

# MULTICULTURALISM OR FEMINISM: THE CASE OF MUSLIM WOMEN

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## Abstract

*The universal application of rights and laws for all women has always been endorsed by the global north against the philosophy of multiculturalism. They often blame religious and cultural practices for not going with their vision of feminism, especially in the case of Muslim groups. The noticeable actions that created this conflict are a ban on the veil, religious education, polygamy and genital mutilation. While discussing the theoretical concept of multiculturalism in political practice and policy discourse in different contexts, this paper critically evaluates the circumstances where Muslim women are being portrayed as a symbol of oppression while declaring irreconcilable differences between feminism and multiculturalism. This paper examines approaches in which multiculturalism and feminism can promote diversity and inclusiveness, along with nurturing values of respecting differences with dignity in societies.*

**Keywords:** *Veil, Feminism, Multiculturalism, Muslim, Culture.*

## INTRODUCTION

European countries such as Belgium, Australia, Netherlands, Denmark, and France prohibited face covering by enforcing the law, which generated debate about the victimisation of women's dress representing a particular religious group (The Guardian, 2018 & 2019). Especially for Muslim women, it became unlawful to cover the head inside French institutions following the 2004 French National Assembly and Senate bills. The bill, in particular, suppresses religious symbols inside non-religious education systems, but Muslim women are explicitly targeted, resulting in a long-lasting conflict (Gaspard & Khosrokhavar, 1995). In Europe, almost similar conflicts appeared in Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany, where organisations and institutions agitated against Muslim women, which consequently brought several heads-covering outlaw incidents into legal courts (Freedman, 2007).

These rules and laws usually come in the name of shielding Muslim females against the male-dominated mentality which compels them to cover their

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heads. Among Western women and their 'oppressed' Muslim sisters, the headscarf is considered a sign of differentiation (Song, 2005). The suppression of cultural freedoms by the dominant groups against marginalised people, thereby, often leads to the deprivation of the freedom of the same females that the dominant majority community supposedly aims to rescue from their 'backward' civilisation. These events lead to possible tension that may occur between multiculturalism, feminism, and the rights of minority groups. The paper offers an overview of the ongoing conflict between feminism and cultural diversity principles. In the context of Muslim people, it examines the ways cultural freedom is misconstrued, especially in societies where they consider minorities. It also underlines the need to review feminism and multiculturalism from the perspective of the Muslim woman.

### **Multiculturalism vs Feminism Debate**

The debate on the connection between multiculturalism and feminism is contentious in some aspects. The two philosophies are revolutionary as both advocate for a significant societal shift by facilitating different ethnic /race-based communities to maintain their customs and advance gender equality. The problem is that embracing multiculturalism in some contexts can appear as endorsing the patriarchal strategy of communities by keeping women in an inferior position to men, which is seen as undermining feminism's key objectives (Reingold & Baratz, 2009). In this regard, several theoretical schools of thought through literature have examined the possibility of coexistence between feminism and multiculturalism. However, the approach favoured by radical feminist theorists is that feminism and multiculturalism maintain a tense and conflicting relationship (Okin, 1999; Shachar, 2000).

These terms, such as Multiculturalism, are explained by theorists as "identity politics," "difference politics", and "recognition politics," all of which reflect a dedication to revaluing divisive cultures and reforming existing forms of representation and discourse that marginalise other communities (Taylor, 1994:). Okin (1999) described Feminism as the belief that women should not be discriminated against because of their gender; recognition of their human dignity and similarly to the rights enjoyed by men, their cognition of a woman's right to enjoy the opportunity to have a satisfying life by her free and deliberate choice. She tends to associate cultural diversity with the retained hierarchical state of affairs, as she compares it with progressive cultural change by labelling it as a flexible strategy of working with a diverse community in the face of political or legislative decisions on a cultural plurality.

Phillips (2007) believes that it is by no means clear, from a feminist point of view, that minority rights are part of the solution [as is claimed by some multiculturalists]; they may exacerbate the problem. In the case of a more patriarchal minority culture or the context of a less patriarchal majority culture, [women] may be much better off if the culture into which they were born... either gradually become extinct (as its members became integrated into the surrounding culture) or, preferably, to be encouraged and supported to substantially alter itself to reinforce the equality, rather than the inequality of women.

As Okin says the bulk of (minority) communities are authoritarian, and their practices, are gendered to regulate and retain women in the private domain. She categorically rejects female genital cutting, girl-child marriage, and veiling by labelling them patriarchal and non-liberal practices. Liberal democracy should not accept all of these traditions, she claims, regardless of whether banning them implies an intervention by the State in religious life. According to her cultural rights protections for marginalised groups are expected to affect women's lives even more than men's lives. She emphasises that minority groups highly restrict women's choices, especially the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam compromise their well-being.

Okin argues that multicultural proponents have overlooked two crucial aspects; firstly, they appear to view minority groups as homogeneous and inconsiderate of the discrepancies within these groups, including the difference of power between women and men. Second, they seem to be missing the private domain of life. She acknowledges that females face discrimination in Western societies, whereas the same rights and protections are constitutionally given to the men living in those societies. She believes females belonging to conservative societies than the US (and other modern, relatively liberal countries) deserve the same protection from male violence as women living in other sociocultural dynamics. She suggested that acknowledging the concept that females should not be suppressed based on their biology means rejecting the privileges of communities that require patriarchal practices.

Okin confronts liberal supporters of multiculturalism who advocate for the legalisation of cultural groups rights by stating this as an individual basic human need to preserve his/her cultural heritage, believing that a person needs to build self-esteem and independent thought to select a suitable way of life for himself/herself, thus explicitly claiming that there is no basis in liberal thinking for granting a cultural community liberal right if they are anti-liberal. Her claims create significant concerns when applied to particular legal and public policy issues. What policies and legislation are the best tools

to implement human rights? What individual rights are fundamental and inevitable? (Berkowitz, 1999).

In comparison, liberal supporters of multiculturalism promote group rights as a tool for protecting the cultural rights of minorities and the welfare of their members. As Kymlicka (1999) affirms multiculturalism, like feminism, strives for a more equal and fair conception of justice and both challenge the classical liberal supposition that equality needs identical treatment. In this regard, Kymlicka and Okin agree that a liberal approach to multiculturalism should consider gender differences; however, they do not agree with concerns about the legitimacy of group rights. Kymlicka contrasts two forms of group rights: "external privileges" are privileges asserted by a minority group against non-members to minimise its exposure to the economic and political influence of the wider society, while 'internal limitations' are rights asserted by a minority group against its members. He argues that liberal views for the rights of minority groups can not recognise the latter. His argument is explicit: Community privileges are acceptable if they lead to the advancement of equality within religious and ethnic groups, but are unreasonable if they establish or intensify gender disparity within the group. In fact, by announcing it, he stressed the value of culture, an essentially positive and complex mechanism that evolves; they act as "contexts of choice. Individual liberty includes choices, which are presented and given meaning by cultures.

Another supporter of multiculturalism, Taylor (1994), believes that cultures have the right to identity recognition along with activities considered pertinent to establishing identity. Likewise, Phillips (2002) suggests that multiculturalism compels public policies to be reformed to make information equally accessible to each group regardless of the disparities. Apart from questioning the concepts of multiculturalism, the elements of cultural diversity compel state policies to acknowledge at least some cultural rights to prevent universal enforcement of legislation made by dominant groups. One instance is that of Sikhs' turbans being excused from wearing protection helmets as the requirement of bikers mandated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Act by the Supreme Court of Canada.

Moreover, it is critical to understand that culture is the blended expression of diversity and is always contested, but it is not the opposite of feminism. Acknowledging the existence of feminism within groups of race ceases the link between cultural diversity and anti-feminism." (Volpp, 2001). Contrary to Okin, Volpp (2001) claims that there is no conflict between multiculturalism and feminism and endorses accepting the aspect of difference located in the principles of multiculturalism without having the

threat of inducing cultural essentialism by putting our culture in conflict with others.

Although Okin's readers agree that sexism is misogynistic, they are not always convinced that the practices she associates with it are always objectionable. Most supporters seek to place these practices about culture and religion to illustrate how they may be used to serve the needs of women. For instance, Honig (1999) states that wearing a hijab helps Muslim women to join society and engage in public life.

Phillips (2007) addressed this situation as a matter of women's autonomy; head covering does not seem to equate with a liberal perspective; even if women declare observing this practice as their own decision, this expression is still often portrayed as a consequence of societal pressure. This leads to the critical question about using an expression of agency: Why do societal pressure and agency not come into a debate when females display their physical contours? In contrast, their expression of using the veil often comes in the debates of practising agency. Al-Hibri (1999), a Muslim female, ostentatiously asks, "Why is it tyrannical to wear a headscarf but emancipating to wear revealing clothes?" Honig and Al-Hibri's disagreement with Okin about veiling is not about respecting women as human beings but over the practices which bring respect for them. According to Al-Hibri, Okin's argument about the transitional status of women in Western liberal political systems is written from the point of view of the dominant 'I,' a Western point of view.

Okin's position has been critiqued chiefly for being too general in her description of cultural communities and presenting women of minority culture as a sufferer of culturally-induced false perception and has been blamed chiefly for only judging minority cultures, not Western modern societies (Nussbaum, 1999; A-Na'im, 1999; Parekh, 1999; Honig, 1999). Honig (1999) states that the relationship between feminism and liberalism might not be portrayed well. An-Na'im proceeds to say that there should be one standard for all regarding their accountability, not only for gender equality but also for all human rights (1999). In this debate, Okin's official statement that minority communities should follow the model established by the dominant is unreasonable, even though the same dominant community may take a while to reach equality between the sexes. Nussbaum (1999) suggests a contrasting approach; she argues that minority faiths should be granted extra protection. However, this can be coupled with policies that support females in such communities, applying the "substantial burden" concept.

Furthermore, Bhabha (1999) claims that Okin (1999) did not grasp the problems and struggles of refugees living in developed societies, as she quoted only some drastic examples of cultural defence cases with criminal charges. Instead, Bhabha suggests a solution from the perspective of the experiences of immigrants in the West and, thus, considers the issues of inequalities in citizenship. Parekh (1999) makes a related point claiming that while taking and using extreme cases related to the culture of non-dominant groups Okin somehow disregards the possible difficulties and issues found in evaluating the culture of minority groups or others. Parekh believes that Okin should have given attention to women representing minority groups to get their views and needs within their group circumstances... He feels it is condescending and unfair to dictate to them or declare on their behalf what is right for them.

Midden (2010) challenges Okin for her single-sided perception that modern females of the West have been liberated and women from other backgrounds should endorse a similar course. Secondly, Okin does not acknowledge the presence of disparities within groups of minorities except for differences between males and females. She declares culture-based expression and activities as a source of women's oppression. Although Okin talks about other types of inequalities, such as racial inequality, she insists that gender discrimination within minority populations should be addressed first. That implies that different varieties of inequalities operate independently of each other. However, other (predominantly black) feminists have demonstrated that sexual and racial discrimination can be both examined and tackled simultaneously.

Furthermore, Okin's version of culture is old and fixed, and she does not even discuss the differences based on age groups and perspectives; there could be liberal power that may alter those behaviours and traditions within groups. Volpp (2001) raises concerns about labelling culture when defendants come from a minority group. For instance, if a female of a marginalised and minority community is abused, oppressed, or worse, murdered, why is accusation placed on culture? Why the word culture is seldom mentioned when a majority-group female experiences the same ill-treatment? For what reason should multiculturalism suffer due to the ideology of liberals? If culture is to be taken as an indicator of determining individual conduct, why cannot it be labelled for gender-related crimes committed in the West?

Similarly, the dual approach of Western liberal feminists revealed by Narayan (1997) regarding developing countries and culture while citing the statistics of domestic violence cases in developed nations such as the US which is significant in numbers in the same way as dowry-related crime rates

in India. However, the culture of only later is blamed as conservative. In this regard, Hoodfar (1997) reveals how the term fashion is used for a white Muslim female wearing the veil, whereas it becomes a conservative veil when an Iranian national carries a scarf, even as fashion. Tietjens Meyers (2000) evaluates the actions of an African woman for letting her daughter go for genital mutilation with the conduct of a Euro-American female who considers her daughter's desire to go for a medical procedure regarding biological determinism. The majority will support the American mother, thinking it to be the result of the free consent of an adult, but in the case of the African mother, the same perception is suspended.

The obsession with marking societies other than the dominant holds a strong probability of cultural imperialism or universalism, which can hinder the efforts to support cultural diversity in the community. What arises from these debates is how multiculturalism has exposed the differences between the dominant and minority groups, often overlooked by women's rights activists by prioritising gender over ethnicity, class, culture, and faith. Narayan (1997) states that "Clitoridectomy and infibulation have become virtually a symbol of 'African women's problems' in Western contexts, while a host of other 'more familiar' problems that different groups of African women face are held up at the border.

This debate leads to the new discussion citing the example of the Sharia Law demanded by the Muslim community living in two secular Western countries; Canada and Australia. This Sharia Law refers to the adoption of Islamic law (to solve matters related to their family lives like marriage, inheritance, divorce, and maintenance). It is imperative here to comprehend the differences in the debate about the interpretation and basic principles of Sharia laws around the Muslim world (Van Engeland-Nourai, 2009). The debate emerged due to the concerns expressed by some Muslim groups (Razack, 2007), which are linked with the arguments of Kymlicka about group rights, which, if recognised externally, sometimes causes issues within the community of this group based on domination (internal restriction and external protection). In this regard, this demand for Sharia law was discussed in two aspects. It could create the possibility of getting protection from external/dominant forces or could be used as an opportunity for Muslim men to control Muslim women (Korteweg, 2008).

How both countries responded to this demand revealed that the Canadian multiculturalism strategy transformed this demand into an opportunity that women of minority communities used for their political empowerment by showing their active engagement and sharing views about the debate. The Australian Government, by rejecting the policy of multiculturalism, did not

even approach Muslim women to consider their voices (Ghobadzaeh, 2009). Discussion in this paper only analyses the way the debate on Sharia was handled in both countries and does not discuss the possible advantages or disadvantages of Sharia Laws for Muslim women.

Although the outcome was the same in the two societies, where the requests for Sharia law application were refused, female Canadian Muslims at least had a significant effect on the results. That statement served as a path for Muslim rights to integrate politically. Nevertheless, female Muslims in Australia lacked opportunities to take part in the discussion. In comparison to the stance of multiculturalism vs feminism, the Sharia argument in Australia and Canada showed that while multicultural legislation theoretically grants women representatives of minority communities the freedom to respond on contentious topics, in the case of Australia, government interference precluded this privilege. Throughout the Canadian context, the Sharia dialogue acts as an advocacy mechanism for Muslim group female leaders and encourages their inclusion in political decisions (Ghobadzaeh, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

This research agrees with Phillip (2007) that Multiculturalism considers itself the route to a more tolerant and inclusive society because it recognises that there is a diversity of cultures and rejects the assimilation of these into the cultural traditions of the dominant group. Moreover, the scheme to prohibit Muslim females from covering their heads may be claimed to have had an effect counterproductive to the exercising of their freedoms. It may serve to further separate them from Western cultures in the context of the universal Eurocentric definitions of women's liberation (Freedman, 2007). While most outsiders view the veil as a symbol of suppression, for some Muslims, women's veils can be empowering and may have multiple meanings. Their veil may be their personal choice or a compulsory condition made for them, it can be a source of freedom or imprisonment, it can be a sign of modesty or political position, and it may restrict space for women or ease their professional lives (Cooke, 2002).

Furthermore, this research agrees with Puilan's (2002) statement that the mission of 'rescuing brown people' is an expression of colonial ideology. Also, this colonial mindset is the basis of Western feminist discourses on religion.

This research also endorses Mahmood's (2011) and Saleem's (2013) opinions that if Western feminists want to understand the "other" women's lives and experiences, they must be open to the possibility of approaching the issues

through the lens of "other women". Moreover, they can change their method to determine their views about a particular experience and standpoint. After grasping the context and issue, they can address the political implications. For this, Mahmood suggests (2008) that feminists need to reconsider their conceptualisation of autonomy by confronting the interpretations of 'Muslim women's voices by liberal feminists. Fatima Elatik (2005) argues that feminists must understand the idea and different avenues to emancipate women. She also claims that Muslim women's power is not known sufficiently by Feminists. However, Muslim women want to emancipate in their way. They want to get their rights with respect, given their background, and religious traditions and keep open the dialogue with their family. We have to facilitate those (Dresselhuys, 2005).

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