

## The Islamic Headscarf: A threat to Secularity, Modernity, and Integration



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**Abstract:** No other piece of cloth has ever caused this much debate as the headscarf. This paper examines the headscarf debate in three European countries i.e., France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Firstly, the headscarf affair depicts different state policies developed and implemented by three countries, to integrate the Muslim immigrants. Secondly, an analysis of different approaches used by these countries regarding the headscarf issue highlights the place of Muslims and Islam in the European countries. Lastly, this paper contends that the headscarf controversy in France, Germany and the United Kingdom revolves around the issues of secularity vs. Islamic fundamentalism, gender equality vs. religious rights, modernity vs. backwardness and integration vs. assimilation. In this paper, we argue that contrary to the common perception that Muslims are intolerant, backward, and theocratic; the act of banning the headscarf by some of the European countries, in fact, proved these countries to be intolerant and authoritarian towards Muslims.

**Key Words:** : Islamic Headscarf, Europe, Secularism, Modernity, Integration

### Introduction

In the recent years, a heated debate has arisen about the integration of immigrants from transnational backgrounds into European societies, the integration of Muslim immigrants. In contrast to Jews, Hindus and Christians, the integration of Muslim immigrants is seen as problematic because the values and practices of Islam are considered by critics as clashing with European ways of life. 'In many influential circles in Europe, it is widely held that its over 15 million Muslims pose a serious cultural and political threat. Sometimes this view is explicitly stated; more often it is implied or simply assumed' (Parekh, 2008, p.179). Muslims in European countries are neither integrated nor are they outsiders so, they are considered as 'an enemy within'. 'The European anxiety about the Muslim threat ... arises out of the belief that Muslims cannot and do not wish to integrate and are in fact engaged in a quiet but sustained conspiracy to subvert Europe' (Parekh, 2008, p.181). In these debates, Islam is commonly represented as a religion that is backward, oppressive, intolerant, and incompatible with the European notions of modernity, secularism,

and equality. Islamic values are considered as incompatible with the European values. This debate has often focused on the Islamic practice of women wearing the headscarf.

A fiery controversy is going on in most of the European countries about the headscarf issue. No other piece of cloth has ever caused this much debate as the headscarf. There have been several legal battles over the decisions to ban the Islamic headscarf in several countries of Europe including Germany, Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. The issue of headscarf is extensively debated in political, legal, feminist, and cultural forums (Carol & Ruud, 2013; Helbling, 2014; Pin, 2017; Ćeman & Maria, 2020). This paper examines the headscarf debate in three European countries i.e., France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Firstly, the headscarf affair will help to understand the policies implemented by France, Germany, and United Kingdom, to integrate the Muslim immigrants. Different state policies have been developed by each of these countries. Secondly, an analysis of different

approaches used by these countries about the headscarf issue will help to identify the place of Islam and Muslims in some countries of Europe and the conflict between Islam and Europe. The headscarf controversy in France, Germany and the UK revolves around the issues of secularity vs. Islamic fundamentalism, gender equality vs. religious rights, modernity vs. backwardness and integration vs. assimilation. Different state policies used by European countries demonstrate the opportunities and constraints offered by these countries for the immigrants.

### The Islamic Headscarf: Different Meanings, Interpretations and Types of Coverings

Islamic historians concur that veiling is pre-Islamic and not an Islamic practice. Even before Islam was founded veiling was practiced in Ancient Greece and throughout the Mediterranean. [El Guindi\(1999\)](#) states, covering “seems not to have been institutionalized until Islam adopted it,” that it is “evidently very congenial to Islam,” “as an institution, it is Islamic,” and before Islam it was “an occasional custom” (1999, p.11). Two verses in the Holy Quran explicitly refer to Muslim women to cover themselves. The first verse is from Surah Al-Nur:

And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments . . . and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! so that you may be successful.

This verse is frequently used about veil. Islamic historians, like Mernissi (1987) and [Lewis \(2003\)](#), claim this verse is open to interpretation and there is not any specific prescription for women to wear veil. The second verse about veiling is from Surah Al-Ahzab:

O Prophet! say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments; this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus they will not be given trouble; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.

Ahmad claims head-covering regulates only the wives of the Prophet (2001, p.46). Mernissi (1987) contends that this verse is time-specific and is meant only for the wives of Holy Prophet and not for all

Muslim women. On the other hand, Anwar (2006, p.109) argues that ‘wearing the *jilbab* thereafter became obligatory for any eligible and free Muslim women’. Fadwa El Guindi summarized different reasons why Muslim women used to veil in the past or nowadays in the following words:

It is a comment against imported western mores, against colonial occupation of Arab and Islamic lands, against state imposition of dress forms, against hegemonic intervention. These are in addition to its function to establish identity, to indicate social and kinship status and represent a phase in an individual’s life cycle. When women are pressured to veil, they protest and when they are forced to unveil, they protest; thus, the veil becomes the symbol of liberation par excellence.

There are different types of covering practices among Muslim women based on their cultural backgrounds. As Delaney states that, ‘There is not one canonical form of head covering or one term for covering practices’ ([Delaney, 1994, p.159-172](#)). Different names are given to varied types of covering practices based on cultural differences. *Jilbab*, *chador* or *burqa* is a cloak that covers the entire body. In some case women wear *veil* or *niqab* (covering both hair and face just showing the eyes) along with the *jilbab* while in others wear the headscarf. Some women do not wear *jilbab* and cover their hair with a scarf. The headscarf is the term that we will be using for covering the hair and neck and does not include covering face and hands. Some authors may refer to the headscarf as ‘veil’ or ‘hijab’.

### Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research methodology used for the purpose of this study is secondary data analysis by doing a review of literature. The researchers collected data on the Islamic headscarf debate in France, Germany and the United Kingdom and carried out a comparative analysis to explore integration policies deployed in these countries for Muslim immigrants. Islamic headscarf is banned in many non-Muslim countries, however, the countries selected for this study are among top three European countries having largest Muslim population. A thorough review of literature is conducted to address the issues of Islamic headscarf in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Scholarly databases, search engines and the University of Auckland, Library resources have been used to collect relevant material. The data collected was analysed by

formulating a theoretical framework, which address the dialectics of Islamic Headscarf debate in non-Muslim countries. Saharso citizenship model delineates the theoretical underpinning of this study (Saharso, 2007, p.513-530). The data was analysed by doing a comparative analysis of the Islamic headscarf integration policies in three European countries selected for this study. Saharso argues that the debates over the place of Muslims in European countries reflect different models of citizenship. Saharso outlines three ideal-typical models of citizenship which are as follow:

1. civic assimilationist,
2. ethno-cultural
3. multicultural model

The first model of citizenship i.e., civic assimilationist model considers the concept of nation as a group of people who tend to adhere to mutual political philosophies. The citizens are expected to detach themselves from their respective particularistic identities and subscribe to the principles of nation to be an effective member of the nation. In short, the citizen can have varied pluralistic identities based on their religion, culture, ethnicity, caste, etc. in the private spheres but they need to shed off these identities in the public sphere. Second model of citizenship is ethno-cultural. This model envisages the nation as culturally uniform society. It tends to consider one dominant culture and religion as the nation's dominant ideology. The adherents of this models find it problematic to accept 'cultural aliens' as citizens. Lastly, the multicultural model of citizenship allows religious and cultural freedom to its all citizens both in public and private spheres. This model accepts migrants and allows them religious freedom in public life. Now we will discuss these models in relation to the headscarf debate in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

## Discussion and Analysis

### France

France has the largest Muslim population among all European countries. There are around five million Muslims in France making up eight percent of the total population (sixty million) of France. It is difficult to know the exact figure as the census data does not include information on religion. After World War II, France enjoyed an economic boom because of which immigrants were encouraged to fill the new range of

the available jobs. Most of the immigrants were from North African countries such as Algeria, which were French former colonies. Muslim immigrants in France are from a wide range of social backgrounds and vary in their level of religious observance. Although, Islam is the second biggest religion in France after Roman Catholicism, 'socially it is practiced by a group of people that is dominated, underprivileged and reduced to political silence' (Etienne, 1989, p. 203). 'In these circumstances Islam becomes for some a manner of self-affirmation and resistance to the outside world' (Venel, 1999, p.28). France is a secular state dating back to the Law on secularity of 1905. *Laïcité*, or secularism, has a central place in the French national identity. *Laïcité* refers not only the division between the state and church but also the part played by the state in shielding individuals from the claims of religion' (Scott, 2007, p.98). *Laïcité* is referred as 'state religion' in France by Kastoryano. Although it is easier to acquire citizenship in France in comparison to other countries, but the citizens of France are required to integrate in a single group.

In France, there are two models of *laïcité*; i) the democratic or liberal model, which is monarchical, hierarchical, and clerical ii) the Republic *laïcité* which is egalitarian and secularist. According to Bauberot (2013, p.60), in France there has always been a tension that democratic model has been applied to Jews and Christians and it will be difficult for French government if this model will be applied to Islam too. The difference in attitude to Muslim immigrants is clear as the democratic model which is flexible is applied to Christian and Jews while the Republic model is applied for Muslim immigrants. He further argues that the democratic model is comprised of a hope for the coming generations in which religious and cultural barriers have been grasped and which will help to the formation of a better future. Therefore, it is the republic model of *laïcité* that compels the assimilation of immigrants and denies the existence of minorities and claims to eliminate differences and create equality through assimilation of the minority to majority. Immigrants must shun their religious or cultural identity to be French. Moreover, secularity demands only the state to be secular not the subjects. The French notion of secularity due to which the headscarf is banned is basically a step to assimilate Muslim women. But the headscarf ban has further widened the gap between the State and Muslim immigrants. A sense of discrimination and frustration is observed in

the students who were deprived of their basic religious obligation and right to don the Islamic headscarf in the schools. As Francois Goguel suggests that Islam is essentially associated with the extremist groups only and it is deemed that it does not appreciate the norms of freedom and *laicite*, therefore, Islam and its value systems should be rejected (cited in [Scott, 2007, p.701](#)). The headscarf ban raised a huge controversy inside and outside France. Intellectuals from all fields of life commented on the headscarf ban. Some consider it as a violation of human rights and other consider it as a courageous step taken by the Republic to fight against Islamic fundamentalism.

France is an example of civic-assimilationist model. The immigrants are expected to shed off their religious and cultural identities in public sphere if they want to be French. According to civic-assimilationist model, the religious identities of citizens should be confined within the private sphere and citizens should exist in public spheres as having no religious or cultural i.e., not having any pluralistic identity but one uniform identity i.e., French. The Islamic headscarf worn by Muslim women seemed to disturb the uniformity and equality of France. Equality in France is attained by eliminating the differences and not by giving citizens equal rights.

## Germany

Germany has the second largest Muslim population in Europe, of three and a half million. Most Muslim immigrants are of Turkish origin, migrants and their descendants who migrated to Germany for employment as guest workers. According to [Schiffauer \(2006, p.95\)](#) 'German society has only recently abandoned the self-delusion that it is not an immigrant country'.

Germany is not a secular state, and the headscarf is banned in Germany to maintain state's neutrality. The headscarf ban in Germany seems to be quite controversial in contrast to France. Germany allows the sign and symbols of Christianity and Jews but only the Islamic headscarf is banned. The headscarves worn by nuns in the public schools have not been banned but the headscarves worn by Muslim teachers are banned. Since state neutrality means that all religions should be treated equally, a double-standard policy is obvious in Germany's implementing ban on Muslim women headscarves and no ban for the nuns.

Germany fits Saharso's ethno-cultural model. Although there is no strict division between church and state, there is an emphasis on maintaining state neutrality. There is a fear and lack of trust in the German policies regarding the Muslim immigrants. Khan (2006, p.1504) argues that the debate of Islamic headscarf is centred on fears embedded in the history of Germany such as migration, authoritarianism, women's right, and secularism. Many of these concerns are encapsulated in the philosophy of political Islam, which created Muslims as the 'other' and in contention with the state, thus state can define itself in relation to the 'other'.

Being an ethno-cultural model, Germany laid emphasis on homogeneity. The teachers wearing the headscarf in schools violate this culturally homogeneity because of which the headscarf is banned in most of German states. The ethno-cultural citizenship model is rejected by the left group in Germany because of their antagonism towards the idea of group identity, which largely forced them to adhere more to French civic-assimilationism and detach themselves from Dutch multicultural approach ([Saharso, 2007, p.527](#)).

## The United Kingdom

After France and Germany, the United Kingdom has the third largest Muslim population of 1.6 million i.e., around three percent of the total population of the country. Many of the Muslim migrants in Britain have origins in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Christianity is the state religion of United Kingdom and the link between the church and state is maintained in the United Kingdom. Multiculturalism is also part of the national curriculum. It is observed that Britain allowed many ethnic minorities to hold significant positions in public sphere of life. Muslims have representative bodies at the local and national level. Besides in the United Kingdom several Muslim educationists and organizations have been efficiently working to voice their opinions and achieve endorsements from the authorities to preserve their religious and cultural rights ([Vertovec, 1996, p.69](#)). There is an accommodation of the requirements of Muslim to a large extent in terms of their school uniform, burials, and food. The headscarf worn by Muslim women in the public spheres has never arisen any strong controversy. Though, the issues have been raised about the headscarf, but no blanket ban is observed in

any part of the United Kingdom. The headscarf is allowed in the United Kingdom but *jilbab* (a full-length Muslim dress) and *niqab* (face-covering except the eyes) are not allowed in public institutions such as court and schools.

The United Kingdom is a multicultural country, according to Saharso's citizenship models, which has accommodated the minority groups but has not been able to integrate with them in a better way as Meira Levinson suggested that the English system may foster a pluralistic community which is divided and composed of some stakeholders who do not adhere to linguistic, religious, economic, and cultural norms of the state ([McGoldrick, 2006, p.174](#)).

### **Comparison of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom**

The headscarf bans in France and Germany are implemented to maintain state neutrality. But the meaning of neutrality is different in France and Germany. In France, neutrality refers to the strict separation of church and state and restricting religion to the private sphere. In the German context, neutrality means that the individuals can express and live out their religion not only in private but in public. So, neutrality in German context means that the State does not identify with any one religion, but all the religions are treated equally and in an impartial way. As an opponent of anti-veiling law stated: 'The state is not judge over the correct religion but umpire who must make sure that all religions can freely develop themselves' ([Joppke, 2007, p.327](#)). In Germany, a double standard exists, as the headscarf worn by nuns in public schools is allowed but the headscarf worn by Muslim women is banned. Either Germany should develop a pure secular state like France, where religion and state are separated and all the religious symbols should be banned whether Christian or Muslim, or it should allow Muslim teachers to wear headscarves in the schools.

The UN Human Rights Committee reports on the rights of minorities explicate the difference in the approaches of French and British regarding cultural diversity. The report about France states that keeping in line with the constitution of the Republic, it is secular, indivisible, social and democratic. It represents all citizens before the law as one, thus, France is a country where there is no minority. However, the report of the United Kingdom presents

a sharp contrast to this approach. According to the report the minorities should be given opportunities to assimilate effectively and integrate in the society while maintaining their identities and a culture of mutual tolerance should be promoted ([Wiles, 2007, p.705](#)).

The British approach is that of multiculturalism, which acknowledges cultural diversity in comparison to France where the importance has been laid on the unanimity of the Republic by eliminating the difference through assimilation. As suggested by Freedman, '... the founding project of the French Republic was the disappearance of difference through assimilation of all to one "legitimate" culture' ([Freedman, 2004, p.10](#)). Roy argues that in France there is no Muslim community at all, Muslims who tend to associate themselves with cultural or religious minority are considered in French terms as 'casualties of the integration process' ([Wiles, 2007, p.703](#)). Britain gives regard to the varied identities of minorities and encourages them to flourish and obtain rights despite their difference while cooperating effectively with both i.e., other minorities and the majority culture. In contrast to this, France has a rigid stance i.e., the 'the requirement to be considered French is to assimilate in the French culture by shedding off one's cultural and religious identities' ([Scott, 2007, p.79](#)). This implies that the immigrant renounces his/her identity and culture and adapts to the laws and custom of France, the superiority of French culture and national identity.

### **Conclusion**

The headscarf is banned in France and Germany because it symbolises: i) Political Islam ii) Gender inequality and iii) Backwardness. The actual threat faced by European states is not the headscarf but what it stands for i.e., Islam. The Islamic headscarf has placed Islam at the centre of debate thus questioning the dynamics between religion and state in European countries ([Kastoryano, 2004, p.1248](#)). Islam is perceived as a religion that is intolerant, backward, and oppressive. Islam thus is opposite to the model of European states, most of which are secular or neutral, aspire to gender equality and modernity. 'Islam' tends to be regarded as a greater moral and political affront to modernity than other religious traditions' (Asad, 2008, p.302). Therefore, it is not the headscarf but what it symbolises, that is Islam, which is problematic for Europeans. Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic extremism and Political Islam are realized by the

western countries as a big danger for the liberal political and moral foundation (Sauer, 2005, p.342). By banning the headscarf European states tried to avoid that threat. The orientalist approach of several European countries towards Muslim immigrants has placed immigrants in an enigmatic place. Many European thinkers like Lewis tend to believe that Muslims do not have the tendency to integrate in the European culture largely because their religion, i.e. Islam is authoritarian, intolerant, collectivist and illiberal (Parekh, 2008, p.180).

The headscarf is seen as a symbol of female subjugation by many of the European feminists. By favouring the headscarf ban most of the European feminists consider that they are emancipating the oppressed Muslim women and protecting them from the patriarchal order which restricted their freedom. But opposite is the case, by supporting the ban on the headscarf, rather than emancipating, the feminists exclude Muslim women access from the public sphere. As Freedman argues that many western feminists who disregard Islamic headscarf are doing more disservice to Muslim women rather than their saviour because by not allowing them one of their forms of expression of identity the feminists are further pushing Muslim women towards social exclusion thus depriving them of their economic and social rights (2007, p.42). The headscarf is an expression of identity for most of the young Muslim immigrant women and denying them the right to wear the headscarf is stripping them off their religious identity. Most of the European feminists favour the headscarf ban only by considering the universal women's rights and without taking into consideration the religious rights of the minority groups. So, the women rights come in conflict with the minority group rights. In contrast to the view of European feminists that headscarf ban would liberate Muslim women. Many Muslim women feel free and liberated only when they wear the headscarf because it gives them access to public sphere.

Women bodies are used as a site of contestation by Islamists, Europeans, and feminists. Women experiences are different throughout the world and the feminists who raise voice for universal women's rights often tend to disregard the significance of cultural variations and identities in the lives of many

Muslim women. Another point of contention is this that most feminists consider that the headscarf views women as an object of sex and they ought to cover themselves because their sexuality may threaten the social order. In contrast to this, the headscarf prevents women to be presented as a sex object. In fact, women wearing the headscarf asserts, 'treat me as a person not as a sex object' (Bullock, 2002, p.196). The Islamic headscarf not only empower women to act as a shield against the consumer capitalist culture's web of glamour but also protect them from being an object of male voyeurism. The headscarf ban not only infringes the individual rights but also the religious and educational rights of young Muslim women who want to get educated. By excluding Muslim women from public institutions, European countries are reducing their chances to be educated.

France and Germany have banned the headscarf to maintain the secularity, neutrality, equality and integrating the immigrants. The discriminatory act of banning the headscarf has further distanced the Muslim immigrants. Muslims in European countries are considered as second-class citizens and not given their due rights. The second generation of Muslim immigrants has started to assert their religious identity and claim their rights as equal citizens. Different critics have raised this question that how a small number of Muslim women wearing the headscarf can threaten secularity and neutrality of European states. The answer has always been the same that Muslim women are used as a tool to stigmatize Islamic values and Islamic. There is a diversity of religion in every country and no country is free of it. The differences cannot be eliminated by banning the religious symbol, they would still be there. Multicultural model of citizenship followed by the United Kingdom provides immigrants a sense of ownership of the country where they reside, which in return encourages them to be an inclusive member of the state and assimilate state policies in their lives. Whereas the authoritarian approach as adopted by France and Germany by banning Islamic headscarf led to disorientation and lack of trust among immigrants. We contend that the act of banning the headscarf proved European nations to be intolerant, authoritarian, and illiberal towards Muslim immigrants residing in European countries.

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