizing the existing understanding of what is an "acceptable voice".

## 1.1 'WHITE MEN SAVING BROWN WOMEN FROM BROWN MEN'-

I would like to begin my analysis with Gayatri Spivak's (2003), celebrated essay 'Can the subalterns speak?' (The term subaltern generally denotes 'an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant'. However, It has been generally used as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, often expressed in terms of gender and caste (Ross, 2009). I use the term subaltern to emphasise the assumed oppression of women as either colonial subjects or minority women who have been described and treated as 'the other' through a presumption of being part of an oppressive culture. These women were and are assumed to have the attribute of subordination either through cultural, religious, or social contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> My reference to the term hijab includes various forms of religious covering used by Muslim women.

<sup>2</sup> This paper follows my argument in my previous research, where I argue that any form of gender equality can only be achieved through the decolonisation of 'acceptable culture' in International Law and human rights discourse. The paper is due for publication in November 2021 and is titled "Decolonizing the understanding of "acceptable culture" – Edited volume on Migration and Culture: Implementation of Cultural Rights of Migrants.

To give a background of the relevance and importance of subaltern studies, it began as an intervention in the historiography of South Asia and developed into a “vigorous post-colonial critique” It developed in the context of the crisis of the Indian state in the 1970s, as the inherent corruption and repression, the nation-state’s claim of representing the culture and its people were put to question (Prakash, 1994). Thus, subaltern studies questioned the nationalist historiography, and the “Cambridge School” that represented India only as a chronicle of competition amongst its elites, thus making the common people of the country mere “dupes of their superiors”. At the same time, it also challenged the Marxist, interpretation of these schools, as even in claiming to represent the oppressed classes and their emancipation, Marxism failed to account for the “lived experience” of the oppressed classes and was unable to deal with concepts of caste and religion (Prakash, 1994, p. 1477).

Thus, it developed as a “postcolonial critique” to challenge the Eurocentrism that was prevalent due to the institution of the West’s trajectory, and how it had appropriated the history of others (Prakash, 1994, p. 1475). In doing so Subaltern studies contested the existing representation of the politics and culture of the common people and accused the colonialists, the nationalists, and the Marxists of robbing the agency of the common people (Prakash, 1477). According to Ranajit Guha, “the subalterns had acted in history “on their own, that is, independently of the elite”; their politics constituted “an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter” (Guha, 1982, p. 403).

Thus, in questioning the assumed lack of agency of the subaltern subject, and claiming that the subalterns acted as autonomous from the elites, subaltern studies, provides the most accurate point of reference for the arguments of this paper.

In her discussion on subalterns, Spivak writes that the colonial policies were in fact an instance of “white men saving brown women from brown men”. Inspired and supported by the British feminist movement (imperial feminism), the British used the condition of Hindu women and the need to improve their conditions as a justification for colonial rule. “The British were thus able to justify imperialism as a civilizing mission in which [...] they were rescuing Indian women from the reprehensible practices of Hindu patriarchal society” (Morton, 2003, p. 63).

In light of the masculinization and Brahminization of the Anglo-Indian judiciary ‘law, as an agent of social reform under colonial conditions, almost inevitably favored religious orthodoxy and male conservatism’ (Engels, 1992). Supported by imperial feminism both these colonial regimes rendered ‘the other’ as a victim whose supposed emancipation was the justification given for these colonial regimes.

Discussing the British policies in India, Spivak writes that in their denial of Indian women’s autonomy and their social context, the British exercised the policy of ‘ferocious benevolent standardization’ of all Indian women. The British thus used this standardization as a justification for colonialism and how they were the saviours who came with the purpose to save native women from their own men (Sharpe, 2003).

But even with the much-publicized intention of saving Indian women from their own culture, in running to the defence of the Indian women from Indian men they did not see her as an autonomous individual (Burton, 1994). In doing so the British feminists assumed that their ‘Indian sisters’ were seeking the same things as their British counterparts (The white woman’s burden: British feminists and the Indian woman, 1865–1915., Burton, 1990). The reason for this was, that the imperialist claim of emancipating Indian women (more specifically Hindu women), and the resulting policies were not a result of any inquiry in the culture or the social context of India, but a mere replication of the British feminist movement that was going on in Britain. This was similar to the case in Algeria where the agenda of reform with the purpose of emancipation was created so that the Algerian women can ‘catch up with their European sisters (MacMaster, 2020). As is clear from the statement below: “Many white feminists’ failure to acknowledge the differences between themselves and Black and Third World women have contributed to the predominantly Eurocentric and ethnocentric theories of women’s oppression” (Amos, 1984).

Backed with this justification, moral claims were made by colonial powers surrounding women’s bodies. This was done to bring equality and liberty amongst women who belonged to the orient. In his conception of Orientalism, Edward Said (1978) explained how western

modernity was considered to be the only cure for traditional consciousness. Similarly, in the French colonization of Algeria and Morocco, the unveiling of women was seen as an act of freeing the 'oppressed Muslim women' (MacMaster, 2020).

I use these references from Spivak's essay, about India, with the purpose to focus my enquiry on the question Can the subalterns speak?, from the perspective of Muslim women. I do this by highlighting the similarities between the colonial policies regarding women in both contexts. We will see the policy of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' backed by the 'ferocious benevolent standardization' in these two contexts, and how they continue with regards to Muslim women.

In French Algeria, the supposed oppression of native women gave the French the justification for establishing a colony and this saviour phenomenon was similar to the one adopted by the British in India during the colonial era supported by the 'ferocious benevolent standardization'. The British encountered India with a sense of confusion due to the pluralistic and fragmented cultural, religious, and political structure in which there was no monolithic Hindu, Muslim, or Christian authority. The history of the governance of these colonies and women (supported by the 'legitimate concern' of improving their condition) clearly shows that women, in general, suffered losses on several fronts (Flavia, 1999).

For example, discussing the struggles of Algerian women, Macmaster writes, that the colonial regime in Algeria found it beneficial to have an ambiguous approach towards what they perceived to be an uncivilized and inferior culture that oppresses its women. Hence, they sustained such a system of oppression as it legitimized the exclusion of Algerians from full citizenship and power-sharing, and to do so "the colonial governing class entered into a tacit 'gender pact' with conservative Islamic religious clerics and leaders who also had an interest in protecting the family and women from the dangers of secularism and 'westernization'" (MacMaster, 2020, p. 394). Although in a different time frame 'similar colonial approach to an 'oppressive' culture was also seen in India.

The term subaltern was also used to describe Algerian women by French policymakers in the context of question of granting citizenship. Faced by the question of whether to give full citizenship to Algerian Muslim natives: 'Les Indigènes' at the time of incorporation of Algeria into the territory of France, the French condemned Algerian Muslims to a subaltern status. However, in doing so the French were violating the principles of 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité' as a secular state, as by the 'Décret Crémieux' of 1871, they had given full citizenship to Jewish Algerian and European colonizers coming from Italy and Malta. To counter this problem, they had to develop a new discourse on women's emancipation from Muslim men (Delcroix, 2009).

In this process for modernizing the women of Algeria, the 'unveiling' of Algerian women became one of the main objectives of the French colonial administration. This was because women's bodies were seen as the site of defining the moral order of the society either as a modern Muslim women or as colonial subject. However, in doing so 'the benevolent impulse to represent subaltern groups effectively appropriate[d] the voice of the subaltern and thereby silence[d] them' (Morton, 2003, p. 56). Thus, Spivak's ideas in "Can the subaltern speak" regarding India, can also reflect the reality of the experience of Algerian women in how the French assumed the authority and moral justification by saying that the women in Algeria needed saving from their own culture and men. In doing so they were also denying the agency of the Algerian women similar to the British justification in the case of India.

Despite this nature of offensive standardization, these policies could not stop these women from speaking, but only impact how the knowledge about these voices was seen in equating culture to oppression. In the next section, I argue that even though a certain kind of knowledge production denied their voices, 'the other' consistently have resisted this narrative giving voice to their cause. Though the manner of expressing those voices have taken the numerous form and shape depending on the context, they have always had agency and expressed it in the terms they thought were appropriate for or available to them. I emphasize that the narrative that they needed saving by someone else, or to be spoken for, is largely false but 'the denial of these voices was and continues to be a result of the narrow definition of an 'acceptable voice'.

## 1.2 WHAT IS TO BE CONSIDERED AN 'ACCEPTABLE VOICE'

It is important to note that the purpose of this paper will be defeated if I use the term 'voice' or 'voices' only to reproduce the meaning it constitutes in liberal feminist theory portrayed in the colonial literature. Such a meaning will only replicate the theory of women's rights as is seen in the Western liberal feminist theories, such as in countries such as the Netherlands, France and Germany (Korteweg, 2021). Hence, I use the term 'voice' to include what 'the other' believe they want and are willing to fight for it on their terms. These rights may or may not involve Western liberal feminist ideas which sometimes equate and presents one set of rights superior to the others.

As was suggested by Elisabeth Badinter in the French context where she said: "...we're headed for 'the burqa is better than the headscarf' – and it's going to be ever more difficult for these young women to say 'no' to the headscarf and prefer the skirt. And if there is one freedom of dress we have to defend, that is the one" (Rapport, 2010, p. 334).

If we are talking about women's rights, we cannot possibly put one choice over the other. Therefore, I take the term 'voice' without moral judgments regarding how they are related to a cultural practice or are choices made as an individual to include all small and big acts of resistance and survival tactics that 'the other' have been adopting and are adopting to express their views. For example, if we are talking about the conscious choice to either veil or unveil themselves, it still reflects their ability to speak and cannot deny or assume oppression just because it doesn't fit in the perception of Western liberal feminist view of an emancipated woman. As Saba Mahmood writes, "[t]he desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed *a priori*, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject" (Mahmood, 2001).

Following this argument, we need to see each of these choices as a matter of personal freedom, which may include adhering to either cultural/religious/liberal values or deciding to leave those values, or to choose to practice all of them simultaneously or none of them, there are all methods of showing and practicing their voices. These voices could be used against either the colonial authorities, or both or neither, or in the rejection of standardization processes supported through movements of feminism.

Therefore, along with discussing the instances of women collectively showing their power to resist against what they perceive as an injustice to them from both inside and outside their culture, I also include instances of individual resistance in or everyday acts. I do this in line with James Scott's seminal work regarding Malaysia in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1970), where he writes about covert resistance in the mundane and how the lower classes made small acts of insubordination in a safe environment, suited in their context, proving agency and consciousness by defying total domination. With this argument, I propose that women's voices and agency don't need to be considered only when they signify a big revolution or rebellious acts as has been attributed in the historiography about colonial women, reserving these voices for the elites and educated (Ghosh, 2008). The everyday struggle for survival by these women, the resistance in the mundane itself is sufficient to prove the presence of their voices and undeniable agency that they have been expressing.

Keeping this point in mind we have to always perceive the voice of 'the other' not only categorically in big chronicled acts of resistance but also in how they find ways to survive and thrive in their social and political contexts. Therefore, every single act of a woman in each category is relevant to show their agency and contest the claims of their 'voicelessness'.

As (Ghosh, 2008, p. 2) writes while discussing the methods of resistance exhibited by women in South Asia:

*"There seems to be little recognition of the multiplicity of strategies for constructing selfhood that women have been adept at in South Asian contexts. Far from representing themselves only in ways dictated by males, .... women often imaginatively scrutinize and critique the social world that they experience, and give voice to it in subversive expressive traditions or actions, some more overtly dissident than others."*

The statement above signifies a consistent struggle faced by ‘the other’ not only in securing but also to ensure their efforts as women are considered. However, the colonial knowledge about ‘the other’ denied the inclusion of their resistance and acts of insubordination and fight against patriarchy within and outside their culture ((Ghosh, 2008). Another reason for such a denial of their agency to speak was categorizing ‘the other’ as a homogenous group. This understanding of ‘the other’ gave no credit to multiplicities of identities, or their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Ghosh, 2008).

Thus, it appears that this description of ‘the other’, seen through the Western liberal idea of women’s emancipation, creates a generalized description and fails to acknowledge any other demands than the once supported by the colonial regime which continue to be reproduced in the current discourse of gender emancipation and women’s rights.

A similar observation was also made regarding Algerian women by Lazreg (Lazreg, 2018, p. 1), where she states that because Algerian women could not read or write French, everything that was written about them remained unchallenged. She summarizes her observation by saying:

*“It is equally disturbing to hear contemporary young undergraduate and graduate students, who never gave thought to the complex dialectic of colonialism, revolution and gender, pass an irreversible judgment on Algerian women by declaring them “oppressed.” With one word they erase a rich, difficult and painful history as well as women’s struggles through it.”*

Keeping this statement in mind, we have to be aware that if we have to talk about ‘the other’ we have to not only see them as a homogenous group having identical characteristics. We have to see them as individuals and give them their due about their power and struggle in expressing themselves without reemploying the colonial attitude to their choices, even when all modern value judgments about these women can never consider them having any power over their own decisions. An example of such an inquiry about women in the Kingdom of Awadh during the British regime gives evidence in contrast to this ‘ultimate truth’ of powerlessness and lack of agency of the ‘the other’. The scholars involved in inquiries of resistance have found evidence that challenges the core of these assumptions.

For example, an observation regarding courtesans in India (also known as the singing and dancing girls) proves that the assumption about the powerlessness of the other is completely wrong. In the era post-1856, when the British took over the Kingdom of Awadh in north India, the British imposed heavy fines and penalties and a contagious diseases regulation on the courtesans as a punishment for taking part in the rebellion of 1856. Thus, women as courtesans, who had been given royal patronage, been the “custodians of culture” and “manipulated men and women for their political ends” were reduced to prostitution as singing and dancing girls in the tax ledger, which provide one of many examples how the colonial authorities came to misidentify “exotic” Indian women (Oldenburg, 1990). In doing so, these women were subjected to Britain’s Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, which required them to periodically get medically examined, and taxation. These women struggled to keep themselves safe from an “intrusive civic authority that taxed their incomes and inspected their bodies” ((Oldenburg, 1990, p. 261), by either bribing the nurses, or the police and keeping two separate books for their incomes. According to Veena Talwar Oldenburg, these were methods devised by women through which they challenged the male authority and fought for their rights against the policies of the colonial authorities (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 261).

An example of this can be seen in the book ‘Contesting Power’ where the authors write: ‘their [the courtesans] struggle obviously cannot be a collective, revolutionary “class struggle” for the gender divisions are vertical, not horizontal, and cut through class lines. [However,] the validity of their struggle cannot be refuted because it is engaged at a private, unobtrusive level. Their will to resist existing gender relations and reproduce the radically ordered social relations within their ambit is as self-conscious and intractable as it is undeniable’ (Haynes, 1992).

Despite the fact that many individual resistance efforts were continuously made by women across the globe, they are hardly ever chronicled. Most colonial literature on the subject only acknowledges, women’s movements in the form of well documented rebellions and fight independence (Ghosh, 2008). Hence, instead of looking for evidence of these voices in the elite movements we have to see them as a continuous process of everyday expression of agency.



As Marnia Lazreg also writes with reference to the resistance of Algerian women: “while talking about it will not do to dismiss what is positive as exceptional or class-bound, and uphold the negative as normative and reflective of a flawed culture” (Lazreg, 2018, p. 2).

The statement shows the discomfort the author feels regarding disparity in the literature that chronicles ‘the other’. With this background, I come back to the discussion regarding the practice of veiling and those who choose to veil or unveil themselves. Without oversimplifying the consistent description of Islam as a problem in the recent debate on values of democracy and secularism, it can be easily seen that within the context of Western liberal democracies the issue of ‘veiling’ has become one of the most contentious issues in the debates regarding gender equality, women’s emancipation, and secularism and this is based on the existing narrative of ‘the other’ and conscious denial of their voices as will be discussed in the next section.

This common colonial description of ‘the other’ and its acceptance in the consciousness continues to resonate in all existing discourses on minority women for example the debate on religious clothing of Muslim women in France (Ahmed, 2020).

However, since the last two decades, this benevolent standardization has shifted to specifically focus on Muslim women. With this movement, most Western liberal theories have again focused on the same narrative and knowledge production for freeing women from the shackles of their society and culture. This argument about a certain culture being the sole champion in women’s rights and equality and the others as a tool of oppression in the hands of patriarchy, has been around since colonial times.

In this regard, in her essay ‘Is multiculturalism bad for women’ Susan Moller Okin’s arguments also use the concept of ‘ferocious benevolent standardization’ of Muslim women. According to her the only way of the emancipation of women belonging to cultures other than the West is either the extinction of the culture or an internal modification that resembles Western culture (Okin, 1999).

However, provocative this argument may seem, it is clear the hegemonic colonial knowledge production does indeed work on the same assumption. One example of this can be seen in form of the existing policies and frameworks on minority women in several Western European Countries. For example, the policies within Western Europe on the issue of the presence of women’s religious clothing in the public sphere worked on the assumption of equating veiling as a result of an oppressive culture in need of intervention for emancipation of its women.

### 1.3 I DECIDE THE COURSE OF MY EMANCIPATION

*“The debate on the modernisation paradigm in Muslim states has invariably centred on gender and the role of women, and has crystallised around certain enduring symbols of perceived Islamic oppression, such as the veil, the harem, seclusion, forced marriage and physical violence”* (Neil Macmaster, 2009). Since the colonial encounter with the Muslim world, ‘the veil’ has been consistently present in the discourse on values of gender equality sometimes overtly and at other times in a dormant manner.

As one of the most contested pieces of women’s clothing, since the colonial powered encountered Islam, there have been numerous discussions on the meaning of veiling and what it signifies. Referring to Frantz Fanon, who in his works regarding Algeria, extensively, discusses the Algerian women and the practice of veiling. In doing so, he writes that despite the colonial powers’ attempt to govern the veil as a cultural sign, the resistance was able to restructure the meaning of the veil (or its absence). As a result, veiling became an instrument against the oppressor and eluded and opposed the colonial powers in a certain semiotic guerilla war (Duara, 2004). Some treating it as a form of oppression or not wearing it as a form of emancipation, or according to Frantz Fanon’s explanation, in both cases as a form of cultural resistance (Racco, 2014). Even beyond these explanations, there can be any number of reasons as to why a woman decided to veil or unveil herself. However, with the colonial narrative of ‘the other’, most explanations about veiling are mere oversimplification of the explanation of the act as a means of oppression.

Since 9/11 the meta-narrative on Islam has brought in a new wave of benevolent civilizing mission to the forefront. One of the explanations in this regard is given by Lila Abu-Lughod (Abu-Lughod, 2002), she writes that post 9/11 the framing of the issue of terrorism instead of

being framed in historical and political explanation came down to religious and cultural one. This in effect created an us versus Muslim narrative where the Western women are free in their bodies and mind and the other shuffle around without speaking, without an agency and voice (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

These generalizations regarding veiled women are then faced with the emancipation process supported through the 'ferocious benevolent standardization' without any regard to the voice of 'the other'. An example of this can be found in the French parliamentary debate on the issue of banning the niqab. The French commission responsible for advising the parliament on policies regarding the ban on veils considered the opinion of 200 "experts" and, this does not come as a surprise, only one niqabi.<sup>3</sup> What better proof can we seek for the reproduction of imperial feminism in all its glory in a policy debate on how a woman's body should appear (Li, 2016).

However, time after time, 'the other', the veiled women have consistently resisted and proved the claims of voicelessness as a false theory. In the next few paragraphs I explain how the veil has been used by women as a method and instrument of power and has taken different shapes depending on the context and the enemies they were fighting.

Elaborating on the involvement of Algerian women in the fight for independence Lazreg writes: "Faced with a colonial government that sought to erase Algerian cultural identity through domination of Algerian men and rhetorical co-optation of women, Algerian nationalists—both men and women—seized on the *ijtihad*, or critical thinking, the tradition of Islam, which advocates the education of women and their freedom of movement. Women were seen as key agents in combating colonial encroachments on the natives' culture" (Lazreg, 1990).

Due to the role played by women in the context of the Algerian war, there have been numerous scholarships regarding the role of Algerian women both in the Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front; FLN), and during the Battle of Algiers, as guerrilla warriors, acknowledging the importance of the role played by women. Even though less visible, an equally important role was played by rural women in helping by providing food, shelter, and medical care to the FLN's Armée de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Army; ALN) (Mortimer, 2018) (Seferdjeli, 2005).

The role of women in the war of independence in Algeria is immense and it becomes important for us to see their use of the supposed 'oppression' of the veil in fighting against the colonial powers. Women in Algeria used the colonial perception regarding the veil to their advantage. They consciously decided to either take it off or to keep it, based on how they wanted the French to see them. While the French either categorized the veiled woman as oppressed or could not conceive the idea that Algerian women following the French version of acceptable identity as having an anti-colonial feeling (Racco, 2014).

Taking advantage of this position, the women in Algeria used the veil through its function of misrecognition, as a guerilla fighter, using the veil to appear and disappear, thus becoming powerful by being perceived as powerless and using the veil to their advantage (Racco, 2014). The maneuvering of the veil to their advantage became a powerful tool in the hands of 'the other'. I would like to clarify my position, that I do not claim that post the struggle for freedom, women did not suffer from patriarchy or injustice, what I show from this example, is even in conditions with immense pressure, women found their voices and expressed it.

Bringing the contemporary discussion on the issue of veils, the victim narrative surrounding 'the other' is consistently supported across the liberal feminist's movements and thus this narrative forms the backbone of policies banning the veil which is based on equating unveiling for gender equality, and 'uncovering' to liberation (Shirazi, 2001).

According to Leti Volpp (2001), this assumption that "third world cultures are more subordinating than cultures in the West" is a product of colonial history. Based on this understanding of 'the other' women, who in covering themselves create an 'unwelcome image' in a liberal society, are seen to be either lacking agency or be a victim of their own oppressive culture.

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3 Stasi Bernard (2003) Commission de réflexion sur l'application du principe de la laïcité dans la République, rapport au président de la République remis le 11 décembre 2003, p. 166.



France is a prime example of such policies where ostentatious religious clothing in school was banned back in 2003. For example, in France, the Gérin Commission report found that the full-face veil was infringing on the three values of the French Constitution, the values being *Liberté* (dignity of women), *Egalité* (in the form of gender equality and mixed society), and *Fraternité* (the common will to live together) (Brems, 2013). We see that in all policy debates, on the issue of the veil, the need to advance and protect gender equality and women's rights (more especially minority women) has become today the most common normative justification of secularism from the state. In a paradoxical manner the same practice that is assumed to be violative of gender equality, the banning of it is being challenged by minority women for violating the principle of equality (Scott, 2005).

This challenge comes from Muslim women, who have also consistently challenged these policies claiming violation of principles of equality, non-discrimination, and freedom of religion under the European Convention on Human Rights with France being at the centre of this whole debate (Initiative, 2013). With the *Affaire de foulard* in France, several Western European countries adopted numerous policies defining limitations to the wearing of veils (in various forms). One of the main justifications surrounding these policies was the claim of liberalizing women to ensure emancipation of women, justified with the argument that the uncovering propagates gender equality (Mancini, 2012). These bans on different modes of Muslim women's dress for ensuring gender equality and women's emancipation have put the relation between women and gender power relations at the center of the interrelation of religion, culture, and the state (Baubérot, 2003).

Since then, France has enacted a *full-face veil* ban which was challenged for being violative of rights guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR); the law was eventually found to be justified by the European Court of Human Rights in *SAS v France* (SAS v France, 2014). The case was filed by the applicant, who is a French citizen born in Pakistan, through the Law firm in Birmingham where she was an intern at the time. Within the petition, she also stated that she has started wearing the *face veil* since she turned 18. 'Gradually, I wore my full-face veil whenever I passed through public areas, travelled on public transport, or visited public buildings (generally three times a week).... Of course, for instance, I would take off my veil if I needed to visit the doctor or keep an official appointment.' Within the same application, a statement is worth noting, she states that her decision to wear the *face veil* depends very much on her introspective mood, spiritual feelings and whether she wishes to focus on religious matters. Even though the judge upheld the ban to be valid, the facts of this case, more specifically the nature of the petitioner's argument themselves help us in understanding that the assumed need for the emancipation of minority women from their culture does not serve any legitimate purpose. *S.A.S v France* (SAS v France, 2014) is but one case, amongst numerous others where the petitioners have been women who decided to wear the veil and are willing to take a stand against what they presume violates their rights.

Considering that the petitioner was studying to be a lawyer, and deciding to choose to wear the *face veil* depending on what she was feeling indicates that she did not require any emancipatory action for herself. She chose to wear the *face veil* out of her own volition. Muslim women in a number of these cases have presented similar arguments on why they chose to wear any religious clothing and explain it as a matter of individual choice and they are the ones who decided to wear them. The problematic construction and interpretation of religious coverings used by minority women in Western Europe have become so intense that it's become one of the most contested issues in contemporary times. According to Caitlin Killian, studies on this issue have concluded that groups facing discrimination and racism despite their best efforts, feeling devalued will give up French values in favour of their ethnic identity. This allows them to refuse the legitimacy of comparisons with the dominant group and feeling proud of one's ethnicity (Killian, 2003).

For example, women across the cross-section of Muslim society, faced with policies regulating or banning the wearing of the veil, have begun to again reclaim their identity and voices which they think are being not represented or misrepresented. This resembles the process of redefining the veil as a form of oppression to an instrument of establishing a chosen identity as was seen in Algeria (MacMaster, 2020). In line with the controversies on *hijab*, the French

parliament recently discussed the new anti-separatist bill which bans the *hijab* in public spaces from women under 18.

While the law was under discussion, a new movement has begun known as the #PasToucheAMonHijab or #Handsoffmyhijab. Talking about the need to begin this movement, Rawdah Mohamed, a French Somalian model says: *“Ethnic minority women are always spoken for. I wished to take back the control of our narratives and tell our stories.”* *“I wanted my oppressors to see my face and the women who look like me,” she said. “They don’t get to hide in their luxurious parliament offices and regulate women’s bodies without a fight.”* (Elan, 2021). This statement completely changes the narrative of what constitutes as oppression, it’s evident that a number of Muslim women perceive the ‘ferocious benevolent standardization’ as oppression and are openly calling it for what they believe it is.

To go further with the conversation, on being asked why did she feel the need to start the hashtag she clearly states that *“I started the hashtag as I felt the need to humanise the movement,”* The movement has picked up momentum across the globe with support from Olympic fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad and the US congresswoman Ilhan Omar. *“(The politicians) want our emancipation, they want to save us from this imaginary oppression, but it is they who are oppressing us,”* said medical student Mona el Mashouly, 25, in her home city of Strasbourg.<sup>4</sup>

The voices are coming from across the platforms, for example, a ban on wearing the *hijab* for football players imposed by the French Football Federation in club matches and international games, is being challenged by the French women players. *“We are not like the kind of hijabi they think we are. They have the idea of the hijabi that struggles in the house, who does housework, who don’t have a life. When they see young women wearing it — doing sports, educated — they don’t want to see that because it’s a contradiction with the vision they have of the hijab.”*<sup>5</sup>

Of course, women across the globe are challenging those narrative of ‘the other’, they wear the veil as a form of identity, and they claim their rights as women and as humans. I would also like to draw your attention to a Muslim women’s organization Lallab<sup>6</sup> in France which is fighting Islamophobia and racism on their own terms. Starting from promoting movements such as #Patouchemonhijab to making efforts in changing the racist and Islamophobic narrative regarding Muslim women in France they are consistently breaking the stereotypes of the oppressed other.

The objective of the organization is listed in the following form:

*“Lallab is a feminist and anti-racist association whose goal is to make voices heard and to defend the rights of Muslim women who are at the heart of sexist, racist and Islamophobic oppressions. We are bringing a paradigm shift in the French anti-discrimination political system. We are shaping a world in which women freely choose their own paths of emancipation.”*

The organization is bringing a new light to the issues of Muslim women presented by Muslim women. In their effort to do so they started a documentary series *The Women SenseTour*.<sup>7</sup> The series follows stories of women, French, Moroccan and Muslim women who are working towards their own emancipation. The series is made by two young co-directors, Sarah Zouak and Justine Devillaine. Sarah describes the reason for making the series, is because she was often confronted with the idea that she could not be both religious and French at the same time. Her culture and religion were presented as obstacles to her emancipation. As a Muslim woman she wanted to challenge the idea of her being submissive and oppressed and without agency.

Quoting their objective they say that they made the documentary: *“to raise the voices of Muslim women who are at the heart of racist and sexist oppressions and thus shape a world in which*

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4 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hands-off-my-hijab-young-muslim-women-protest-proposed-french-ban-2021-05-04/><https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hands-off-my-hijab-young-muslim-women-protest-proposed-french-ban-2021-05-04/>.

5 <https://abcnews.go.com/International/hands-off-hijab-french-muslims-rail-ban-religious/story?id=79406168>.

6 For more details please visit the organization’s website at <https://www.lallab.fr/>.

7 <https://www.lallab.fr/documentaire/>.

women freely choose their own paths of emancipation.” Sarah further says that “We have too often spoken in place of Muslim women, for my part, I prefer to give them the floor” (Women Sensour, In Muslim Countries, 2016). (Lallab, 2016).

Reflecting on the struggles of wanting to simply be able to make a choice of living an authentic life, where they can pick and choose aspects for themselves, an article published on the website of Lallab describes the opinion of a young Muslim women in the following terms: “all of this [the movement of emancipation, the new policies and laws]] is contradictory. When Muslim women stay at home, they are criticized for not integrating sufficiently. But if we dare to respect our religious principles, while studying or working, we are deeply humbled. We especially do not want an emancipated woman, who takes exams or who goes to the beach, while wearing a headscarf. Everywhere, we are looked down upon, when we just aspire to live like everyone else”.

From the above discussion, it's clear that ‘the other’ have chosen to speak and they continue to do so in manners they deem fit for themselves as individuals and in collective actions, through their art, through social movements or any other form they believe to be correct for them. They definitely have a voice but the knowledge about that voice needs a change in perspective.

## 1.4 CONCLUSION: LISTENED TO, NOT SPOKEN FOR

I began this paper, with an introduction of the Afghani journalist, and I would like to start my conclusion with a focus on women of Afghanistan, which will have a relevance for voices of all Muslim women.

I refer to the concept of redux of imperial feminism post 9/11 across the globe (Sadia Toor, 2012). In line with the new geopolitical movement in Afghanistan, we have a crisis not only of upheaval in terms of an unmitigated danger to the world, but the danger that ‘the other’ faces. They are facing a twofold danger, one a real security threat and the other one which is relevant to other Muslim women, is the threat of being subjected to another emancipation drive.

The same concerns were raised by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). The association was established in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1977 as an independent political/social organization of Afghan women fighting for human rights and for social justice in Afghanistan. In an interview, conducted by activists of the Kurdish Women’s Movement with Samia Walid, activist of RAWA in 2019, Samia categorically criticizes the imperialist power in the region for denying the voice of Afghani women to the forefront. On being asked What does women’s freedom mean to you and your movement? She answered:

“Women’s freedom for us is our participation in every sphere of the society built on independence, democracy, secularism and social justice. It is our complete equality with men in every aspect. This freedom and equality are tied directly to politics and society. Only a society free from occupation [of imperialist] and the fundamentalist misogynist virus, where democracy and social justice are implemented can break the chains of violence against women and accommodate the complete freedom and rights of women.”<sup>8</sup> It is clear that women of Afghanistan have a specific vision of how they want to build their own identity. Hence, we need to talk about the possibility that all new efforts and narratives that are trying to change what it is to be a Muslim woman can go back to the way they were post 9/11 and what impact it will have on ‘the other’.

Of course, the universal categorisation of ‘the other’ and the application of such rules does not help the cause of women in Afghanistan or anywhere who want to be practicing Muslims while living a life that they choose for themselves. We need to listen to women from Afghanistan but not through the lenses of ‘ferocious benevolent standardization’ of the past as it will only produce the same results including non- acknowledgment of the voices of ‘the other’.

Hence it becomes relevant to remember that any conversation regarding ‘the other’ has to be seen from their perspective. A reference for this can be seen when Werner Menski talks about India: “If the focus of the debate could be switched away from the overwhelming evidence of gender imbalance in India (it is, after all, a universal phenomenon), and turned to the core issue

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8 The full interview can be found at <http://www.rawa.org/rawa/2019/09/20/interview-afghan-women-s-struggles-against-patriarchy-imperialism-and-capitalism.html>.

of individual agency, we might make some progress' (Menski, 2008). I use the same logic of gender imbalance across cultures and ask how can we remove the colonial moral judgment of culture and view the choices of 'the other' as a matter of individual choice.

Maybe a conversation on the issue, with women can help without the presence of a saviour. It's possible that they do not want to choose either/or, it is possible that they don't need to be saved but just need to be heard in manners that they haven't been heard before. I began my analysis with the introduction of the Afghani journalist, who, if seen through the colonial and liberal feminist lens, epitomizes the image of 'the other'. However, she has a voice and she expressed it. While we are in the process of decolonization of the world, the answer to the question: Can the subalterns speak? is yes, but what it needs is, the decolonization of what is an acceptable voice.

In their decision of identifying with either/or, neither/nor or both or none of the identities that are described for them, 'the other' do not need to be spoken for, they need to be listened to.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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