Unveiling
French Society

- A qualitative study on young Muslim women’s opinions and experiences regarding the law on religious symbols

Author: Anna Mezey
Supervisor: Pernilla Ouis
Abstract

The long tradition of secularism in France has a great influence in the public sphere. It is furthermore deeply ingrained in the French identity. Eventually the secular ideology resulted in a law against religious symbols in school. Since autumn 2004 Muslim girls are not any longer permitted to wear the veil in school. This thesis aims to present the perspective of young Muslim women in France regarding the new law. It seeks to capture how the law has had an influence on these women. Additionally it puts forward young Muslim women’s experiences of a secular society and their understandings of the veil. It is an empirical study of a qualitative character, based on unstructured interviews with seven Muslim women. Said’s notion of orientalism and Foucault’s idea of governmentality are central elements in the analysis. Further, the analysis of the empirical material is structured around a variety of concepts. The paper concludes that the law has contributed to an increased islamophobia in French society. Further, Muslim women are excluded to a greater extent due to the law. Hence the law has been extended beyond the educational sphere. Muslim women in this study are stigmatised due to their veil and the law has suddenly legitimatized discrimination against them.

Keywords: France, Muslim women, veil, the law on religious symbols, orientalism, governmentality, secularism, integration, assimilation, social exclusion, discrimination, islamophobia, stigma, identity, gender
Acknowledgements

First of all I want to say thank you to the interviewed women. Without you this thesis would never have been realized. I appreciate your interest in meeting me and sharing your opinions and experiences. Merci!

Furthermore, I want to direct my appreciation to Loïc, for putting up with me during this period. Thank you for everything!

Mum, thank you for all linguistic help!

Rebecka, thank you for our inspiring discussions!

Anna, thank you for useful commentaries!

Last but not least I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Pernilla Ouis, for always encouraging me to continue my work. Furthermore, I appreciate your personal interest in my thesis, always prepared to comment upon my work. Thank you!
Abstract

Acknowledgements

1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................ 6
   1.1 PROBLEM .................................................................................................................. 7
   1.2 PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS ........................................................................ 7
   1.3 TERMINOLOGY ........................................................................................................... 8
   1.4 DISPOSITION ............................................................................................................. 8

2. BACKGROUND ................................................................................................................... 8
   2.1 THE POSITION OF THE VEIL IN ISLAM ................................................................. 8
   2.2 THE PRINCIPLE OF SECULARISM IN FRANCE ........................................................ 10
      2.2.1 From Invention to Legislation .............................................................................. 10

3. METHOD ............................................................................................................................ 11
   3.1 THE QUALITATIVE METHOD .................................................................................... 12
   3.2 SELECTION AND PROCEDURE ................................................................................ 12
   3.3 THE INTERVIEWS ..................................................................................................... 13
   3.4 PROBLEMS ................................................................................................................ 14
      3.4.1 The Researcher’s Role ............................................................................................ 14
   3.5 ETHICS ....................................................................................................................... 15

4. PREVIOUS RESEARCH .................................................................................................. 15

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ................................................................................... 17
   5.1 ORIENTALISM .......................................................................................................... 17
   5.2 DISCOURSE & GOVERNMENTALITY ........................................................................ 19
   5.3 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS .................................................................................... 19
      5.3.1 Secularism ............................................................................................................... 19
      5.3.2 Integration .............................................................................................................. 19
      5.3.3 Assimilation .......................................................................................................... 20
      5.3.4 Social Exclusion .................................................................................................... 20
      5.3.5 Discrimination ...................................................................................................... 20
      5.3.6 Islamophobia ........................................................................................................... 20
      5.3.7 Stigma ...................................................................................................................... 20
      5.3.8 Identity ..................................................................................................................... 21
      5.3.9 Gender ..................................................................................................................... 21

6. ANALYSIS .......................................................................................................................... 21
   6.1 PRESENTATION OF THE INTERVIEWEES .............................................................. 21
      6.1.1 Nedjma ...................................................................................................................... 21
      6.1.2 Malika ....................................................................................................................... 21
      6.1.3 Amelle ...................................................................................................................... 22
      6.1.4 Maryam ..................................................................................................................... 22
      6.1.5 Karima ...................................................................................................................... 22
      6.1.6 Amina ....................................................................................................................... 22
      6.1.7 Yasmine ................................................................................................................... 22
   6.2 WHAT HAPPENED TO LIBERTY, EQUALITY AND FRATERNITY? ....................... 23
   6.3 THE PRINCIPLE OF SECULARISM ........................................................................... 24
6.4 RESPECT TO THE VEIL ........................................................................................................ 26
6.5 THE IDENTITY BEHIND THE VEIL .................................................................................. 28
6.6 THE FIRST GENERATION IMMIGRANTS’ REACTIONS TO THE VEIL ....................... 32
6.7 EXCLUSION FROM THE EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DOMAIN .............. 33
6.8 GENERAL IDEAS ON THE LAW .................................................................................... 35
6.9 DEFINING RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS ................................................................................. 36
6.10 PRINCIPLES OF CLOTHING IN SCHOOL .................................................................. 37
6.11 ASSIMILATION AND INTEGRATION ............................................................................. 39
6.12 STIGMATIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION .................................................................. 41

7. CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................... 45

Appendix
References
1. Introduction

In February 2004, an overwhelming majority of the French National Assembly voted in favour of adopting the bill prohibiting conspicuous religious symbols in municipal schools. In the beginning of March the decision was approved by the Senate. A few weeks later the law was signed by Jacques Chirac, president of the French Republic, and was implemented when the school started autumn of 2004.¹ Thereby it is now prohibited to wear conspicuous religious symbols or clothes in French municipal primary and secondary schools and high schools.² Yet the focus in discussions prior to the law has predominantly been on the Islamic veil.

The Muslim population in France constitutes approximately five millions, which makes it the most concentrated Muslim community in Europe. Hence Islam has become the second largest religion in France and has spread and developed by immigration, especially from ancient French colonies (Hunter 2002). The French debate on Islam and its appearance stretches back to the 1980’s. It was in 1989, however, that “l’affaire du foulard” – the headscarf affair – perturbed the political climate as well as the civil society. In October the headmaster of a secondary school in a Parisian suburb forbade two girls to wear the veil. The girls, with origins from Morocco, refused to take the veil off hence the headmaster refused them to attend their classes. He turned to the Ministry of Education in order to obtain a legal procedure in this issue. Lionel Jospin, the Minister of Education at the time, asked for advice from the State Council (Conseil d’État), the highest authority council concerning legislation in the French Republic. A few weeks later the Council gave its point of view; the wearing of religious symbols is not incompatible with the principle of secularism because in the present case there is no provocation, proselytism or perturbation.³ This recommendation became the base of the jurisprudence on the veil.

During the 1990’s new “affairs” appeared, excluding young veiled girls from school though without any legal support. Yet in some cases the expulsions of the girls were justified by the jurisprudence referring to the act of provocation and perturbation. The subject was hotly debated in the Parliament during several years. In April 2003, however, the political

---

¹ 494 voted in favour of the law while 36 did not support the proposal in the National Assembly. Assemblée Nationale: Deuxième séance du mardi 10 février 2004
² “Dans les écoles, les colleges et les lycées public, le port de signes ou tenues par lesquels les élèves manifestent ostensiblement une appartenance religieuse est interdit” (Loi n°2004-228 du 15 mars 2004)
³ “Voile à l'école: les principales dates”
establishment decided to act and investigations later resulted in the legislation on the question of religious symbols in school.  

1.1 Problem
The French catchphrase “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” is universally renowned and constitutes the core of the Republic’s identity addressing all citizens. The secular ideology is also closely intertwined with the identity of France. The notion of secularism eventually resulted in a law preventing girls from wearing the veil in municipal schools. A few months since the implementation have now passed and several exclusions have taken place. I am interested in the perspective of young Muslim women regarding issues of secularism and the new law. Further, the Muslim woman’s veil is an issue of extensive discussion in French society but the voice of Muslim women is not often revealed. With my study I want to shed light on the opinions maintained by young Muslim women.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions
My purpose with this thesis is to find an answer on how the law has influenced young Muslim women in France. Women are a marginalized group in society and being young increases the feature of marginalization. Furthermore in the western context Islam does often seem to represent different values and norms from those of the majority society. Muslims epitomize ‘the Other’ and tend to be marginalized due to their religion. Therefore my aim is to highlight young Muslim women’s stories and perception of the law on religious symbols and its effect. I have also chosen to look further into young Muslim women’s notion on the veil and French society and the principle of secularism.

Against this background my primarily research question is:

- How and in what way has the law on religious symbols influenced young Muslim women?

This question leads to the following sub-questions:

- What does the secular society imply according to young Muslim women?
- What does the veil represent according to young Muslim women?
- What has become the consequence of the law according to young Muslim women?

4 “Voile à l'école: les principales dates”
1.3 Terminology
Numerous Arabic terms are used in order to refer to diverse items of women’s dress depending on body part, region, local dialect and so forth. Hijab, jilbab, burqu’ and niqab are some of these terms to name a few. In English, however, the term “veil” is generally employed in order to refer to Muslim women’s covering of their head and body (El Guindi 2000: 6,7). Its French variant is “voile”. Yet the interviewees in my thesis predominantly used the term “foulard” which in English can be translated as “headscarf”. I will, however, employ the word veil throughout this study as it is the most common term in English. I want to emphasise that in this case the veil only refers to the covering of the hair and not the face.

1.4 Disposition
Current chapter gives an introduction to my study and presents the purpose of my thesis. Next chapter is devoted to give a background presenting a related frame to my topic. The third chapter deals with the method and succeeding chapter, number four, presents some of the previous research in the area. Chapter five gives the theoretical framework for the thesis which will be applied in the analysis. Chapter six starts with a presentation of the interviewees and includes thereafter an analysis of the interviews. The seventh, which is the final chapter, contains a conclusion.

2. Background
In this part I will briefly present the discourse of the veil and try to explain the veil’s position in Islam. In the following sub-chapter I will clarify the principle of secularism in France. Chapter 2.2 contains a lot of information and is quite extensive but I believe it is essential to be detailed in order to apprehend the long tradition of secularism in France and to understand what impact it has in the public domain.

2.1 The Position of the Veil in Islam
The veil is often subject of discussion both in media and in books, and it is evident that it is a complex issue. El Guindi notices that veiling is a rich phenomenon with several implications in her study on the veil (2000). In the Western context, Roald asserts, the veil has different connotations (Roald 2001: 254). For example a Christian nun wearing the veil may be perceived as a representation of “sincere religiosity, purity and peace” whereas a Muslim veiled woman is expected to be oppressed and not in accordance with existing social and
religious norms (2001: 254). On the one hand we find Muslim feminists who argue that the
veil is a symbol of oppression and that veiling is not an Islamic obligation for women. This
idea, however, is contested by many leading Islamists who do not see the veil per se as
undermining women’s position⁵ (2001: 256-257). Yet the common image of the veil in the
Western world appears to be that it symbolizes women’s subordinated position in society
(Rabo 1997). Leila Ahmed, however, argues in her book, Women and Gender in Islam, that it
was only the wives of the Prophet who were required to veil (1992: 55).

According to Roald, the discussion of the veil maintained by western influenced/educated
scholars is complicated due to the lack of a clear definition of the veil; there is no established
terminology. She believes there is a confusion of concepts and that many researchers do for
example not successfully differentiate between the face-veil and the headscarf⁶ (2001: 262).
The Islamic debate contains more specificity. What does then the Islamic law sources say
about the female dress? Roald has looked further into the hadith⁷ literature and concludes that
there is no “indication of a uniformity of dress” yet it gives a notion that there are some
essential regulations concerning both men’s and women’s decency (2001: 267). Within the
Islamic law schools Roald finds different approaches regarding female veiling. Some
promotes that women should cover both the head and the body whereas others support the
face-veil implying it is an Islamic obligation. A scholar who represents the traditional
understanding of Islam indicates that “every Muslim woman should wear a head-cover, /…/
whereas a face-veil [is] necessary only for a woman whose face is so beautiful that she might
cause temptation /…/” (in Roald 2001: 272). Roald states this is the common opinion among
Muslims in general. Yet it is always a question of interpretation and sometimes a translator’s
personal view becomes integrated in the translation (2001: 272). Some scholars adhere to the
“Arab cultural base pattern” and others may be influenced by the “western cultural base
pattern” in their interpretation of how a woman should cover herself. Scholars belonging to
the salafi⁸ movement are strongly influenced by the “Arab cultural base pattern” and tend to
believe it is obligatory for women to cover both head and face. Other Islamic scholars
inspired by the “western cultural base pattern” tend to encourage covering of only the body
and the hair (Roald 2001: 293). However, many Muslims consider in general the veil (head-

⁵ For further details see chapter 12, “Islamic female dress” in Roald 2001.
⁶ Roald describes the face-veil as completely or partly covering the face and the headscarf covers the hair but not
the face (2001: 262).
⁷ Hadith = “narrative relating deeds and utterances of the Prophet” (Roald 2001)
⁸ Salafi = “movement with stress on Koran and Sunna as normative” (Roald 2001)
scarf) as a part of the Islamic law. Therefore it is often believed that not wearing the veil is against the law.

2.2 The Principle of Secularism in France

The Republic of France has a long tradition of secularism, which today constitutes the core of its identity. However, the beginning of secularism in France dates back to the French Revolution in 1789. Citizenship came to no longer be bound to religion though Catholicism was accentuated on the political arena, which aimed at comprising a plurality of religious options (Stasi 2003: 11). Since the end of the 19th century France has ensued a policy dissociating citizenship and religious belonging, which resulted in the law of 9th December 1905 affirming the separation between the State and the Church. The first article declares the freedom of conscience and assures the liberty of religious faith and practice. Further the second article states that the Republic does not recognise, nor does it subsidize any cult. Hence religion does not any longer maintain a public place and eventually France ceased to define itself as a Catholic nation (Stasi 2003: 11).

The religious agenda in French political life has been situated between strict secularism and open secularism (Thorson 2004: 160) and it was first after the First World War that the notion of secularism was extensively accepted (Stasi 2003: 11). At the course of 20th century secularism became the symbol of the Republic and furthermore a fundamental element in the French constitution of 1958. Accordingly the state remains neutral and does not privilege any religion nor does it promote atheism. Hence it is the neutrality of public places that permits “a harmony in the co-existence of different religions” (Chirac 2003). The issue of secularism includes moreover freedom of spiritual and religious expression in the public sphere yet without a political aspect (Stasi 2003: 13).

2.2.1 From Invention to Legislation

Along with immigration new religions have emerged. The French society has become diverse on the spiritual and religious level and it appears that the law of 1905, generated in a Christian

---

9 Article Premier. “La République assure la liberté de conscience. Elle garantit le libre exercice des cultes sous les seules restrictions édictées ci-après dans l’intérêt de l’ordre public”

Article 2. “La République ne reconnaît, ne salarie ni ne subventionne aucun culte /…/” (Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la separation des Églises et de l’État.)

10 “La France est une république indivisible, laïque, democratique et sociale. Elle assure l’égalité devant la loi de tous les citoyens sans distinction d’origine, de race ou de religion. Elle respecte toutes les croyances. /…/” (Article 1 de la Constitution de 1958)
context, do not seem to be compatible anymore. Thus the idea is to provide space for new religions but at the same time preventing them from interfering the political domain (Stasi 2003: 66). Against this background, Jacques Chirac, the President of France, demanded a study on how to preserve and assure the principle of secularism. A commission headed by Bernard Stasi, mediator of the Republic, delivered a report in December 2003. The investigation resulted in a number of propositions regarding schools and education, public services and enterprises. For example the report suggested to permanently establish religious official holidays for Jewish and Muslim traditions in school as well as in workplaces. Further it was recommended to provide an extensive education on French history concerning slavery, colonisation, decolonisation and immigration. The report did also propose to develop the learning of Arabic in national schools. However, it was the suggestion of prohibiting religious symbols in public schools that gained most attention, both by media and by the government.

In his speech to the nation 17th of December 2003, Jacques Chirac emphasised the principle of secularism stressing its significance representing the heart of France’s republic identity. It is a “crucial prerequisite of social peace and of national cohesion”. In accordance with the first article of the constitution the President referred to the values of respect, dialogue, and tolerance, values of the Republic. The notion of secularism expresses the willingness to live together in line with these common values. Hence it guarantees the option to believe or not to believe and assures furthermore everybody to express and practice his or her faith (my italics). Chirac further stated that the school is the principal place where the common values are to be transferred; “it is where the citizens of tomorrow are shaped and educated”. Thus the school shall remain secular, as it is where values and knowledge are obtained. For these reasons and in the name of secularism Chirac asserted that symbols, “which ostensibly manifest religious appearance, should be forbidden in municipal schools”. Symbols such as the Jewish kippah or the Islamic veil shall not be accepted to wear. Discrete symbols, such as a cross, a David star or a Fatima hand shall be tolerated however. In order to achieve this, Chirac proclaimed the necessity of a law. Giving his speech, Chirac demanded the French Parliament to adopt the law and to put it into practice in the autumn of 2004.

3. Method
This part explains the methodological approach. First the qualitative method will be discussed, followed by a presentation of the selection and procedure. Thereafter I will
describe the interviews. Next sub-chapter will account for problems in the process of collection including my role as a researcher. Finally ethics will be considered.

3.1 The Qualitative Method
With the thesis’ purpose in mind the choice of method was evident; the qualitative device aims at allowing somebody’s voice to be heard hence obtaining the story of somebody. I want to bring to light young Muslim women’s stories on how the new law has influenced them thereby a qualitative approach is suitable. Lantz asserts the purpose of the research decides the method, which in turn limits which aspects that shall be highlighted (1993: 24). Hence the fundamental issue in my research is to know the opinions of these young Muslim women related to a certain topic. The women’s personal understandings are in the spotlight and their thoughts constitute the essence for this work and are crucial for final interpretations. May states when concentrating on subjectivity, “we focus on the meanings that people give to their environment, not the environment itself”(2002: 13, original italic). My analysis takes an ideographic stance, that is, the view on reality is subjective. However, research deriving from the qualitative approach is featured by anti-positivism/hermeneutic and can be characterized by its aim to explore the meaning of everyday life (Lantz 1993: 31). My field of interest is to explore what these women feel and think, thus my point of departure is explorative (Rosengren & Arvidsson 2002: 62). Yet a pre-understanding does always exist and some of my questions are to a certain based upon previous knowledge. Lantz affirms how the pre-understanding implies how the phenomenon is considered. No research is unprejudiced or impartial thereby my understanding of France and Islam in France directed the gathering of information (1993: 46,52). To exemplify, in the western world the veil is often illustrated as a symbol of oppression and in the beginning of this study my view was filtered through this notion. During my study this perception became, however, changed.

3.2 Selection and Procedure
The law concerns municipal primary and secondary schools and high schools. Thus my original intention was to interview about five girls preferably from high schools, who wore or had worn the veil since they were the one who predominantly were affected by the law. This intention, however, did not turn out to be possible as it was more problematical to establish contacts than I initially had thought. I went to France and I began with sending out emails to high schools and relevant organizations and associations yet without any reactions. Eventually
I found different forums uniting (mostly French) Muslims on the Internet and especially one provided me with useful information and help. I posted a presentation of my thesis and myself although it only resulted in one contact. I obtained my other contacts by sending out an email to those members who were online, and in this manner I managed to make contact with interested women. During my attempts to find young women I realized that it was not necessary to only interview schoolgirls as I noticed the law forwarded a lot of discussion and raised intense feelings among many women (and men as well). Thus my contacts finally resulted in four different interviews with a total of seven women aged between 15 and 28.

3.3 The Interviews

Interviews provide the researcher with rich insights into people’s life, personal experiences, values, attitudes and so forth (May 2002: 120). They are furthermore used as a tool in order to grasp how individuals make sense of their social surrounding and how they act within it (May 2002: 142). Interviewing has its strength in the direct contact with the individual interviewee. A qualitative depth pursues the unstructured situation, which allows the interviewees to freely express themselves without being limited to a certain range of answers (Lantz 1993: 18). Yet the approach of my interviews alters between the open interview and the openly directed interview form. These forms are for example characterized by the descriptiveness, the focus on decided themes and the openness for interpretations and flexibility (Lantz 1993: 34).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face lasting between thirty minutes and one hour. They were structured around certain themes including a number of questions. I decided meeting with the women over phone and asked them to choose a place where they wished to conduct the interviews. It is important that the interviewees feel comfortable and relaxed in a situation like this (Lantz 1993: 111). However, all interviews except for one took place in public places forwarding some problems. One interview became disturbed from the environment yet it was possible to finish the interview; in another situation we had to finish the interview since the place where we were closed. Nevertheless we solved it by finishing the interview by email.

After finishing a particular theme the interviewees were free to add more if they for example thought I had left something out. The interviewees were yet bound to my questions but could develop their answers as they wished. Hence it was their subjective opinion I was looking for.
All interviews were recorded with a minidisc. All of the women accepted my wish to record our conversation. The recording allowed me to fully concentrate on what the women were saying (May 2002: 138). Due to the microphone some women felt uncomfortable and could not feel natural. Yet during the conversation that feeling was in most cases reduced. All of the interviews have been transcribed and sent out to those interviewees who wished to have a copy and have thereby been accepted by the women.

3.4 Problems
The Islamic veil in the French secular society is a sensitive issue and not always an evident subject to discuss. For example a friend of mine works as a teacher and she talked to her colleagues about my thesis with the intention to help me finding interviewees. It appeared to be a very delicate matter and nobody among the teachers was willing to express what they thought nor were any girls interested to participate. Yet my major problem was certainly to find women who were interested to meet me. One interviewee withdrew her participation at the last minute and I had to restart the search. Finally I found all my interviewees on the same forum on the Internet. I do not, however, consider this being a problem. What unites the participants at the forum is the fact that they are Muslims and as my aim is to know the opinions maintained by young Muslim women, I do not think it is a hinder for my research. Initially I wanted to meet schoolgirls only but as I wrote above this did not turn out to be possible. Now afterwards I am satisfied that I came to meet women outside school who were older. Their life experiences are different and mentally they are in another stage in life. Consequently they have meditated more upon their reflections regarding society and Islam. On the other hand, the younger women were more spontaneous in their manner and expression.

3.4.1 The Researcher’s Role
Is it possible to talk to somebody, whose story and reflections you are interested in, without being emotionally touched? I do not believe it is possible to remain objective and neutral. Of course it will be difficult to forward and analyze the women’s story without including my personal interpretations. Before my interviews, however, I tried to remain as neutral as possible regarding what I thought about the law and to what extent secularism shall be maintained. I tried not to take a certain stance in order to be focused as a researcher.
An advantage with qualitative methods is the possibility it gives to approach the object of study on a closer level than with quantitative methods. The closeness obtained from physical encounters discloses the individual personality giving the research more character. On the other hand when employing a qualitative approach the researcher risks to develop a too close relation with the interviewee and thereby becoming very influenced and maybe biased (Andersson & Persson 1999: 196). Intellect must yet dominate emotion (Lantz 1993: 149).

Lantz stresses the interplay between the interviewer and interviewee as crucial for the data collection (1993: 101). Factors such as age, ‘race’, sex, social class, dressing style, language and so forth have an affect on the interplay. During my meetings with the women I was often asked why I was interested in Islam, did I want to become a Muslim? I believe if I had been a Muslim myself I would probably have obtained different answers since we probably would have had more common points of departure. Additionally, if I had been a man I believe it would have been more difficult to establish contacts and meet these women. One interviewee for example wanted to be sure that I was a woman. I was also asked, somewhat ironical, if my interest in these women was a result of all attention Islam and the veil have gained in media and society. Furthermore with the younger women, I was perceived as an adult far away from their world and in the beginning they were a bit shy and giggled. After a while, however, the conversation proceeded smoothly.

3.5 Ethics
When doing research it is important to respect the individual and her/his integrity. In order to not reveal the women’s identity they are given different names in my study, hence their anonymity is guaranteed. When I established my contacts I explained the aim of my thesis, it is vital that the interviewee understands her/his contribution and participation in order to answer the questions (Lantz 1993: 63).

4. Previous Research
Islam is France’s second largest religion and a lot of research has been carried out in the field. There are several studies concentrating on Islam and the youth, secularism, the Republic and the veil and so forth.
One prominent scholar is the Iranian born sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar, who has analysed Islam and the youth in his book *L’Islam des jeunes*\(^{11}\). He explains Islam of the youth as a religion being born in a society building on universal values, which bans particularism in the public space, but at the same time treats the individual youth with foreign roots different and even inferior (1997: 13). Khosrokhavar describes how the young generation has used Islam as an expression of their identity and has further brought religion into the public domain. The youth proclaims their Muslim identity and demands space and recognition in society, which contradicts the secular position of France. The French society stresses its secularism and the first generation of immigrants has to a certain extent accepted the secular stance but the youth has found themselves somewhere in between and complications arose. Moreover, second and third generations of immigrants are caught between two cultures thus they meet difficulties in creating an identity (1997: 30). Additionally the youth is to a large extent socially and economically excluded from society and search instead for confirmation and recognition in Islam.

Gaby Strassburger\(^{12}\) has contributed to the field with her study illustrating the tensed relations between Muslim immigrants and native French in the city of Colmar, located in Alsace. The tensions had its origins in the story of Muslims girls who were expelled from school because they refused to take their veil off.

Katherine Bullock, an Australian who has converted to Islam, examines in her book *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*\(^{13}\), the signification of the veil in Canadian society. She challenges the common notion on the veil as being a symbol of women’s oppression, and gives an alternative theory of the veil. Additionally, the French speaking area of Quebec, which naturally has common traits with French culture, has taken similar measures as France regarding the veil in school. Yet it seems that other parts of Canada as well questions the veil as a component of Canadian society. Bullock’s study includes interviews with Muslim women in Toronto, Canada and their stories witness about discrimination and stigmatisation due to their dress.

\(^{11}\) See bibliography for details
\(^{12}\) See bibliography for details
\(^{13}\) See bibliography for details
However, in my specific area I am not yet aware of any conducted research, and I presume it is due to the recent implementation of the law. Yet the law per se has been regarded upon since it was put into practice, concluding there are no longer any veiled girls in school (Gros 2004).

5. Theoretical Framework

In this part I will present the theoretical framework for my thesis. I have chosen to employ a variety of concepts thereby I have chosen not to use one single theory which covers my empirical material. However, young Muslim women in France are central in my thesis. It is possible to structure this group in a number of ‘categories’ and then draw upon the theory of intersectionality, in order to combine ‘race’, age, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and so forth. The intersectional theory incorporates these features into one particular theoretical frame (Brah 2002). Yet it will be beyond the scope of my essay to analyse the empirical material according to this theoretical stance. My aim is not to emphasise the theoretical aspects but to illuminate the empirical material. Of course a theory is a crucial tool when doing that but I have chosen to put more weight on presenting the empirical material in relation to concepts.

The idea of Orientalism, I would argue, is the underlying theme throughout the analysis and I will therefore here account for Edward Said’s important work. I am also concerned with Michel Foucault’s notion on discourse. Further his concept of “governmentality” will be pondered. Thereafter I will introduce useful concepts and clarify them with definitions. The conceptual frame has emerged out of the empirical material and has been developed subsequently. The concepts shift between the theoretical framework and the empirical material, hence the interaction\textsuperscript{14} is imperative (Rosengren & Arvidsson 2002: 115). Yet some concepts are of greater importance than others and will be more salient in the analysis.

5.1 Orientalism

Edward Said has written the influential volume \textit{Orientalism}\textsuperscript{15} where he discusses the relations between the West and the Orient, which implicitly encloses the relation between the West and Islam. Said describes how the West constructs the Orient as something different, the place where “the Other” lives and thereby it also defines itself (Berg 1998: 12). Berg explains how

\textsuperscript{14} In Swedish it is called “växelverkan mellan teori och empiri”

\textsuperscript{15} Orientalism was first published in 1978 yet my copy is from 2002.
the Oriental discourse is shaped in accordance with the West’s will to politically, military and economically dominate and control the Orient (1998: 12). The term Orientalism arises according to Said, from how the West has perceived the Orient throughout its history. Geographical proximity and colonial expansion has given the West a picture of the Orient as “the Other” and it also contributes to the definition of the West by being its contrast (Said 2002: 64). Hence what we know about the Orient is rather a reflection of the West.

Said in turn is strongly influenced by Foucault’s discourse on power/knowledge when discussing Orientalism. Hence Said argues that Orientalism has been reviewed and analysed from the perspective how the West has dealt with the Orient. That is, Orientalism has become a tool in West’s way to dominate, reorganize and rule over the Orient as it has made statement about it, described it, taught about it, colonised it and reigned over it (Said 2002: 65,66). The oriental discourse is produced by the West who stereotypes the image of the Orient within the framework of its hegemony (Hall 2003 a: 259). Hence the Oriental discourse possesses a power over the Orient itself. Accordingly Orientalism is profoundly concerned with the notion of power and Said argues

It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism its durability and strength /.../ Orientalism is never far from /.../ the idea of Europe, a collective notion that identify “us” Europeans as against all “those” non- Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures

(Said 2002: 71)

Orientalism is a complex subject yet Said summarises it with four elemental principles. The first is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, human and superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped and inferior. Next principle embraces the abstract Orient, hence texts representing “classical” Oriental civilisation is always preferred instead of direct evidence drawn from contemporary modern Oriental reality. Furthermore, the Orient lacks the ability to define itself and is eternal and uniform. Lastly, the Orient is something to fear or control (Said 2002).
5.2 Discourse & Governmentality

Foucault considered the discourse as a modus of representation composed by relations of power. It is through the discourse the production of knowledge derives yet within the system of power relations. A discourse creates and defines the topic; it is moreover “within the established order of things” (Foucault 1972: 216). Thus it establishes the scene of how a topic is discussed and dealt with (Hall 2003 b: 44). Foucault argued, “nothing has any meaning outside of discourse” (in Hall 2003 b: 45). Foucault thereby stated, “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (Foucault 1972: 216).

Governmentality is a modern regime of power in which the state takes the control to guide its citizens’ behaviour. It rules by creating the “right mentality” and can furthermore be illustrated as a manner of focusing on the individual’s way of thinking. Hence the state acts in order to direct its citizens to norms implied by the state which seem to be imposed by the people themselves (Foucault 1991: 100). It is moreover a form of exploitation of the collective consciousness yet governmentality is internalised by the people as they become a part of the standardizing force (Shawver 1999).

5.3 Definition of Concepts

5.3.1 Secularism

A secular society holds the view that religious considerations should be left out from the public sphere. The West has increasingly become more secular and Steve Bruce puts it as following “From the Middle Ages to the end of the twentieth century, religion in Europe /…/ has declined in power, prestige and popularity” (in McGuire 2002: 286).

5.3.2 Integration

The process of integration endeavors to unite separated social units such as individuals, groups, cultures and nations (Brante et al\textsuperscript{16}).

\textsuperscript{16} Sociologiskt lexikon, 2001
5.3.3 Assimilation
Assimilation signifies the process through which an individual or a minority group completely abandons his or their own culture in order to become internalized and thereby integrated in the dominating culture’s values, norms and traditions (Brante et al).

5.3.4 Social Exclusion
Social exclusion refers to the approaches which groups endorse to separate outsiders from themselves thereby a total or partial exclusion from participation in society (Giddens 1989: 214).

5.3.5 Discrimination
An act of discrimination addresses the unfair treatment of a person or group, often based on prejudices notwithstanding the individual merit (Giddens 1989: 247). The link between prejudices and actual behaviour is not always direct. Hence discrimination can occur out of the society’s limitations or imprinted norms and traditions (Brante et al).

5.3.6 Islamophobia
The tensed relation between non-Muslims and Muslims can be termed as Islamophobia. Hence it refers to the fear for the Islamic religion and its adherents. Islamophobic expressions build upon how the majority society views the minority. That is, islamophobia is developed out of a power relation between groups in society where the prevailing social norms and patterns decide what is right and what is wrong. The social norms and patterns are constructed by those who define who is “the Other”, hence the supremacy lies in the power to define. In this power relation “we” are acting and thinking in a correct way with “real attitudes” whereas “they” are not acting and thinking in line with current social models (Ouis & Roald, 2003: 26,27).

5.3.7 Stigma
An individual or a group is stigmatised when the majority society apply negative attributes due to a certain feature. The term stigma is employed in order to identify deeply discreditable characteristic, in other words characteristics diverging from what is regarded as “normal” (Goffmann 1972: 14). A stigma can for example be present as physical imperfection, homosexuality, ethnic belonging, religious conviction or social position.
5.3.8 Identity
Identity is commonly referred to as our understanding of ourselves, and our perception of others. The concept is used both on the individual level as well on the group level of how we define ourselves related to several aspects and characteristics (Brante et al). Identity is not primordial and fixed but can rather be distinguished as constructed and changing (Brah 1997, Hall 1997).

5.3.9 Gender
Gender is a social construction based on cultural and traditional norms. In accordance with their sex men and women obtains specific roles in society (Brah 2002).

6. Analysis
The women are first briefly presented with some personal information. Yet their names are changed as it is important they stay anonymous. Thereafter follows the analysis which is divided into chapters highlighting various issues. The analysis contains quotes from the interviewees which are translated into English by me.

6.1 Presentation of the Interviewees
6.1.1 Nedjma
Nedjma is 26 years old and lives in Paris. She was born in France by Syrian parents. Nedjma converted to Islam at the age of 20 and started to wear the veil in March 2004. Right now she is working with telemarketing. To be a Muslim for Nedjma signifies first of all submission to God and to respect the divine laws. She is involved in the Muslim community and works as a volunteer when she has the time.

6.1.2 Malika
Malika is 23 years old and lives in a Parisian suburb with her family. Her parents are originally from Morocco but Malika was born in France. Three years ago, when she was 20 Malika began to wear the veil. She has a bachelor degree in Italian but does now study to become a teacher for young children. To be a Muslim for Malika constitutes a part of her identity, she believes Islam corresponds to certain aspects of her personality; discretion, respect and decency. Malika is active in the local Muslim community.
6.1.3 Amelle
Amelle is 15 years old and lives in a Parisian suburb with her family. Her parents are originally from Algeria but Amelle was born in France. She began to wear the veil in April 2004. Amelle studies her first year on high school. She stresses the faith in God as the most salient feature when being a Muslim. She is not engaged in the Muslim community but attends the mosque as often as she can.

6.1.4 Maryam
Maryam is 18 years old and sister of Amelle hence she also lives in a Parisian suburb with her family. She wears the veil since December 2003. Maryam studies her last year on high school. She feels strengthened by her faith and Islam gives Maryam a comfort in life.  

6.1.5 Karima
Karima is 17 years old and Amelle’s best friend. She lives in a Parisian suburb with her family. Her father is French and her mother is Algerian. Karima does not wear the veil. She studies her first year on high school. Karima thinks that the faith in God is important when being a Muslim yet she does not really practice her faith. She is not active in the Muslim community.

6.1.6 Amina
Amina is 26 years old and lives by herself in a Parisian suburb. Her father is Algerian and her mother is French. Amina wears the veil since a year and a half. She works in a lawyer firm as a secretaire. For Amina to be a Muslim is above all to believe in God and to follow his demands. Islam provides her moreover with a way to pursue in life. She is not involved in the Muslim community.

6.1.7 Yasmine
Yasmine is 27 years old and lives by herself in a Parisian suburb. Her parents are originally from Morocco but she was born in France. Yasmine does not wear the veil. She works as an assistant in Human Resources service. To be a Muslim signifies for Yasmine first and foremost to respect people and submission to God. She is not engaged in the Muslim community.

---

17 Maryam was interviewed together with Amelle and Karima though she came later and the question regarding her involvement in the Muslim community was never asked to her.
6.2 What Happened to Liberty, Equality and Fraternity?

Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, the French catchphrase, is embedded in the heart of the Republic’s identity. Additionally France’s law on religious symbols is founded on these values. The motto was born in connection with the French Revolution and has become equal with French democratic values. The three words surround the French nation and its population aiming at uniting everybody. For some people, however, liberty, equality and fraternity seem to fade away and the words have lost its content. Malika for example says today I would say that it’s limited, that it doesn’t address all citizens, not always at least.

Nedjma follows the same line of argument and expresses her feelings accordingly:

*Oh, it signifies nothing for me any longer. Liberty, equality, fraternity, then maybe liberty, not even the word liberty, we don’t have any freedom I believe because things are enforced against our religion.*

Nedjma feels how the motto increasingly has lost its significance since she converted to Islam from Christianity: *fraternity, I think it’s even less since I’m a Muslim.* She believes the law contradicts the values of the Republic; she questions what liberty is when one is not free to practice her or his religion. However, she stresses a lack of respect regarding religion in general.

Due to the law and its enclosing discussions the significance of the catchphrase seems to have been reduced. Amelle feels especially her freedom is being restrained;

*I believe that we’re not free because everybody should be able to do what he likes as long as it doesn’t bother anyone else /.../ they reproach us to be dressed as we want.*

The law has strongly diminished Amina’s belief in France. She has always perceived her country as a country of freedom regarding the number of immigrants, advocating human rights and so forth. With the law, however, she has become very disappointed. She claims her freedom is taken away; *there’s no freedom in French society, I miss my freedom, I’m not free to wear my veil as I would like.*
Chirac once said in his speech to the nation “All children of France, whatever be their history, origin or faith, are all daughters and sons of the Republic” (2003). Accordingly, everybody shall be integrated into the Republic in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity. However, the interviewees do not feel linked with these words and Nedjma for example confirms a difference since she became a Muslim.

6.3 The Principle of Secularism

One of the central principles in the French constitution is the separation between the Church and the State. Secularism is closely interlaced with the French Republic, prevailing the public domain and it does furthermore not recognise religion in the educational sphere. The principle of secularism emphasises the freedom to believe or not to believe. The law on religious symbols was created in the name of secularism thus I consider it as essential to let the interviewees express themselves on this fundamental principle.

All of the interviewees have almost the same view on the principle of secularism. They regard it as a liberty of religious belief and see it as a positive feature in society. Yet most of them stress on a liberty of religious expression and Amina interprets secularism as

> It is to be able to live our religion as we understand it. That’s secularism for me; to be able to live our religion exactly as we understand it, as we want, without prohibitions. That’s what secularism means to me, that was what I thought, but apparently it’s not like that.

For Amelle secularism implies that no religion is more privileged than others. Maryam and Yasmine also stress on the connection between secularism and freedom. Yasmine expresses her view on secularism accordingly

> Secularism for me... that’s public space. I believe that when the principle of secularism was originally adopted, it was also to stress on the notion of freedom, freedom of choice.
Malika underlines the respect and acceptance of all religions and to treat them equally. Hence she questions the Republic’s approach to secularism. She argues that if strict secularism is the model all religious symbols should be prohibited.

*Why accepting certain [symbols] but not others? If [secularism] is that threatened /.../ equality for everybody... everything should be forbidden.*

In general the women comprehend the principle of secularism as a mode of expressing their religion. Along with the law, however, the word has come to have a different interpretation for them. Nedjma claims that the word secularism has lost its meaning and significance. It is furthermore not used in its context. Amelle talks about a secular society where no one practices [her/his religion]. When Amina gives her description of secularism she concludes it by saying that was what I thought, but apparently it’s not like that.

The theoretical definition of secularism accentuates that religious considerations should not be incorporated into the public sphere. It is interesting to notice that the women all have a similar definition of secularism, more or less corresponding to the theoretical definition. They have the same definition as the French government has based its constitution upon. The women consider it as a positive feature in society. With the law, however, the women have faced a change. What they have regarded as an advantage of French society has by the law rather become a disadvantage decreasing their feeling of liberty. In the context of the new law the women experience that the principle of secularism has become identical with not being able to express their religion. Hence they are disappointed that the notion on secularism has not given them a religious liberty.

The long tradition of secularism guides France’s public space and religion is regarded as a private matter. The Muslim population seeks recognition in French society yet the politics of secularism prevents them public space as such. Let us, in accordance with Foucault, consider secularism and Islam as two discourses. The French State follows the discourse of secularism excluding religion in the public realm. The discourse of secularism sets the frame of how to deal with religious issues and consequently the veil. Foucault argued, “nothing has any meaning outside of discourse” (in Hall 2003 b: 45) thereby secularism is limited to its range (of its discourse). The same reasoning is applicable to the discourse of Islam. The Islamic discourse prescribes an integration of politics and education, being a part of the State and
politics, and a part of the educational system which is in total contradiction with the situation in France. The discourse of Islam pleads for religion in all spheres hence there is no distinction regarding the veil in the public and the private field. From herein derives certainly the difficulties Muslims face in France. It is furthermore the source of existing tensions and incomprehension between Islam and the principle of secularism. It becomes a question of which is the dominating discourse and thus to which discourse one is loyal to.

My interviewees understand secularism as a total freedom and space of religious expression, yet the role of secularism in a State is to prevent religion from interfering the political arena and education. The argumentation of the majority of the interviewed women indicates a sceptice for the French state and a lack of integration. Hence they refer to France or the State or even society without naming it. Their opinions reinforce the impression of “us” versus “them” and it seems that they cannot identify themselves to their social environment. Moreover many of the women feel more attached to the Islamic discourse than to that of secularism thus implicitly not to the French Republic. The present situation in France can be referred to as a clash between two discourses arguing different conceptions of the shape of society. It is evident that there is not a perfect solution but in this case it appears that neither the State nor representatives for Islam thrive to reach a compromise.

The French State’s implementation of secularism can be portrayed by the concept of governmentality. Hence the fact that large parts of the population consider secularism as a natural part of the French identity is a result of the State’s actions which encourage strict secularism in the public sphere. On the other hand, the individual’s interest is apart of the system and it is only the mass which maintains the norms. From this perspective the interviewees feel excluded from the norms. The act of governmentality thereby reinforces the marginalisation of these women. However, it indicates a failure of governmentality among Muslims. It contradicts the veil which the Islamic discourse prescribes. Thus, the law has paradoxically drawn them closer to the discourse of Islam and decreased their sense of loyalty to the French State, although they initially witnessed about a positive view of secularism.

6.4 Respect to the Veil
The veil signifies purity and is important in the religious spirituality. It is an item worn of pure conviction and devotion to God, yet wearing the veil is not an obvious decision to make.
For Nedjma the veil represents primarily purity and she interprets it as an obligation according to the Quran. It was very natural for her to put it on, signalling her spiritual dignity. It is also a sign of respect and she expresses herself as following,

I get more respect with the veil /.../ That is, I know that people won’t look at me because of my hair as it’s covered /.../ I know that if somebody would come to see me, it would really be for what I have in my mind.

Yasmine does not wear the veil now but intends to wear it in the future. For her the veil represents, as for the other women, devotion to God, purity and protection. Right now she does not feel morally ready to wear the veil even though she says the social aspect also has an influence. Karima describes the veil as a valued piece of tissue yet she does not wear it herself. She maintains her respect for girls and women wearing the veil hence they represent decency for all Muslim women.

Karima also gives another side of the veil where her respect is replaced by disapproval. She confirms that not everybody wears the veil for real but some girls wear it in order to pretend that they are serious.

At the shopping mall...I’ve seen girls wearing the veil... but when they arrive at the parking they take their veil off because they enter the shopping mall to flirt /.../ they can’t flirt with their veil on! True, but /.../ some girls wear the veil for nothing. They only want to show their mother and father that “I’m a serious girl...”

She believes it is a behaviour of disrespect and Maryam and Amelle agree stating one cannot wear the veil just like that; one has to reflect upon it and have faith. Karima continues saying some wear the veil during winter time because it is warmer and take it off summer time when it is sunny in order to have a tan. Maryam bursts out in laugh and admits that during summer time the veil becomes very warm, yet it is not a reason for taking it off.

However, among the interviewees the women who wear the veil do it by religious conviction and devotion to God. They have found a way of expressing their identity and the veil becomes moreover a visible sign for their faith. As Nedjma puts it: The veil is also a sign of distinction in our society... The veil thereby becomes a representation of the Islamic presence in society.
The religious aspect constitutes a significant part of their identity. The interviewees experience a protection provided by the veil. It is moreover a salient mode for these Muslim girls and women to express their religion.

The veil has become somewhat of a paradoxical piece of tissue. Within the oriental discourse the veil is perceived as a symbol through which the Muslim woman is silent and invisible in the public space. However, in the Western society the veil has the opposite effect. It is a diverging element and a veiled woman is easily distinguished and regarded on the streets. She has moreover become visible and maintains a place in the public space. Yet her veil has also become her stigma as it constitutes an unexpected component in the western context. Thus within the occidental discourse the veil signifies something different than what originally was meant.

It is, however, interesting to notice that most of the women began to wear the veil due to the debate and discussions on the law. Malika would be the exception, she has worn the veil since December 2001. The other women began with the veil somewhere between summer/autumn 2003 and spring 2004. I do not doubt their reasons for wearing the veil, religious conviction and devotion to their God, but I do believe social circumstances have influenced them when taking the decision to be veiled. It is important to embrace the issue from different angles. The debate prior to the law was a sensitive question and provoked reactions among the Muslim population. Hence it can be questioned whether the interviewees unconsciously put the veil on in order to show their reaction. On the one hand it can be considered as a step to protect their religion in front of the debate. On the other hand the act can be seen as a way of provocation to show that they will not agree with the law. Moreover, they demand the same dignity even though their religious faith is not recognised.

6.5 The Identity Behind the Veil

Amina tells that the veil is an obligation protecting her from for example men’s look. Yet she does not wear the veil at work because she does not want to be judged due to her veil. She is afraid of being regarded as an “alien” and she believes that people around her at work would change their attitude if she worked with the veil on. She emphasises how she wants to remain discrete thereby she has chosen to be unveiled at work. However, Amina explains how hard it is and a constant combat:
Without my veil I have the impression of being hypocrite with myself! I have a feeling of playing a double play, lying to myself, because outside work I obey the laws of God, I protect myself from men’s looks, but at work /.../ I obey the laws of my bosses, and it’s very difficult to deal with in my head. I have the impression of being two persons at the same time forgetting my religious convictions when I’m at work. Especially to forget God between 9h to 17h30; that’s very hard to ensue!

All of the interviewees who wear the veil consider it as an essential part of their identity and without it they feel naked. It is a part of their clothing. Amelle says I am used to it and when I take it off I’m not feeling good /.../ because for me it’s my clothing /.../ the veil, that is me. She criticizes the State for trying to erase a part of her identity by the law.

Malika clarifies the significance of the veil and how it represents her dress style:

> It’s a part of me! And I would say it’s a part of my corporal apperance. It’s also necessary to consider it as a look /.../ It’s my dressing look. Like some people like to be dressed in sportswear... it constitutes a part of my clothing... and of my identity.

She says she has the impression of being totally empty without the veil and it feels like a sin not having it on. Those times she has taken her veil off she says it is not an obvious decision to make. Malika explains that it is a struggle with herself until the last minute. She hesitates and hovers between shall I keep it on, shall I take it off, where shall I take it off, when and so forth. You only have one wish, that it will end… and then you can recover.

Nedjma maintains a similar position: if I must take it off... it would be very inconvenient because it’s a part of me /.../ yes absolutely a part [of my identity]. She cannot imagine being without the veil yet if she had to take it off, for example regarding job opportunities, she says she would wait until the last minute and it would be very difficult.

Maryam explains how she feels without the veil like this: when I don’t wear it I feel naked. And I feel observed… She thinks it is difficult to really describe how she feels without the veil; it is a feeling of emptiness. She acknowledges she always feel veiled even though she does not have it on. Yet she states she has more self-assurance with the veil on.
Amelle expresses herself differently by saying her confidence is not within the veil but inside herself. She says *it’s not the piece of tissue that would change [me], it’s the inside.* Nevertheless she utters she feels completely naked without her veil.

The identity of these young women is to a certain extent constructed through the veil. Without it, a feeling of being naked appears and to take it off is a hard effort as it constitutes a part of their clothing. It does also contribute to a position of being different. A veiled woman diverges from the majority and Malika admits it is not easy to be different today. Amina declares that her veil has become very heavy to wear. The law implicitly tries to reduce a part of their identity and lessens their feeling of security in society. The women perceive themselves through their veil yet the French State questions the veil as an identity as such. On the one hand the veil is understood as a threat to the principle of secularism, and thereby a provoking element in society. On the other hand the veil is perceived as an oppressive symbol denying women’s rights. The veil suddenly signifies a resistance to French culture and defiance to be a part of the western hegemony.

I perceive the women I have interviewed as very strong individuals, contradicting the general picture of the veiled woman as being oppressed and insecure. However, the veil represents different things for different people. To live in France with a veil today requires a psychological strength. Malika portrays herself and her veiled Muslim sisters as very courageous, not at all corresponding to the prevailing image in France (and the Western world). She describes it accordingly:

*It is said that the veiled girls are submissive /.../ that her father beats her and tells her to wear the veil... that she’s not educated /.../ that she’s stupid... I’m sorry but that’s not the case... they are not weak, on the contrary to wear the veil, to be French and veiled... it’s somebody who is very strong, who has a strong personality because wearing the veil everyday... that’s not easy. Everyday it’s a combat. To wear the veil today it’s necessary to be really tough!*

However, there is a small percentage of girls who are being forced to wear the veil. Amina estimates 5-10 percent of veiled girls/women in France are obliged to it by their parents/husband. This image has come to depict the common picture of the Muslim woman
and it is difficult for women who voluntarily wear the veil to prove the contrary. The Muslim women’s voices are excluded from the dominant discourse of the meaning of the veil. Hence, common knowledge of the veil derives from the prevalent discourse which power creates and defines the veil. The discourse in Western society gives the veil negative attributes such as demoting women to an inferior status. It symbolises moreover women’s subordinated position in society. France defines the Muslim women out of its superior position as a State and gives the women an identity of being obedient and passive. However, my interviewees do not experience the veil as oppressive, on the contrary, the veil provides them with confidence as it gives them protection and security. They wear the veil with pride and furthermore as an act of self empowerment. Consequently the Orient is defined and decided by the Occident, it is presupposed that a veiled woman is oppressed. The discourse represents the relations of power in society, and its power becomes manifested within the notion of orientalism. Accordingly, the idea that the veil is oppressive, Bullock states, is a result of Europe’s/Occident’s will to dominate and control the Orient (2002: 3).

The law and its including debates have to a certain extent contributed to create more problems regarding the veil. Amina experiences all the medial attention as negative and she refers to a discussion between her and her mother:

My problem with the law although I’m not even [legally] concerned /.../ is that my mother looks at me in a different way. My mother who’s French has always been in favour of everybody’s freedom /.../ and last time I had a discussion with her, she looked at me and told me, “what you have on your head, that’s politics” /.../ This is her idea of the veil now. That I want to start a revolution...

Amina experiences that another meaning of the veil is imposed on her, disregarding her personal reasons for wearing it. Hence, the veil has been given an additional, a political, dimension by the Western world. The veil is defined as a political statement implicitly opposing the Western secular norms. It has become politicised in the battle between Islamic and French values. The veil thereby gives its possessor a political identity depending on who is the interpreter and definer, irrespective of the wearer’s own political understanding.
6.6 The First Generation Immigrants’ Reactions to the Veil

The early generation of Muslim immigrants has to some extent abandoned their religion and origins, aiming at assimilation. They practised their religion rather discrete and tried to integrate into French society by adopting secular norms. Hence, the primary encounter the early generation immigrants had with the French Republic was as a colonizer of their home countries. They were placed in an inferior position with an imposed French control and domination. A violent era of colonial power has resulted in an inferiority complex and to be loyal to the State. As Amina explains, the Maghreb parents have a mentality, which aims to respect the State and its public institutions. The first generation of immigrants has to a certain extent accepted the secular stance. Thus many parents prevent their girls from wearing the veil, as it does not correspond to the secular policy upheld by the State. Additionally many Muslim countries have tended to decrease religion in the public sphere inclining a secular policy (Bullock 2002: 67).

Amina and Yasmine (they both live in areas with a highly concentrated Muslim population) have witnessed how many parents forbid their girls to wear the veil due to various circumstances. Yasmine argues that some parents lose their parental authority as their children choose another path than themselves. Another concern is the school; parents with veiled schoolgirls are worried for problems it may generate. Maryam affirms that her and Amelle’s mother (who does not wear the veil) was very reluctant to her girls’ veiling. She concluded somewhat of a contract with them; if she had any problems with the school, they must take the veil off completely.

When Malika told her parents (they both practice Islam and the mother wears the veil) her father warned her for future problems to have a work and so forth but said it was her faith and her choice. Amina says her father looks at her differently since she wears the veil:

My father is from Algeria and he looks at me differently, he is proud but if I could take it off he wouldn’t be displeased. Sometimes when I’m with him in the shops he says “don’t even walk next to me…” Well it’s only for fun but still...

These stories witness some of the difficulties with Islam and hence the veil in contemporary France. The early generations of Muslims came as immigrants and have tried to adapt
themselves to the majority. They may feel a greater pressure to assimilate to Western dress codes. Yet their children are born in France and regard themselves as French citizens demanding space and recognition. In this sense, the Muslim youth could be seen as more “French” than their parents who have tried to assimilate. That is, they are more integrated as they stipulate their rights and dare to claim space. They embrace a religious identity that seeks recognition in the public sphere (Khosrokhabar 1997). It is moreover not the law per se that contributes to these different perceptions of the veil by parents and children. Rather it has its roots in the French colonisation and the social climate.

6.7 Exclusion from the Educational and Professional Domain
Muslim veiled women are often excluded from public sphere. They are moreover kept out from public interaction and reduced to jobs for instance in telemarketing. Nedjma for example would love to work in the French administration but with the veil it is not possible. Hence her veil is not compatible with the public domain where strict secularism prevails. Right now she is working in the domain of telemarketing where her veil is not seen.

*I’m obliged to work behind a telephone /.../ because... the word they love to employ these days, it’s secularism.*

Amina does not wear her veil at work but admits she is looking for another job where she would be able to wear it. She knows it means a less paid job than she has at the moment but she thinks it would be worth it without a doubt. Amina stresses that her professional competences are same with or without a veil; the fact that she is wearing a veil does not change her skills. However, this does not seem to be the impression of the society and its labour market. Yasmine stresses on that veiled French girls who have ambitions to do a professional career will have to leave school because of their veil. Hence they will stay at home and thereby correspond to the caricature of the submissive Muslim woman without any social status. Yasmine accentuates their effort for a role in society but indicates that the result becomes the opposite. The law has then from this perspective contributed to an increased exclusion. Yet the logical response to the law against the veil is a more closed community among the Muslims, argues Yasmine. Malika explains the present situation:
Those girls who have chosen to keep the veil, what shall they do /.../ without school? And they say we will protect you... it’s the opposite. They say that the law will diminish communitarism so we’ll not keep us for ourselves /.../ [but] what does this law do? It creates and reinforces communitarism /.../ the girls... what will they do without lectures and without school?

Malika is not concerned by the law per se since she is at the university. Although she has felt obliged to take her veil off at several times in order to have the same opportunities as other women.

When I’m at an entrance examination, otherwise I don’t even have a chance. I have done several entrance examinations /.../ I’m introducing myself without, otherwise it’s not even worth going there! They don’t even look at you if you come veiled /.../ Therefore I take it off, to have the same chance as the others. If not, I have a handicap I would say.

It is worth to mention Muslim women’s situation in United Kingdom. In England veiled women work in the public sphere and the veil is for example included in the police dress. It was the Sikhs who pursued the issue of religious clothing at work, but now the right includes everybody. Veiled women can apply for which job they want to and keep their veil on. It is, however, interesting to see how the subject is approached from two very different angles. United Kingdom, declaring a multicultural policy, seems to better integrate its Muslim citizens by giving them space. In France, where a secular policy is ensued, Muslim citizens are excluded from the public space to a great extent.

The French State implicitly keeps the veiled women out from society and the public place the school represents. Moreover, the Republic’s female Muslim population is not included in the arena where tomorrow’s actors are educated. Thereby their chances to have a job are automatically poorer. From my personal observations I have noticed how deeply secularism is imprinted in Frenchmen’s philosophy. Additionally, the law reinforces the stereotype of a Muslim woman as oppressed, uneducated and restricted to stay at home. The Muslim woman’s oppression is thus created by the majority society who does not accept the veil in the public realm. Further, gender equality and female emancipation are vital issues in Western society. Women’s right to education and access to the labour market are seen as crucial in
order to achieve this. Yet French society reduces theses chances for Muslim veiled woman by creating an extreme secular scene. Thereby values of society become somewhat of a paradox. That is, France endeavours to gender equality and female emancipation. At the same time, however, they restrict chances for education and job for Muslim veiled women.

6.8 General Ideas on the Law
In order to defend the principle of secularism, a law was implemented prohibiting conspicuous religious symbols in the municipal school. Further, the law seeks to protect young girls who are forced to wear the veil. It aims to equalise everybody and to improve integration. Chirac stated in his speech that the school is the place where the citizens of tomorrow are shaped and educated. The school should thus remain secular, as it is where values and knowledge are obtained.

In France religion is highly regarded as a private matter. Religion and religious practice should be kept in the private without interfering the public sphere, which in turn should remain secular. With this in mind, together with my personal observations of French society in general, I understand that a majority is pleased with the law, as religion is something personal. Among the Muslim population, however, my impression appears to be quite the opposite, not only from my interviews but also in general. The law is regarded as unfair and has contributed to a common dissatisfaction against the French Republic among Muslims.

An increased feeling of not having a place in French society develops. Amina for example questions her place as a French citizen. She is uncertain if she can continue living in her country and still liberally practise her faith. She declares maybe it’s my values /.../ or the Republic which isn’t compatible with my values. Her statement shows that she, as a consequence of the law, questions her loyalty to the French society and feels excluded from it.

It is first and foremost considered to be a law against the veil even though other conspicuous religious symbols are prohibited. Malika validates that by saying the debate only has been focused on the veil. Maryam ironically states that a piece of fabric disturbs, but a low-cut top

---

18 When I write French society in general I refer to my understanding of national newspapers and informal conversations with friends. I have earlier lived in France and go there frequently.
19 When I write among the Muslim population I refer to my understanding of discussions on diverse forums on the Internet with a majority of Muslim participants.
or other revealing clothes do not chock people (in school). Partly therefore she understands the law as being against the veil.

Amelle argues the law is against the veil because it was first when girls came with the veil to school, that the law was initiated. Yasmine is surprised that the law is considered as a little success, due to the fact that many girls haven taken their veil off. Yet the aim of the law was not directed solely at the veil but Yasmine has the impression this was the final objective: They noticed that more and more girls wore the veil hence they thought: danger, islamisation...

Amina puts it in this way:

I believe they should have reflected more before doing a law. It’s the law which has changed the mentality. All this medial attention /.../ a law concerns the State, it concerns society, everybody feels concerned...

The present situation can be considered from the angle of governmentality. That is, the French State contributes to shape the norms for its citizens and secularism is one of these norms. Amina emphasises the change of mentality and that everybody feels concerned by a law.

6.9 Defining Religious Symbols

Discrete symbols are authorised in school yet no compromises were done in the law regarding the veil. The discrete Muslim symbol was reduced to the Fatima hand which actually has no relevance specific to Islam. Hence, the Fatima hand historically existed prior to Islam’s presence. Besides, the symbol is not found in any religious texts, particularly the Quran (Legherba 2003). The Fatima hand is not considered as an Islamic symbol; it is seen as a symbol of superstition and not in line with “real Islam”, which many young Muslim practices. Many Muslim were thereby rather surprised to its connotation suggested by the French State. I asked Amelle why she thought the Fatima hand came to represent Muslims’ discrete symbol. She answered; maybe they saw it’s an Arabic sign and thought it was Islamic...

The choice to denote the Fatima hand as an Islamic symbol indirectly reveals a lack of knowledge from the French State regarding their second largest religion. They suddenly set
the frame of Islam and decide what it shall contain. There is a reformulation of the Islamic symbols in order to fit the French State’s needs. They define the symbol of Islam without seeking an answer by the Muslims themselves. Furthermore, the Muslim population and the veiled women were not met on their demands. Malika says that when girls tried to compromise with only a headscarf and other colours than black, they were constantly met with a negative response. She does not consider the Muslim representation in the Stasi commission as satisfactory:

The most concerned parties weren’t included: the veiled girls... /.../ No attention was paid to the most concerned parties.

Hence the Muslim woman (and man) is distinguished as “the Other” whose opinion does not matter. It is a one-way communication from the State leaving out its citizens they refer to as “the Other”. The secular society excludes their participation.

6.10 Principles of Clothing in School

Of my interviewees Amelle and Maryam are the only girls who are legally concerned by the law. They find the law unfair and believe it is exclusively directed towards the veil. Hence other discrete signs such as the David star or the Christian cross are accepted but the Islamic veil has not been allowed to be discrete. Within the school it is since long time not allowed wearing headgears, yet Maryam says in her school there are plenty of boys wearing a baseball cap or girls with a scarf without any problems. She describes an incident taking place before the law was implemented:

When one enters my school they have caps... one she has a pink hat but when you come with a little piece of fabric... no! Because they know it's a veil... In the beginning I didn’t know /.../ they didn’t do any difference consequently they didn’t say anything... but one day my teacher saw me with my veil and she told me to take it off, “it’s like, look at me, it’s too much Muslim” she said.

When Amelle went to school the first day after the law in September she wore a headscarf which covered her hair only. Her headscarf was a small one, tied in the neck without any
visible religious significance, hence a headscarf everybody could wear. She was stopped at
the entrance by the head master and had to take her scarf off.

Maryam had the same experience as her sister. Yet she can understand and accepts that the
Islamic veil is not allowed. Hence she agrees that is a conspicuous religious symbol, but the
headscarf should be tolerated. She claims the headscarf is not specific to Islam and says it’s not written Muslim on my head! I cannot understand in what way it [a scarf] disturbs. Additionally, the headscarf is not mentioned in the law and should therefore be authorised. This is what upset all of the interviewees. They cannot understand how a little headscarf would be conspicuous and furthermore why it would disturb the lectures. Nedjma for example puts it like this:

In what way does a young girl wearing only a headscarf in order to cover her hair, in what way does it disturb the teachers? Will it prevent them to give their lecture? /.../ No, I don’t think so...

Karima says she can understand that the veil is forbidden to wear when being in the classroom; it is the same as not wearing a baseball cap during class in order to show respect to the teachers. It is worth to mention that this is a custom deriving from Christian traditions. During Church attendance men took their hat off in order to show respect to God.

Additionally teachers have extended the law to their satisfaction, even before the law was voted Maryam had difficulties with her clothes. One day she arrived to school with a tunic and her teacher informed her if she wanted to continue her studies she could not wear that tunic. Maryam says she had even couloured it blue, as it is less chocking than black. Another day she came to school dressed in black, which is her favourite colour, and a teacher asked her if she mourned. When Maryam asked why, the teacher answered, well she was dressed completely in black and maybe her religion obliged her to dress like that. The girls’ experiences from school indicate a climate where no compromises are reached. No one should diverge from the other, hence everybody should be equal. However, interesting to question is whether equality is the right to be different or whether it is the obligation to be alike.
6.11 Assimilation and Integration

The French State instructs the Muslim girls how to behave and what to wear in school. Its cultural hegemony sets the scene for the French identity and people are expected to adapt themselves to prevailing social norms. The law on religious symbols has taken away the right to be different according to Malika. It suggests that all girls should appear in the same way, supporting a process of assimilation.

Yes. The law requests the girls to be the same, not allowing that certain girls diverge /.../ As the law forbids girls dressed in a certain way to enter [the school], it’s the same as demand to be as everybody else, thus you’re told how to behave. You don’t have the freedom to choose. It’s imposed on you.

Maryam states she adapts herself to the rules as she takes her veil off in school. Yet Karima replies she does not really have a choice if she wants to continue school. Hence she is imposed a certain behaviour according to the dominating norms. The Republic defines its Muslim citizens and decides what is the best for them. However, on the one hand it tries to integrate “the Other”. By suggesting equal conditions for everybody it is an attempt to reduce the division between “us” and “them”. On the other hand while doing this it suggests that France does not want to recognize its Muslim population. The Islamic identity is rejected in the name of the secular ideology. The law actually makes Muslim women invisible as Muslims. Moreover, a cultural homogeneity is demanded, and the French State aims to generate a socially and culturally cohesive nation. Hence the State does not allow the Muslim girls to dress as they wish but anticipates a non-Islamic attitude. Nedjma claims France has not accepted they have a Muslim population, they want to hide them with the law.

One doesn’t want to see a veil in a school, it’s like one doesn’t want to show French society that yes, there exist French Muslims. One doesn’t want to show people who we are.

Malika adds the law reduces social integration as the school shuts the girls out. The veiled girls and women want to integrate into society but they are rejected. Further, the law stigmatises them and legitimates discrimination.
The Republic doesn’t want to embrace everybody who actually composes the Republic itself. We have never required that [France] should be Iran. We only demand to be included like full worthy citizens, having rights and obligations /.../
They [the girls] only want one thing; they want to study, to have a future later but the door is closed for them! They are told “no, there is no place for you”. Society doesn’t want to see them, don’t want them; “in order to integrate in our group you have to give up an aspect of your personality, either you do as we do or you can leave”

In French society the veil is the visible sign of women’s subordination in Islam, moreover the western notion on the veil. The law on religious symbols is an attempt from the French State to reduce the oppression; hence those girls who are being forced to wear the veil are at least “released” in school. Yet a possible oppression does not disappear with a law forbidding the veil in municipal schools. Rather, what vanishes is a part of the Muslim women’s Islamic identity. As I stated earlier, the veil constitutes a central part of their identity contributing to defining themselves from a religious perspective. The French State’s action against the veil can thereby be regarded, just as Nedjma alleges, as a mode of concealing its large Muslim population by streamlining them. Radically put, and in line with Said’s description of orientalism, the law can be seen as an attempt of controlling the Muslims in France. That is, the Orient is something to fear or to control (Said 2002).

Yasmine argues the law legitimises racial and xenophobic behaviour and emphasises that these girls are French. Yet they are faced with a challenge, the girls want to be a practising Muslim wearing a veil and also be French, but on the whole they are told it is impossible.

They have done this law in order to erase all unusual appearances, so that everybody looks the same in fact...

Amina explains her feeling similarly claiming that the future for Muslim girls is restricted.

“I want to manage to be a French girl and to wear my veil. I want to manage to become a lawyer and wear my veil”. But no... they tell them that it’s not possible.
According to the interviewed women there is a lack of willingness from France to recognise the veil as such. However, as long as people do not see the veil as a natural part of clothing or accept it as an element of the Muslim identity prejudices and scepticism will remain. Khosrokhavar explains that today the French doubt religions and its influence as a result of a long secular tradition (and maybe also a too fundamental secularism). Consequently Muslims feel rejected by the French people (1997: 316). Yet the civil society must, continues Khosrokhavar, vis-à-vis the Muslim community show a high grade of tolerance and evidently vice versa.

6.12 Stigmatization and Discrimination

The women witness that the law has contributed to underpin the tensed relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in France. It is evident that it is difficult for many to accept the veil or rather Islam on the Republic’s territory. All of my interviewees feel affected by the law in various situations even though they are not in school, thus not legally concerned by the law. Prejudices and Islamophobia are revealed to a much greater extent and becomes justified by the law. However, it is not only the law *per se* which has produced a tougher climate for Muslims. After September 11 it has become more difficult to live as a Muslim and the interviewed women declare a constant need of always defending themselves. Malika states

*We are always pointed out: what’s behind that veil, behind that beard? Especially after the events since September 11, it’s not easy to be a Muslim that’s for sure.*

Maryam blames the media for not giving an accurate picture of Islam which has contributed to strengthen the negative image of Muslims. Hence she argues as soon there is a beard or somebody with an Arabic name who has been to Afghanistan, the media draws its own conclusion contributing to prejudices. Further, she has several times felt stigmatised because of her religion and she claims that it has become worse after the debate and discussion about the law:

*Before this law it didn’t bother anyone... after they have implemented this law it bothers everybody... and since the law exists we are assaulted in the streets by people /.../ earlier people smiled but now we’re like aliens.*
The true problem, argues Khosrokhavar, is not between the State and Islam, but the incomprehension between civil society and Muslims in France. According to the author, problems related to Islam arise rather from the people and not from the institutions per se (1997: 315). Amina notes that it is people’s mentality which contributes to discrimination though she states that the law will not diminish islamophobia. Maryam and Amelle describe for when they walk on the street in their neighbourhood people scream “Islamist” after them. Amelle confirms people’s intolerance and disrespect related to the veil.

Before when I didn’t wear the veil people didn’t look at me, I wasn’t insulted, people didn’t shove me and if I was shoved people excused themselves but now... we’re like dogs.

Both Malika and Amina have experienced how people look at them suspiciously and for example change their place in the metro. Amina affirms

I’ve seen how the look of people has changed, in the metro /.../ and I’ve understood from their looks that they consider me as a rebel, that I don’t want to obey /.../ what’s the matter? I’m not even included in this law

She interprets their looks as saying, “look at her, she wears the veil even though we’ve told her not to wear it”. Amina’s understanding displays a notion of orientalism by the people on the metro. Amina is regarded as someone who breaks the rules, not respecting prevailing norms. In their eyes she steps outside the governing discourse. Hence, she does not want to subordinate herself to the dominating superior rules.

Karima does not wear the veil but her best friend Amelle does. Karima has noticed people’s regards when they walk around in their neighbourhood and talk behind their backs.

It’s like “look at the girl who hangs out with the veiled one” /.../ I like to dress in low-cut tops and she [Amelle] is completely covered hence they look at me strangely... Well, on the one hand there is a girl who shows everything and on the other hand there is a girl who really hides herself /.../ And they ask how I can hang out with her... how we come along with each other.
The previous story illustrates a superior attitude by the non-Muslim population. That is, the women in the neighbourhood give themselves the right to question why Karima (who yet is a Muslim but without veil) is friend with a veiled Muslim girl and how they can have something in common as they appear in very different outfits. Karima and Amelle come to signify “the Other” whereas the non-Muslim women in the neighbourhood belong to the majority with the power to define what is right and what is wrong. Maryam points out that it seems to be difficult for some people to accept the sight of somebody who is veiled together with somebody who is not:

“When I walk with my mother in the street... they look at my mother; the old one doesn’t wear the veil but the young one does... and it chocks people...”

Yasmine accounts for a story about her cousin’s friend who was verbally attacked in the street when accompanying her children to the school. A group of parents outside the school told her

“get lost with your veil” 20 They insulted her and afterwards they threatened her to death. When she wanted to raise a complaint at the police they told her as there were no witnesses they could not take into account her complaint but only take a note.

Muslim women in France suffer daily indignities from the environment due to their veil and dress. Malika tells me a story of when her sister was at the pharmacy. The saleswoman talked to her as a child explaining she had to present her health card and described to her what colour it had. The sister was astonished over the saleswoman’s manners, feeling she was treated inferior due to her veil. The story can serve as an example of illustrating the relations between the West and the Orient. The Muslim woman is perceived as “the Other” far away from the world of the saleswoman. She is given negative attributes such as being stupid and not understanding what she is being asked (Said 2002). Hence the Oriental discourse produces knowledge about “the Other” through representation (Hall 2003: 260).

20 In French Yasmine said “tu dégages avec ton foulard” yet the English translation does not sound as much aggressive as the original sentence.
Malika says that since the implementation of the law she has become suspicious. She never knows how people will react on the fact that she wears a veil. Yet she says it was the case before the law as well but it has become intensified after the law.

You never know how people will act towards you... how they will look at you, how they will talk to you. Now they can kick you out because there is this law /.../ “I don’t want you here!” and everybody announces their prejudices, their hate... and employs the law in order to endorse their own ideas...

People seem to interpret the law according to their own opinions and take it furthermore into their own hands. A gradual deviation from the original law has become apparent and discrimination becomes justified in accordance with the law. A veiled mother was not allowed to follow her children into the school and another story reveals that a veiled woman was hindered to enter the city hall. Yasmine expresses her annoyance and says problems are developed out of situations like these.

Normally the law concerned only pupils but now it concerns even the adults /.../ and islamophobic behaviour is revealed /.../ a hate is brought to light, all prejudices become displayed. It’s unbelievable /.../ it’s all the excess the law led to, problems that did not exist before [which] has released the attitudes.

The law creates a category and it has become legitimised to discriminate veiled girls and women. It suddenly entitles people’s prejudices and intolerance and has lost some of its intention. Before the law problems of this kind did not occur and the interviewees think it is difficult not to blame the law. Moreover, the law and its including discussions have influenced the social climate in France and thereby the conditions for Muslims.

Another example of the extreme direction the law has taken is in a Parisian suburb, where a doctor simply has put up a sign at his clinic declaring that he does not treat veiled girls/women. He demands them to take their veil off, as it is a sign of disrespect to the French Republic.21 Amina confirms how a bank in Paris has taken a similar approach. They have put

---

21 See Belqasmi et al in references under electronic resources
a sign declaring that in order to protect their clients, access to the banc is restricted. It is not allowed to enter the banc with a veil, hat or other head-coverings.\textsuperscript{22}

Malika points out that these incidents are not presented in the national media thus not discussed. Nedjma argues the islamophobia is hidden in France. For example when the Jews are harassed it is obvious that it is an anti-Semite act whereas when Muslims are attacked nobody talks about islamophobia even though it is obvious it exists. An act of anti-Semitism gains a lot of attention in the media while an act against the Muslims results in silence and the story is concealed. Muslims are furthermore not included in the laws.

\textit{If one defends an ethnic group or a religion...all religions must be defended /.../ it’s only a minority who’s included in society and its laws.}

Amina feels her character has changed due to the law. She is less peaceful than earlier and thinks she has become more hostile towards society. She continues saying that the law permits people to criticise us. They allow themselves to scowl at us.

7. Conclusion

Orientalism posits Islam and the Muslims as a central “Other”, thereby degenerating them to an inferior position. Thus the notion of orientalism becomes salient regarding Muslim women’s position in French society. Further, the veiled Muslim woman is defined out of the Oriental discourse, which gives her negative attributes. France (and Western society) perceives the veil as a symbol of the Muslim woman’s subordination in society. Hence, the French State reduces her role as being passive and submissive within the framework of its hegemony. The women in the analysis do not consider the veil as an oppressive symbol. On the contrary, they experience the veil as a protection providing them with self-esteem. The veil is an integral part of them and moreover a defining part of their Islamic identity.

The idea of governmentality is crucial in the French secular ideology. It has contributed to create a mentality of secularism, which is considered as a prominent feature in French society. The secular ideology is deeply embedded in the French Republic’s identity. Governmentality

\textsuperscript{22} See Selmani in references under electronic resources
is moreover a democratic power tool directing the citizens along with the State’s demands. The discourse of secularism prevails the political and public sphere. It ensures the option to believe or not to believe, declaring everybody’s freedom to express and practice his or her faith. Further, nothing has any meaning outside the discourse, Foucault argued, thus the veil is discussed within the limits of secularism. Eventually it resulted in a law prohibiting religious symbols, such as the Islamic veil, in school. However, the law appears as a paradoxical issue. The secular policy maintains the right to one’s faith, yet the women experience a decrease in their religious freedom originating from the law. Besides they feel the law reduces a part of their Islamic identity.

Integration is a key aspect in French politics. The law against religious symbols aims to improve integration. Nevertheless it seems to have realized the opposite effect among the Muslim women in this study. The law has been extended, deviating from its original intention. An islamophobic climate has become apparent with an increased division between “us” and “them”. Suddenly the law legitimizes discriminating acts against veiled Muslim women. The women become stigmatised due to their veil and subject to inferior treatment. Further, a feeling of exclusion arises resulting in a diminution of loyalty to the French State. The idea behind the law’s ambition is also to promote equal opportunities. However, gender issues such as equality and emancipation become eclipsed by the law. Veiled women are excluded from education, which indirectly is fundamental for further integration. Without an education, it is more complicated to enter the labour market. Thus, the stereotyping image of the veiled women as confined to the home, is reinforced by the mainstream society.
Appendix

Questions for interviews

Personal information:
- Name
- Background; origins from which country
- What does it entail to be a Muslim for you? *23
- Are you involved in the Muslim community in France? *

The French society:
- Liberty, Equality and Fraternity is the French motto, how do you feel about that?
- Some people think that the Islamic values are not compatible with the values of the French Republic, what do you think of this claim?
- What does a secular society mean for you?
- Do you think Islam has the same position in society as other religions have?

The law:
- Do you consider the law as a law against religious symbols or as a law against the veil?
- How do you feel about the law?
- Has the law changed your religious habits? How?
- Has the law been positive or negative for your faith?
- In what way has the law changed your attitude vis-à-vis society?

The veil and identity:
- Do you consider yourself as French Muslim or [country]-French or something else? *
- How old were you when you first covered?
- What factors led to your decision to cover? *
- What does the veil represent for you?
- Do you feel that you are met differently because of the fact that you wear a veil?
- Do you think that others look at you differently when not wearing the veil? Are you met differently without it?
- Do you recover after school? Why or why not?
- Do you think you are more liberated with or without the veil?
- Do you feel more self-confident with or without the veil?
- How do you feel without the veil?
- Do you think that your values correspond to those of other young Muslim girls? Or to young girls in general?
- Do you think that you adapt yourself to the majority?
- Do you think that the law has tried to change your identity/personality?
- With whom do you identify yourself?

23 Questions marked with a * are taken from Katherine Bullock’s Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil
References

Bibliography


Rabo, Annika (1997) *Kampen om slöjan – slöjan i kampen* in Kvinnovetenskaplig Tidskrift nr 3-4 1997


**Electronic Resources**

Loi n° 2004-228 du 15 mars 2004

Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l’État.

Assemblée Nationale: *Deuxième séance du mardi 10 février 2004*

Belqasmi, Mohammed et al. (2004) *Pas des filles voilées dans la salle d’attente d’un cabinet medical à Évry*

Center for Women’s Global Leadership, Background Briefing on Intersectionality
Chirac, Jacques (2003) Speak to the Nation 17th December 2003


Selmani, Meriem (2004) La société générale interdit l’accès d’une de ses banques aux femmes Musulmanes
Online: http://www.oumma.com/article.php3?id_article=1014&var_recherche=la+banque (2004-12-15)

Online: http://lesrapports.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/BRP/034000725/0000/pdf (2004-11-10)

Voile à l’école: les principales dates