Beyond the Veil: Media prejudice towards the use of the hijab in Europe
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Abstract
Using the perception of the hijab in European society, I intend to highlight the role of the media in the construction of stereotypes toward Muslim women in Europe, in the hope of opening a discussion of the topic. By examining Islamic feminism as a lens with which to view the oppression of women in Europe, the reader's implicit tendency toward an ethnocentric interpretation will hopefully begin to diminish and a clearer picture of the potential entry points for empowerment begin to take shape. The goal of this article is to remove barriers of western feminist ideologies in the effort to better understand the lives of Muslim women in Europe.

Keywords: Mass media, Muslim women, Europe, Islamic feminism

Introduction
In the course of the first decade of the 21st century, we have witnessed a rise in the importance that has been given in the public sphere to the phenomenon of migration. During the last ten years, the cultural diversity that has defined group identified as ¨migrants¨ has been expressed in terms of isolation, conflict, and a threat to social cohesion. Currently, this representation is having a tremendous impact on the Muslim community (Amnesty International, 2012). Contributing to this trend, terrorist attacks against the United States and European cities such as Paris and Brussels have led to discrimination against such communities. Muslims in Europe remain under the weight of an amalgam of stereotypes and prejudices and, according to a report published by Amnesty International (2012), most of them suffer discrimination based on religion in the workplace and classrooms, even in countries where such discrimination is prohibited.

The aim of this paper is to show the role of the stereotypical image of Muslim Women in transmitting the rejection of Islam in today´s western societies, as well as to emphasise the importance of the media in the dissemination and even the construction of this image.

Currently there seems to be a real problem with Islam and all its aspects: civilization, culture, religion, which causes it to be considered in broad sectors of society as incompatible with all the values of western modernity. For me, as a person who has never interacted with Muslim communities before arriving to Belgium (in my country, Colombia, 58% of the population is Catholic and where not even 1% of the population is practicing Islam as a religion) I wonder why Islam seems to frighten much of Europe? Why is the hijab, halal butcher shops, and Ramadan viewed in such a negative light? What is the danger that this religion represents in

Europe? According to Garcia et al (2012), these problems have only one root cause: absolute ignorance about Islam.

Literature review

Europe and Muslims: A conflicted relationship

Two crucial elements found in the literature describe the problematic relationship between Europe and the Muslim world: Colonisation (European colonisation in several Muslim countries: North Africa and the Middle East among others) and Religion (Christianity versus Islam).

I will start this section with a literature review about the struggles of the Muslim world with the West related to this colonisation process before finishing with a historical review of the Christian church's criticism of Islam.

1.1 Colonisation guilty for current Muslim migration?

For most Arab countries, as well as for most Third World countries, the post-independence era did not mark the end of the struggle against the West. From the various decolonization movements that occurred during the wake of World War II, a number of national liberation movements began to challenge territorial European colonial domination. In this sense, new nation states emerged in the developing world that were classified under the political entity of the "Third World" in the 1955 Bandung conference (Shome & Hegde,2002).

According to Shome & Hegde (2002), two factors influenced the current migratory movements toward the metropolitan centers of the "first world" (from their former and current colonial possessions): Depletion of raw materials and resources by former colonial powers and the suppression of any attempts by the colonised to produce a self-governing political structure.

In my perspective, Muslim arrival to Europe reminded the world that the western metropolis must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as a native narrative internal to its national identity.

Another way to see current trends, Muslims are experiencing what they see as a new form of international colonialism. Countries in the developing world often are controlled by Western powers through institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the UN Security Council (Smith, 2015) as well as through the capitalist system, inflation, as well as

other factors. "The West has long been known for supporting corrupt dictators so as to foster its own economic interests. Muslims, not surprisingly, question the sincerity of Western belief in justice and democracy (Smith, 2015, pp.4)".

Regarding all the before mentioned problems, Europe is still the main destination of Muslim migrants and refugees coming from north Africa and the middle east. Many explanations for this phenomenon include the search for work, social advantages, higher wages, the geographical proximity to their home countries (at most two to four-hour flight) and family reunification processes of Muslims who immigrated to Europe after the second world war (they now represent the European union's Muslims as at the end of the war, European countries started the reconstruction of their cities and resorted to their ex colonies to offset labour shortages. Khaser,2016).

In this sense, the majority of Muslims in Europe are immigrants or sons of immigrants, and a big percentage are political refugees. As such, Muslims are settling in Europe, and their demographic numbers will increase in the future. Given this reality, Khaser (2016) states that European countries should increase their efforts to further their integration, and Muslims should contribute by showing attachment and loyalty to their new home countries.

Christians versus Muslims: A history of hatred?

"Identities are constructed in opposition to the other and Europe´s others were Muslim-Arabs, until the end of the reconquest, and Muslim- Turks, until the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Dieste, 1997, pp.34)."

Between the 12th and 18th centuries, the Christian church emphasized an attack on the prophet Mohammed (Robinson,1990 pp. 16). His life became the center of attention to try to prove that he was a false prophet and to highlight the irrationality and aggressiveness of his religion. Among other accusations, Mohammed was also accused of immorality for advising his people to enjoy their sexuality (within marriage). By the end of the XIX and beginning of the XX century, the validity of the Muslim religion was no longer emphasized in the Christian church, however Islam became a fundamental element of cultural differentiation, meaning an irreconcilable difference between Europeans and Muslims (Robinson, 1990. pp.20).

In this sense, Islam has been considered an enemy of Christianity, represented today by immigrants who are perceived as a threat to European secularism (Aixela,2001). According to Moreras (1999 pp.11) "the current relations between Islam and the West go through an evident phase of disagreement, in which it is easier to insist on the distance that separates them, than to highlight the existing links between both", a situation that is currently perpetuated.

Currently, Islam is growing in many European countries not only because of immigration, but also due to high rates of birth as well as conversion. Convert women are among the most active in participating in interfaith discussions and in explaining Islam to non-Muslim Europeans (Pew research center, 2017). Wearing the hijab, public call to prayer and building of mosques with visible minarets, availability of halal meat, participation of Muslim students in some public-school activities, and a host of other issues must be faced by Europeans. "Some among the Muslim population, perhaps growing, want nothing to do with Western life and values, leading to feelings of marginalization and economic disadvantage. Conversations between Muslims and other Europeans are also difficult because of the high level of anti-Muslim prejudice, encouraged by the press and other forms of media (Smith,2015, pp.20)".

Muslim women, media and the stereotypes toward Islam

> "The emergence and rapid spread of the hijab has to be understood as one of the chief manifestations of the Islamist discourse's emphasis on the necessity of re-drawing gender roles in order to forge an Arab identity along the lines of religious principles. In this sense, the hijab is more than a simple item of clothing prescribed by religion; it is a strong symbol of the rise of a religious nationalism setting up Islamic values and behaviors as a protective screen against the "depraved" and "imperialistic" Western culture (Ahmed 1992; El Guindi 1981; 164; Hoodfar 1992 in Eid, 2002)".

For Nash (2004), the cultural conflict between the West and Islam has had clear gender connotations, since the Muslim woman has been placed as one of the main objects of cultural differentiation. In the construction of the difference between both worlds, gender has played a key role, since it has tended to represent the East as a set of cultures or civilizations that are particularly cruel and oppressive towards their women in the exercise of male social dominance (Spivak, 1988). In this sense, two elements have been set in contemporary European society as markers of the borders between Western and Eastern identities. In the first place, the use of the hijab (veils) in the public presentation of Muslim women has been mentioned, which has led to continuous controversy, since this garment is considered to be the public display of Islamic religious identity. Secondly, the arranged marriages that are sometimes practiced among Muslim

families, have also been interpreted as an example of gender discrimination associated with Islam and the East in general (Vives and Nash, 2009).

According to Garcia et al (2012) the opposition between the modern West and a certain Orientalized and obsolete Islam is reproduced almost systematically in the representation of gender relations among "immigrants" of certain origins that is made through media reception. For the author, it manifests itself in the debates about the viability of mixed couples between the native Europeans and individuals of the Islamic religion, considered difficult in the case that woman is the Muslim; as the clothing with which the Muslim women cover her body appears again as the main symbolic obstacle for the cultural union, in this more concrete case, for the conjugal union. The media certainly informs us of what is happening in the world and in doing so, they manage the information, select it, hierarchize it and then disseminate it. In a democratic system such as that which exists in European Union states, the media play a fundamental role before the citizens, providing them with knowledge of a series of facts that they did not know about. This function means that for a large majority of the population that reads the newspaper,

listens to the radio, watches television or surfs the net, what the media reports contributes to represent the reality of "the others". Moreover, for some, the only reality of "the others" is what the media tell us (and it could almost be said that what is not reported does not exist) (Desrues, 2008).

In this sense, the media plays a leading role in conveying images about immigrant groups and in particular about their women. Although these "immigrants" are under-represented in the media, in the few cases in which they appear, they do so as carriers of the most recurrent stereotypes about their cultures of origin, which makes them symbols of their community of origin (Nash, 2003). This defines an imagined community of "immigrant" women, which brings them together in a homogeneous group and serves to nurture collective beliefs through which the patterns of inclusion and social exclusion are articulated.

For Muñoz (2000) the public display of differentiated provenance, often carried out by "immigrant" women through certain clothing, in particular the various clothes combined with the hijab or veil, have been interpreted as a threat to the cultural purity and social cohesion of the western nation states. The dress that Muslim women use surprises, but annoys, when it does not offend (Aixela,2001). The rejection of "the Muslim" is transmitted to a great extent through the

woman, considered as a victim, not of a patriarchy, but of her religion, and represented as the archetype of the oppressed woman, which condemns her to a stereotype. When in the West there is talk of the alleged discrimination against Muslim women, the true origins of this situation are ignored, "it is taken for granted that their religion is the origin of their evils, instead of looking for causes in the politics of the States and the patriarchal sociocultural heritage of their societies "(Moualhi, 2000 pp. 292).

To think that the problems faced by women in Muslim societies are phenomena derived solely from Islam and from their religious identity prevents, according to Forti, R. (2002) having an understanding of the structural inequalities and the efforts of those who they fight for a change in their societies, which sometimes pay with their lives, and more often with their freedom.

It must be emphasized that the essential components of patriarchy in a Muslim society are not different from those found elsewhere. For example, in a society like Colombia violence against women has become "normalized" to the point that it is invisible to authorities and society in general (Sisma Mujer, 2016). Women in Colombia prefer not to report domestic violence out of fear of being stigmatized or revictimized by state institutions (Sisma Mujer, 2016). However, although the patriarchal structures and the discriminatory practices derived from them are similar inside and outside the Muslim world, we must not forget that:

"Religion, one of the characteristic features of the definition that people give of themselves and their cultures, influences the profile of women's lives and their possibilities of self-affirmation. In much of the Muslim world, Islam is a daily reality for people. It is an integral part of how they define themselves in society "(translated from Spanish, Forti, 2005 pp,18).

In this sense patriarchy would not be the ally but a great enemy of Islam, since "the Islamic world betrays every day that passes the spirit of their religion, having a behavior distant light years from the spiritual dimension of the message" (translated from Spanish Forti,2005 pp,19).

This rejection is exemplified, as I had already mentioned, through the hijab, considered unilaterally as an emblem of Islam and a sign of delay and oppression and denying the variety of connotations that it entails today, excluding its bearer in broad areas of our society. However, it is important to highlight that the use of the hijab differs widely between different countries in the Muslim world (Soltani, 2016). For example, in some countries, the use of some variation of the

hijab is mandatory like in Saudi Arabia and Iran and in other countries is discouraged or seen as a sign of low social status like in the case of Morocco (Soltani, 2016).

The continuous polemics about the hijab and its presence in the public space constitute a conflict generated by these forms of stereotyped representation of alterity. In fact, the necessary significance of the Islamic veil as a symptom of patriarchal inequality associated with the culture of origin, has been repeatedly denied by the experiences of the Muslim women who decide to wear it (Aixelá, 2000).

According to Garcia et al (2012) Opposed to the West, Muslim women, have been associated with ignorance, irrational religious fervor and social backwardness. For the most part, they have been clearly characterized as victims irrevocably subject to the patriarchal disciplines of their culture. In this way, the alternative origins have been presented as societies to which power relations are immutably discriminatory with respect to the female gender (Ahmed, 1992).

The Muslim woman is thus represented as the victim of a tragedy that will haunt her from birth. The female submission and domestic seclusion attributed to Muslim Eastern women make up the semiotic set associated with the Islamic religion and the hijab as a sign of externalization of the cultural difference.

For Garcia et al (2012), there is a certain voyeurism in the West in the face of these "tragedies, which have the effect of diverting attention from their own realities.

These "tragedies" give, on the other hand, reasons for the rejection of Islam. Thus, stereotypes about the situation of Muslim women are possibly the most effective instrument to demonize their societies and very particularly their religion.

According to Garcia et al (2012), an important pillar on which this aversion to Muslims is based is that they are not considered as producers of culture, which is ultimately all human society, but products of their culture, judged as anchored in time and immovable, in that women would be vehicles for these obsolete values. Also, the binomial culture / religion, frequent in the western thought, is applied implacably to the Muslim community and mainly to the Moroccan one in the case of Belgium.

It should be noted that the gradation of cultural differentiation established on the basis of the binomial of immigrant-autochthonous significance, establish certain distinctions between

dangerous "unwanted" immigration and the preferred one whose origins do not represent a threat to social cohesion to such a high degree (López, 2000). Both politicians and intellectuals have proposed since the beginning of the phenomenon the preference of some migration origins to others from arguments of cultural and religious similarities with respect to the receiving society. In this way, Latin Americans and Eastern Europeans seem to be more welcome in western Europe.

The visible urban signs of this "usurpation", as is the case of places of worship, and as I had already mentioned, the hijab of women, almost exclusively Muslim, are considered as an attack on the homogeneity of the autochthonous European society (Garcia et al, 2012).

Conclusion

As it has been observed in this paper, these exclusionary stereotypes have been largely conveyed by the institutional discourse and collected and reworked by the media that contribute greatly to its dissemination in broad areas of European society.

According to Garcia et al (2012), one possibility of finding a solution to this situation that hinders the way out of the limits that Europeans impose on the Muslim community is to give them a voice to allow them to represent themselves in order to counteract the stereotypes of which they are victims.

Through my literature review I was glad to find so many social science studies that are contributing to dismantling these stereotypes through analysis aimed at sensitizing public opinion and policy makers. At the same time, they could, within the framework of their studies, offer Muslims a space for their self-representation.

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