

Deconstructing French Legislation on the Islamic Headscarf: A Derridean Reading of the Prohibition Bills on ‘Conspicuous Religious Symbols’

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The research aims to scrutinize French legislation since 2003, through Derrida’s deconstructive hermeneutics, to dismantle the fixity, singularity, and unified meaning of various legal postulates.

Methodology: This study is based on close textual analysis of selected news articles on anti-hijab sentiment in France. The key concepts of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, including the metaphysics of presence, aporia, logos, binary oppositions, and de-logocentrism, are discussed in relation to anti-scarf French legislation. Since Derridean deconstructive hermeneutics of argumentation is the main concern of this study, his seminal works, such as *Of Grammatology* and *Points... Interviews from 1974-1994*, served as the theoretical framework for this study. Derrida’s work also employed for its postulates on deconstruction as a mode of inquiry.

Findings: Using the Derridean perspective, the study explores new horizons by dismantling the fossilized deadlocks of the Aporia of meaning and the authoritative centralized structure of human thought.

Conclusion: This study concludes that conscious attempts at national integration remain undecidable because the concept of secularity is fluid and lacks fixed meanings. Therefore, when binary logic within the controversy is destabilized, it calls for a study of the deferral of meaning rather than a static structuralist approach to the wearing of clothes or the conspicuous display of signs of affiliation with a faith.

Keywords: Islamic Headscarf, Anti-scarf Legislation, Deconstruction, Aporia of Meaning, Secularity, National Integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2003, the 20-member French education commission known as Stasi Commission, appointed by the President of France, Jacques Chirac (1995–2007), recommended that public school students be prohibited from wearing “conspicuous religious symbols” or apparel, including “the Islamic veil and Sikh turban” (French Report). This recommendation was quickly enacted, becoming the Law of 15 March

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2004. Subsequently, in April 2011, another ban of the same nature was imposed by the then French Prime Minister Francois Fillon (2007-2012) under a decree where Muslim women were banned from wearing hijab:

From 11 April, women will be banned from wearing the niqab – full-face Muslim veil – in any public place, including while walking down the street, taking a bus, at a bank, library, or shop, or in a cinema or theatre. It will be illegal for a woman in niqab to visit the Louvre, or any other museum, take a train, visit a hospital or collect her child from school. (Full-face Veils Outlawed)

In August 2016, Prime Minister Manuel Valls upheld a municipal ban on body covering “burkini swimwear designed for Muslim women after Mayors imposed burkini bans in several seaside towns” (Burqa Bans). Under the ban, no woman, French or foreign, may leave her home with her face hidden behind a veil without risking a fine. These foundational bans remain legally binding and are widely accepted as an expression of France’s age-old principle of the 1905 declaration on *laïcité* (secularism), which represents the country as a liberal democratic state: “This law is meant to be an application of the ‘principle of *laïcité*’ which is part of the French Constitution” (Bauerot 7). The original principle of ‘*laïcité*’, however, when applied to new domains, becomes increasingly inconsistent with its basic ideology. This phenomenon will be dealt with in detail in this study.

In September 2023, France announced the discriminatory bill: “2023 Abaya Ban” in public schools. An abaya is “the loose-fitting, full-length robe worn by some Muslim women” as part of their veiling practice. The government argued that covering the hair and body falls under the 2004 French law’s definition of conspicuous “religious signs” (Abaya Dress).

Recently, in 2025, a Senate-backed bill to enforce the Sports Headscarf Ban in all sports competitions, professional and amateur, came under discussion and is in the process of taking final shape. The bill is meant to ensure “that neutrality is a requirement on the field of play.” The bill has so far passed its first legislative hurdle in the French upper legislative house. The law was “proposed by the right-wing group Les Republicains, with 160 votes in favor, and opposed by the government, with 143 votes against”. The proposed law, which would prohibit the wearing of “conspicuous religious symbols” (French Senators Vote to Ban Hijab) in sports competitions, awaits final approval from the National Assembly.

Lately, another officially backed prohibition bill, entitled the “Proposed Ban for Minors”, is also under active consideration. A proposal by President Emmanuel Macron’s Renaissance party aims to ban minors under 15 from wearing headscarves in public spaces such as parks and cafés. The proposal is under consideration and has not yet assumed its final shape, as it must pass the National Assembly to become law. The debate over the bill is ongoing and has drawn support from the current French PM, Sebastien Lecornu, whose Renaissance party aligns with a strict secularist view on religious symbols in public spaces and conceives the Muslim Brotherhood as a “threat to national cohesion” in France, warning it as a risk that may undermine “the fabric of society and republican institutions” (Macron Party Backs Banning Hijab for under 15s). However, earlier, the debate had received considerable opposition from the former PM, François Bayrou, due to potential risks of social division amid a diverse population and self-imposed challenges during enforcement.

In addition to France, many other European countries, such as Austria, Denmark, and Germany, have issued rulings prohibiting the full-face veil or hijab over the past two decades. In December 2025, Austria passed a ban on Muslim headscarves in schools for girls under 14, which came into effect in February 2026: “Various regions of Italy and Spain have imposed different bans, and eight states in Germany ban schoolteachers from wearing the hijab. Bulgaria is likely to follow suit soon, while disputes are continuing in Denmark and Holland” (Peterson). Reports in July 2025 indicated a ban on face-covering clothing, such as the *niqab*, in public places, citing security reasons.

Since the controversy to limit women wearing hijab and headscarves initially arose largely in Europe, where the issue of headscarves in state schools was perceived as a potential threat to National Solidarity, this case study will begin its argument by revoking Article 10 of the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance. (Union C 364/10)

Article 14 of the same Charter ensures respect for "the rights of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions. . ." (Union C 364/11). According to President Nicholas Sarkozy, whose administration brought in the ban, veils oppress women and "are not welcome in France"(2009). This study, therefore, takes legislation in France, regarding women and headscarves, as an object of inquiry since the country has about five million Muslims, the largest Muslim minority in Western Europe.

The main argument of this research focus on deconstructing the core provisions of legislative rulings on the Islamic headscarf, while taking into account the challenges of alleged discrimination against the concerned community arising from the enforcement of these laws. The arguments in protest to these rulings shared during the Derridean analysis of the aforementioned legislation.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The movement to limit women wearing headscarves and Muslim veils, such as the burqa and hijab, has been growing in Europe in recent years. This research first provides an overview of the timeline of the French government's proposed laws on the wearing of hijabs and headscarves by Muslim women in the country, since the arguments and exact statements of these laws and legislative measures form the basis of this study. According to an Al Jazeera report dated 10th February 2004, France's National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, debated and passed a bill "that will ban Islamic headscarves and other religious symbols in schools" (Agencies) citing certain pretexts.

However, attempts to limit the wearing of headscarves and hijabs have not been adopted by the French government as unopposed decisions in the State's legislative houses. The process has met considerable opposition from within public and private organizations and from think tanks in the country. This study will therefore engage with counterarguments as source material to deconstruct anti-scarf sentiment and legislation in light of Jacques Derrida's principle of deconstruction. Hence, this study aims to conduct a theoretical inquiry into the constitutional provisions of the proposed laws.

The question of whether Muslim women living in Western society should wear a headscarf is a debate that gives rise to multiple differences. This ambiguity suggests two meanings: it may mean that the imposition of the veil on women against their consent may constitute a human rights violation. It can also mean that the total prohibition of the headscarf through legislation is an encroachment upon the rights of a minority community in a hegemonic regime. Therefore, it remains to be decided whether the wearing of a headscarf is a state issue or a feminist cause. If one frames the issue as feminist, one encounters a divided sentiment among women, with some in favor and a few opposed to the move. These women may be categorized as pro-veil and anti-veil Western feminists, as well as pro- and anti-veil Muslim women.

Since the veil issue is a widely discussed subject across many quarters of European society, this study will narrow its focus to the French state's handling of the issue as it first escalated in France through legal proceedings initiated by the State. This problem regarding "clothes or signs that conspicuously display affiliation to a faith" (Agencies). is also best understood through the example of France, "which is home to Europe's biggest Muslim community—forming 7.5% of the population, some 4.5 million people (or more, according to some sources)—" (Peterson). This study will therefore focus on the proposed French law banning Islamic headscarves and other visible religious symbols in state schools, i.e., the law that

forbids “signs and dress that conspicuously show the religious affiliation of students” (France: Headscarf Ban Violates Religious Freedom).

When studied from close quarters, another ambiguity may also be revealed in this controversy. In the West, the exact nature of the veil has been identified with a headscarf. At its structural level, the concept of *purdah* is meant to address the nature of a veil: whether it is a headscarf, a *chador* (shawl), or an *abaya*; an attire that covers a woman from head to toe. Therefore, this study considers all forms of visible religious symbols associated with the concept of the veil that are prohibited from being worn due to legal proceedings brought against them.

2.1 Research Questions

This study concentrate on the following questions

- What does wearing a headscarf mean according to Western perception?
- How does framing the anti-scarf French legislation as essential to upholding *laïcité* bring it close to a state of aporia?
- How does Derrida’s principle of deconstruction challenge structuralist binaries when religious symbols are interpreted as markers of separation from the laws of secularity?

3. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Deconstructing the Logos: A Reading of French Legislation on the Islamic Headscarf

M.A. Rafey Habib writes in his book *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present: An Introduction* that deconstruction is “a way of reading, a mode of writing, and above all, a way of challenging interpretations of the text based upon conventional notions of stability, of human self, the external world, and of language and meaning” (240). Habib is currently Professor of English at Rutgers University, Camden. The influence of deconstruction can, therefore, extend beyond the humanities and arts into the social sciences, culture, and politics.

In the present day, the influence of deconstructionist philosophy has broadened to encompass a variety of disciplines. It offers a powerful critique of the possibility of creating detached, scientific, metalanguages and is thus categorized as poststructuralist. Jacques Derrida writes about it in his foundational, groundbreaking work, *Of Grammatology* (1967): “Deconstruction is destruction and de sedimentation of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos” (J. Derrida). Therefore, deconstruction is an attempt to reconstruct and to dismantle logocentrism or phonocentrism. When we deconstruct or destabilize the text and logocentrism on the basis of this philosophy, our perception advances in the direction of “an absolute break with the past, notably with a logocentric tradition that centers or orders a work through the authority of an unchanging logos. . .” (xvi). The application of the deconstructive principle reinterprets the hierarchical binary oppositions such as word/silence, speech/writing, or reason/emotion, presence/absence.

During the early 1990’s, French state schools were faced with a situation where some Muslim girls wore the headscarf, and others did not. The regime assumed that there was strong pressure on the latter to conform to the practice, as they had to face so-called daily pressures ranging from insults to violence on the part of their peers. Therefore, the govt. labeled the religious way of dressing up as ‘conspicuous’. The term ‘conspicuous’ may be contested on the basis of an intentional interpretation of the practice as subjective in nature, which is suggestive of a loud political display. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the adjective suggests something that stands out as “striking” to the eye or mind or something that is “marked by a noticeable violation of good taste” (Merriam-Webster). Head covering, on the other hand, may carry more weight in expressing observance of faith in Islamic culture, since it is age-old and adopted across societies, irrespective of political or social setups. According to the French legislation of 2003, regarding Muslim women wearing the headscarf in state schools, freedom of choice was removed

from those girls who wanted to wear it. That step amounted to a denial of free choice in a society that claimed to ensure basic human rights to all, irrespective of race or religion.

In Derridean terms, the headscarf may be viewed as the primary signifier in this controversial debate. There are multiple meanings attached to this signifier, which makes this situation complicated. First of all, wearing the scarf can be interpreted as the articulation of a free belief or the expression of a genuine religious commitment on the part of women who wear it. It can also be read as an attempt at teenage identity formation, the sign of adolescent assertion or rebellion. Western discourse interprets this identity formation on the part of teenagers as the rejection of the school system and the democratic norms of the country and of the sentiment of the whole society. Therefore, the same signifier can assume multiple implied images, on the basis of which the subsequent signified may differ accordingly and can have exactly the opposite meanings in their own specified contexts. Therefore, the scarf can become a symbol of coercion, on the one hand, if viewed from the govt.'s perspective and on the other hand, of identity formation, if read in the light of the students' exercise of free will in a just and democratic society.

This binary replacement of arguments yields two contradictory equations. This political impasse, in Derrida's terminology, becomes the practical demonstration of the binary of "Differance" in which each equation is defined by the absence of the other: "The difference, however, is that 'trace' more often gives rise to blankly contradictory formulations, like saying that the trace is 'present-absent', or that it is an origin that is not an origin" (Miller 47).

This play of 'differance' results in the deferral of meaning. However, the exercise of the deconstruction principle does not require that the binary construction between two equations be rejected or replaced by another binary. Deconstructing the debate reveals that the conflict is not over a misapplication of a stable truth about the freedom to wear religious symbols. Instead, they are either seen as signs of secularity in a multicultural society or of prejudice against the other existing cultures at the same time. Therefore, the ideal of 'secularity' calls for its deeper consideration as it does not have a fixed, stable meaning. According to Collins Dictionary in British English, the definition of 'secularity' pertains to "a state or condition of being secular" (Collins). This allows for fluidity in the application of the term, as both concerned entities can claim adherence to the spirit of secularism in their own right. Therefore, meaning cannot be generated by placing one equation over the other, which therefore becomes a chain of deferred meaning, to the traces of traces. This phenomenon of differing may apply to the delayed and contested pro and anti-scarf struggle adopted in France.

Kimberly Hamilton, the Director of Program Planning and External Relations at Washington, D.C. says in her article on managing French diversity entitled "The Challenge of French Diversity" (2004): "But in any case, and this is the fact I want to emphasize at the start, complete freedom of choice for all was, unfortunately, not on offer" (Hamilton). Freedom, therefore, is a hollow claim if not offered to all, and not in its entirety. Therefore, the binary of freedom/restriction, in Derridean terms, cancels itself out. In actual practice, freedom is deferred to its "traces of traces" (Derrida, 1997).

A headscarf has also been interpreted in terms of parental oppression by Western think tanks, as something imposed by parents. Another speculation has been that some radical Islamist groups also try to influence families, that is, asking the girls to wear the headscarf, forbidding them to attend mandatory biology and physical education classes. Western society also views the headscarf as a symbol of women's oppression by patriarchal Muslim societies and groups and denotes the internalization of such oppressive values by Muslim women themselves to justify the ban on the veil. There is also the widespread fear of growing Islamic fundamentalism in France, where the Muslim population is estimated to be the largest in Western Europe, with over five million Muslims as immigrants. Hence, the ban on the headscarf can be viewed as a countermeasure against this threat.

Banning the headscarf has also been justified by protecting or defending the French principle of *laïcité*, which stands for "secularity", a French concept of secularism. The Stasi Commission, which drew up recommendations for the law banning religious visible signs in schools, emphasized its commitment to

French secularism and refused to make exceptions for one group of devout people. However, the pretext to use the shield of this concept to justify the ban policy is itself quite problematic, since *laïcité* was meant to uphold the principle of neutrality: "... the assurance that individual should be free from state interference insofar as religion is concerned. . ." (Doomen 275). This rule discourages religious involvement in government affairs. The principle of *laïcité* refers to the necessity of upholding the separation of church and state in education. It requires the neutrality of the state, the public sector, public schools, and the educational system in general. In his article, "Laïcité: Ousting Some Religious Elements while Introducing Others", Jasper Doomen attempts to demonstrate the problematic situation that arises in relation to the concept of *laïcité* due to the radical elimination of religious principles:

The 1905 law on the Separation of the Churches and State is the basis of the modern French state, in which *laïcité* is an important principle. Article 1 reads: 'The Republic ensures the freedom of conscience. It guarantees freedom of worship, limited only by the following rules in the interest of public order'. (Doomen 275)

The ban on face covering, therefore, proves incompatible with the idea of a liberal democratic state. This development leads to a situation that may be considered a state of *aporia*, according to Derridean language. *Aporia* is a Greek term that means a philosophical 'impasse' or a lack of resolution arising from a realization that we lack a firm, convincing ground on which to base our judgments. In that state of puzzlement, the definition of true and false etymology creates a circular trap, created by the same historical and philosophical context we try to analyze. As Mikhail Syrotinski tends to define the difference between 'false' and 'true' nature of etymology and the understanding of its underlying meanings in *Reading Derrida's Of Grammatology*;

The epistemological *aporia* we are confronted with is thus the following: how can we know true from false etymology, when the very terms which allow us to make such a determination are themselves indissociable from this very history, and philosophical genealogy? (Gaston and Maclachlan 27)

Therefore, Derridean reading opens up a "playfulness" regarding the meaning of this "serious question", inviting us "to a radical rethinking of the very politics of language as such" (Gaston and Maclachlan). In the context of a work, this approach to a text is known as deconstruction. However, it is not a dead zone of meaninglessness. This impasse leads us to a deeper appreciation of the complex relationship that both underlines and undermines the meaning-making process.

In this case, an aporiatic situation denies freedom of choice to those who do not want to wear the headscarf or endorses a law that removes freedom of choice from those who wish to wear it. Another exposed anomaly is the inconsistency in the government's stance, indicating the loophole that the law does not sustain its force and continuity in the general public's life. This critical dead-end situation was revealed by Patrick Weil, who had served in the presidential commission on the implementation of the principle of secularism in the French Republic. He has been a member of the commission's high advisory council on integration, owing to his expertise in the state of impasse found in Derridean philosophy. While explaining the principle of *laïcité* (secularism) in the French Republic, Patrick Weil presents a partisan formula for this complex situation: "We decided to give freedom of choice to the former during the time they were at school, while the latter retain all their freedom for their life outside school" (*A Nation in Diversity: France, Muslims and the Headscarf*, 2004).

This problematic situation leads to another encounter with *aporia*. By extension, this situation also raises the question of the tussle between freedom and restriction, leading to an 'impasse'. One fails to find a definitive version of the convention. If a woman is forced not to wear a scarf, she is being made to submit to the government. On the other hand, if she wears the scarf, she submits to her parents or her family or her tradition. Therefore, in either case, the concerned woman is denied the right to choose on the basis of her free will. In actual practice, the wearing or not of a headscarf may fall into the category of personal choice. And therefore, it may be treated as such. According to Article 1 of *France: Declaration of the*

Right of Man and the Citizen, “the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man” set forth, recognized and approved by the National Assembly of France as early as 26th August 1789, inform: “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good.” Article 10 of the Constitution clearly states that: “No one may be disturbed on account of his opinions, even religious ones, as long as the manifestation of such opinions does not interfere with the established Law and Order”. Article 11, makes the categorical declaration:

The free communication of ideas and of opinions is one of the most precious rights of man. Any citizen may therefore speak, write and publish freely, except what is tantamount to the abuse of this liberty in the cases determined by Law. (UNHCR)

Banning a piece of clothing in schools may also be interpreted as banning an entire religion and community in France. The ban may also signal a crisis in the French policy of integration. While discussing the undecidability in either side of the situation, Francoise Gaspard, a notable French academic, politician, and feminist activist and a sociologist at the Advanced Group for Social Studies in Paris, avers, as reported by Raja El Habti in his paper entitled “Laïcité, Women’s Rights, And The Headscarf Issue in France” (2004) : “The headscarf today symbolizes a defeat for the French government, which has failed to integrate those minorities” (Habti).

The epistemological aporia that one gets confronted with is highlighted by the fact that if a Muslim child and her family are attached to hijab, they should be outmaneuvered. The ban on headscarves applies to girls between the ages of six and sixteen. At this age, they are too young to make a choice. Hence, the headscarf is worn because of parental or traditional influence. But the French government presents a solution in which parental authority is substituted by state authority, which is another name for communism, all in the name of national integration. At this point, one is reminded of Article 14, Clause 3 of the European Union Charter of Human Rights, mentioned at the beginning of this study, which guarantees respect for parents’ rights to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious convictions.

An aporia of situation is encountered when the French government fails to discern the true meaning of the ideal of national integration. According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2001 “ National Integration can be defined as the process by which diverse social and cultural groups within a nation come together to form a cohesive and unified society, often facilitated by the expansion of local networks and institutions at the national level” In this regard, a state may be considered responsible to some degree in developing a violence free society since it has the wherewithal of a “centralized decision making authority and more or less extensive welfare-dispensing apparatus” (National Integration).

On the other hand, if a state uses its authority as an instrument of pressure to push young Muslim girls wearing the headscarf out of an educational system on the basis of their affiliation to their tradition, they are marginalized, and that contributes to their lack of integration rather than the promotion of national integration. Therefore, instead of countering radicalization, Western legislation against headscarves may radicalize the immigrant community with a greater impact. National integration cannot be reached on the basis of one’s dress code. The dream of national integration calls for addressing issues with wider implications, such as poverty, unemployment, poor housing, discrimination, and alienation, rather than withholding the freedom of choice from a particular segment of society.

The Reverend Roman Catholic Bishop, Stanislas Lallanc of the Catholic Church in France, points out the same phenomenon in these words: “The fundamental questions of integration will not simply resolve themselves through a law on religious science” (Lallanc, 2013). The Western argument that headscarves are a sign of militant Islam can be challenged on the basis of the fact that the fear of the so-called ‘militant Islam’ is a phenomenon of recent history, whereas the wearing of headscarves dates back to the earliest phases of the advent of Islam, i.e., 1456 years ago. Except for a few minor instances, in practice, the connection between militant Islam and headscarves has not been categorically proven by historical

evidence of any notable occurrence in Europe in recent or distant years. According to an Al Jazeera report on 7 September 2023, teachers and students at Maurice Utrillo high school in Stains, Seine-Saint-Denis, went on strike against the government's Islamophobic policy over the abaya ban in public schools. The paper quotes one of the students as having protested: "For months and months, we had no teachers as there were no replacements, but they found time for this?" (Islamophobic policy': French High School Goes on Strike). Against the backdrop of this scenario, one may assume that the state's Islamophobic policy may lead to a chain of heated responses and to violent protests in the long run. Therefore, quite contrary to the basic ideology behind these laws, the battle that tries to pull the headscarf down may end up breeding a militant face of Islam in retaliation.

Public schools provide a space for national integration, as that is the place where regular mutual interaction among young people from different backgrounds occurs. Banning signs of difference and claiming to promote a universal ideal of secularism and commonalities appear as two contradictory elements. One may argue that, in the name of secularism, devising school dress codes on the part of the regime ends up doing the opposite of what it actually intends to promote, i.e., the likelihood of the threat of religious fundamentalism on the part of minority groups. These unnecessary restrictions on personal rights amount to coercion, even when phrased in neutral terms.

According to structuralism, facts of reality may be better understood through their opposition. Earlier, structuralists discussed binary oppositions to argue that the opposition between two things helps generate a clear and stable idea. Saussure declares in *Course in General Linguistics*: "*dans la langue, il n'y a que des différences*" (120) i.e., in language, there are only differences "for differences carry signification" (Saussure 118). In this system of signification, thought perceives the difference, and the language forms new terms or signifiers accordingly. This phenomenon of signs can be connected to the opposition between speech and writing in language, which may be read as a manifestation of Western culture's logocentrism. The concept of "Logos" (Greek term for word, reason, or divine principle), treats language as the ultimate source of meaning.

In the present case, the argument that the headscarf may not really be required in Islam seems to be based on a logocentric approach, the fixity of which calls for greater fluidity in its dealings. An individual's belief system may be determined by the concerned entity and not by some authority existing outside the realm of the concerned matter. In the light of a theoretical argument, a transcendental signified cannot pour meanings into the actual text of the matter. This is what Derrida calls the Metaphysics of Presence, according to which truth in reality may not exist outside the language. Derridean philosophical principles suggest that the crucial role of absence and difference may not suffice to articulate an issue. He avers, "The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structure from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they accurately aim. Deconstruction should necessarily operate from the inside" (Derrida, 1997). Therefore, it is quite understandable to claim that a system experiences its deconstruction from within.

Therefore, in Derridean philosophy, the binary is likely to take the following form: the anti-discrimination provisions of the government's own human rights protection laws, on the one hand, contrasted with oppressive and coercive measures regarding the policing of clothing. If allowing the students to wear religious symbols undermines the principle of secularism, then the proposed prohibition on the same symbols also acts as "an unwarranted infringement on the right to religious practice" (France: Headscarf Ban Violates Religious Freedom). In other words, disrespect for religious diversity reveals a certain fear of difference: religious intolerance in the name of secularism versus protecting the rights of all students, that too in the name of secularism. This way, Derrida's binaries under difference expose instability and undecidability. They seem to experience an endless deferral through a chain of differences.

The ideology underpinning the present conception of *laïcité*, particularly its emphasis on dignity and equality, does not consistently align with any particular religious message delivered on behalf of the government. The logic that the garments break French rules on secularism in education may amount to

direct interference of the Church inside the system of education, where students who wear an abaya or a hijab are stigmatized. The attempt to coerce a few may not be interpreted as an appropriate legislative measure to address a compelling security concern, such as protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of the rest of the students. Voicing similar concerns, French writer, poet, and aristocrat Antoine de Saint-Exupéry reportedly avers, “Your difference, my brother, far from scaring me, enriches me” (Saint-Exupéry, 1948). The question is how French officials expect to teach their children to live in a diverse society if every sign of difference should be banned from schools. Against this backdrop, questions may arise about how far a diverse society can go in erasing inherent signs of difference, such as those of skin, color, and gender. The argument exposes the hollowness of the French government’s slogan of secularism.

Against this backdrop, the plural voices of a minority group in France deserve a hearing, which may, in the long run, serve as a learning process to better understand the significance of the headscarf to a Muslim woman, compared with the French perception of this practice. The French government’s steps to adjudicate between these meanings or to interpret religious symbols tend to lack convincing logical grounds in the light of this argument. As Patrick Weil says,

Whereas for a majority of women, the headscarf is an expression of the domination of women by men, it can also be the articulation of a free belief, a means of protection against the pressure of males, an expression of identity, a statement of opposition to Western and secular society.

Deconstruction critics claim that opposing arguments to a motion tend to open the doors towards continuously changing ideas. In this process, pure essence is never achieved; rather, meaning-making effort may always be deferred. In the present case, the successive governments of France treat the issue as a state issue, whereas for the concerned minority who practice hijab, it remains a matter of faith and of their proclamation of chastity and modesty as they claim. Meaning, therefore, may be understood in more than one way. Over the last two and a half decades, the headscarf controversy has sparked considerable debate and discussion. The controversy over the issue continues and has not yet reached a consensus satisfactory to both concerned parties. Although the state decides the matter through legislation, the case cannot be considered closed. It remains a historical document that may be debated and amended over time for further progress. This is how important texts create history themselves and signs that evolve with time.

In literature, as opposed to historical documents, literary works are most often constrained by historical influences. However, this tendency of a static text is challenged by the concept of deconstruction. The philosophy of deconstruction holds that texts produce meanings not according to their historical location, but because of the nuisance value attached to their own reference. Therefore, rather than running smoothly, their operations may be continuously disrupted by the ambiguity surrounding them. The process of deconstruction exposes internal weaknesses, contradictions, and blind spots.

While challenging the contradictions inherent in a system, the principles of deconstruction hold that a structuralist binary entails a violent hierarchy. Derrida overturns this hierarchy in his deconstructive endeavor. He starts with a “double gesture,” as mentioned in one of his seminal collections of lectures on deconstruction, entitled *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994* (1995). According to him, one can only intervene in the power structure by creating a reverse hierarchy. This may be known as overturning the hierarchy or neutralizing the binary. This reversal of hierarchy is only a phase in the strategy of deconstruction: “Whence this double gesture that proposes a philosophical thinking of cinders and shows how ‘cinder’ is that which prevents philosophy from closing on itself” (Points...211). Derrida calls the overturning and displacing of a conceptual order using “the word cinder” or ashes “for the transformation of a philosophical concept.” The term is meant to signal “the total destruction by fire” for the sake of “restructurations of philosophical discourse” (211). In this philosophical context, one can reverse the state-versus-Muslim binary in France by drawing an ideological comparison between the two

controversial positions. A visit to history reveals that the French had to struggle for a long time before achieving the 1905 law, which separated the new French Democracy from the Catholic Church:

The 1905 Law of Separation of Church and State was enacted as the climax of decades of conflict between monarchists and anticlerical Republicans who viewed Christianity as a permanent obstacle to the social development of the Republic. (Davis)

The law was passed in order to weaken the Catholic Church's in education. As a result, the French tradition of *laïcité* was built in 1905, in opposition to the Catholic Church's influence and domination in public affairs. In the present case, under international law, the state's decision to limit religious practices may signal a defeat for the Western government in its efforts to integrate immigrant communities into Western society. The underlying fear may have been the assumption that the so-called 'militant Muslims' can drive the situation to undo the body of state law in the long run. However, before resorting to coercive law-making in order to counter such fears, the state authorities may try to read the difference between the postulates of Islam and those of the church. The in-depth study and comparison of the two religions may lead to the awareness that only a misinterpreted face of Islam can connect its basic ideology with that of having a clergy, as has been the case in the Christian religion. There is a distinction between the significance of a Cross to a Christian and a headscarf to a Muslim. The Cross is a religious symbol, whereas the headscarf is an integral part of Muslim religious belief. Therefore, if considered part of religious belief rather than merely a religious symbol, it may be accorded its due respect.

Islam does not claim to have any Church body in actual practice. An effort to recognize that difference may help French lawmakers understand the nature of the issue from a completely different perspective. Instead of a hierarchical clergy, the tenets of Islam emphasize collective decision-making rather than a hierarchy that can dictate and impose things at will.

4. CONCLUSION

This research article revisits the state's current anti-scarf policy in France in light of Derrida's deconstructive principles. It exposes the aporiatic situation inherent in the legislation at the announcement of a ban policy on Muslim head scarves in various educational institutions. The selective banning of head scarves and abaya, based on age limits or school standards, while sometimes ignoring markets or other public places, creates confusion, as it does not clearly define the government's objectives. The imposition of a ban on scarves as religious symbols also reveals a contradiction inherent in the system, as the principles of *laïcité*, meant to promote national integration, do not align with the state's coercive policing of the minority dress code. French philosopher Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of deconstruction opens up a series of dialogues that may discourage a final and stable solution to the issue for the satisfaction of the Muslim minority group on the one hand and the state on the other. This study reveals a dichotomy inherent in the state policy that misreads the Islamic code of dress as religious symbols of the Catholic Church, thereby creating an impasse or a deadlock between the two standpoints. The study, therefore, calls for a situation in which, instead of a static structuralist approach to the issue, a study of the deferral of meaning is undertaken. The chain of difference may not reach a final identity, yet it can indicate that neither parents nor the state resorts to coercive measures, and that the matter is left to the choice of those who are directly concerned. Otherwise, the issue will suffer from an endless, unequal deferral of meaning. Slogans such as national integration and secularity remain undecidable because they lack fixed meanings and therefore destabilize binary logic from within. The state needs to recognize the rights of the parents as long as their children are minors. Later, the issue may become a matter of individual concerns as responsible citizens.

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