



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-I, Issue-II, September 2014, Page No. 134-136
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Book review:

**Bowen, John, *Why The French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, The State, and Public Space*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.
304p. including index (paperback)
Syed S. Uddin-Ahmed***

Bowen's *Why The French Don't Like Headscarves* is a fascinating blend of culture, history, demographic changes, global politics and identity. He is currently a professor of Anthropology and Director of the Initiative in Pluralism, Politics, and Religion at Washington University. He deals with pluralism and changing discourses in ethnically diverse society. The text is a wonderful dialogue and analysis of a very controversial topic that had an immediately polarizing impact on French society and politics. Even more than that, this event in terms of its scope was a major issue throughout Europe in the 2000s as Europe was undergoing significant demographic changes, thanks to the growth of immigrant communities. These communities became a source of political debates which brought out the worst of Orientalist racism via policy implementation.

There was clear tension in France from the late 1990s into the 2000s especially when the idea of assimilation and integration with ethnic minority communities of Muslims especially from the Maghrib (North Africa) Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and to a lesser degree Turks, and West African Muslims were considered. The number of the ethnically non-European French people was growing rapidly and debates with being "French" and assimilating to "French" culture brought to the fore serious clashes. Bowen brings us clarity and insights into the complex makeup of the debate in France.

Significantly, we had French political groups ranging from the far-left wing parties to more conservative parties who had taken issues with the visibility of the Islamic identity of these minorities. There was the perfect political football with the issue of the "Hijab" that they felt was a clear demarcation of faith and this brought these minority communities into direct conflict with French ideals of society and democracy. The politicization of the Hijab became the perfect opportunity to do social engineering in attempt by force to assimilate a group of people who were the anti-French or the other.

Bowen breaks down the crucial fault lines from politics, race, religion, media coverage, and gender misconceptions in understanding this debate beyond a group of minorities that refuse to break away from Islamic identities and assimilate to French culture. In 2004 the French Government passed a law prohibiting people in any public school from wearing any clothing that clearly indicated a pupil's religious affiliation. This had a polarizing effect with regards to Muslim girls and women who attended public schools and university. It made women especially those who wore headscarves into a political object that French politicians could easily use to explain away serious social problems in France. Some of the social problems ranging from the ghettoization of the suburbs of France, violence against women, and other major socio-economic problems were put into the lap of the hated "head-scarf" (veil) as it posed the best scape-goat for political leaders to score points on.

Moreover, in understanding the dilemma of the "veil" in France Bowen focuses our attention on the concept of 'laicite' which represented the essential French tradition of secularism. This laicite represented symbolically one of the most important values of French society signifying the major victory of French society over the religious tyranny and oppression of the Catholic Church. Now, in the late

1990s there were significant socio-economic problems in the poorer suburbs of France. The French found itself having to deal with violence towards women, poverty, and a more radical interpretation of Islam that led these communities toward greater levels of communalism.

This presence of radical Islam became an issue the government had been grappling with and its greatest fears of assimilation and integration were associated with it. Now, this is interesting for Bowen as well because the government claimed to have had anxieties with the idea of this very communalism via radical Islam. The government developed a tendency to assume that the veil was represented of a reactionary response retreating back to Islam and rejecting French ideals and values that support a democratic society.

Once again the veil was viewed as a violation of laicite because it was a firm visible symbol of otherness, when the state felt a responsibility to create a French identity that was void of religion. Religion was to be a private enterprise and it had no place in the public sphere in French society. However, the veil whether we are talking about the Hijab, Jilbab, Chaadar, or other garment had become the object of the debates in the late 1990s and early 2000s, culminating in the adaptation of the 2004 ban on anyone wearing any clothing that could be indicating a person's religious belief.

Without a doubt this is a significant event and one that when put into the context of the evolution societies in Europe and America after the events of 9/11 brought keen interest in radical Islam. Although, there was a reductionist tendency to approach Islam as some kind of monolith that was beginning to attack French identity and most importantly the ideals of laicite, the debate took part and parcel segments of the Muslim population and its lack of integration. The veil became symbolically what was backwards in these communities and debates themselves were questionable in its understanding of the Muslim communities. The debates often brought in controversial figures who came from other countries and outwardly expressed hatred of the veil and confessed how taking the veil off emancipated them.

Now, the testimony of the Islamic feminists from such places as Morocco, Tunisia, and West Africa while fascinating for those who following sociology and evolutions of cultures really did not speak to the experience of the typical French Muslim women. Bowen focuses very positively for a moment on the importance of agency. He is critical of how these debates and political shows often did a wonderful job of extolling the beauty of emancipating ourselves and expressing our sexuality in order to escape the tentacles of patriarchal religious authorities, they missed on a key issue "Agency" and "Experience" which cannot be underestimated.

Many of the women in the audience who wore the veil did not necessarily share the same sentiments of the women who grew up in Muslim countries so their views of the veil as a symbol was not necessarily a major connection. Often these events had the atmosphere of hard core conservative political events where they prop up people to sing jingoistic propaganda for a pro-government rally. This is because often veiled women in the audience did not share these sentiments, or feel such a deep resentment towards social order, and honestly speaking they were just concerned with being a Muslim woman in France.

The speakers and advocates, in these events seemed to be far-left liberal elites who did not speak to experience of a woman was concerned about her college career, her future, and whether she would be denied "Agency" based on a law which directly while attempting to liberate, sentenced her to a life of mediocrity. This law could bar her from an education, a career, her ability to create her own identity, and ironically enough if these events continue then arguably the law could force women to fall into being pray to a system of communalism which claimed to save women from. These debates showed that even policies that come from the left can often be injurious and regressive. This exemplifies the magician and savant Bowen truly is because through his cover of these series of events he brings clarity into one major problem in all these debates and pushing bans on veils, it denied "Agency" to the woman who was just trying to live her life, educate herself, and exist in a society where she became a political football.

Furthermore, in *Temenos* Per-Erik Nilsson stated, "Bowen lets his discerning narrative voice take readers on a journey through contemporary France, shaking the very foundation of this society. This is important. The idea of the enlightened and secular European, needed to discipline the religious despot from the south, is far from limited to France." This is interesting when we try to understand the phenomenon of secular states of the West having the deal to backwardness of the immigrant communities.

This brings to life a new Orientalism because of the inability to achieve assimilation in to modern western societies and the threat of communalism and radical Islam attacking, the most precious ideals in secular democracies.

Moreover, in *Social Athropology* Marjo Buitelaar, states "Bowen wrote a marvelous book which illustrates that 'affairs' concerning Muslims and non-Muslims cannot be explained in terms of a general incompatibility of Islam and the West, but call for detailed analysis of local civic cultures, as well as a contextualized understanding of specific domestic and foreign factors contributing to societal tensions." This highlights his ability to unpack such serious cultural, religious, and political undertones in these debates on secularism and radical Islam. Bowen's strength boils down to his sage like understanding and breadth of coverage of deep social problems and bringing us into the heart of a major social event and giving voice and agency of the women who became political objects often, under the guise of being saved or protected.

Finally, the magic of Bowen's work is it takes us into the heart of this deeply divisive topic in French politics, via his interviews, conversations, and deep interests in social developments. It gives "Agency" to the women who in the debates and the actions of political actors were marginalized and objected in the questionable attempts to liberate. He even critically exposes some of the lack of cultural and ethnic sensitivity of feminist groups who tried to portray these women as victims showing a lack of connection between the foreign born women in speaking to the experiences of a French Muslim woman going to school. He focuses us on the fact that these Muslim women want to visible defy the older cultural identities of France not the political framework of the Republic, which they belong to. He concludes with remarks on the faith of the women stating, "That faith is worth retaining, properly understood it liberates citizens to explore different identities not conceal them allowing for the sharing of a life together despite vast differences in religious ideas, history, and appearance."

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