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## Arab Skin, French Masks: 'Ni Putes, Ni Soumises' and the Assimilationist Discourses in France

In my research, I look at the relationship between the French state and its post-colonial immigrants from North Africa, better known in France as (the rather derogatory term) *'les Arabes'*. I am interested in particular in how assimilationist discourses in France shape the 'acceptable' behaviors of the *Arab*<sup>1</sup> subjects. My point here is to show how these discourses create racialized and gendered conditions of entrance into the wider community of citizens.

In order to understand how this discursive system functions, I focus in this paper on one feminist and anti-racist organization, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (i.e. neither whores nor submissive). I analyze how *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (or NPNS) has emerged in the media as the 'voice of the women from the ghettos', but has yet become complicit in the perpetuation of gendered and racialized narratives of assimilation. I end my paper by highlighting how race and gender become central elements in the exclusion of the 'bad' immigrants from the imagined community of French citizens.

First, looking at the formation of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (or NPNS), and the principles on which it relies, helps us understand the emergence of NPNS as the voice of *Arab* women. NPNS was created in March 2003 by mostly women of Maghrebi origins living in the *banlieues*<sup>2</sup>. The original purpose of the NPNS women was to denounce the "difficult living situation of women in the suburbs" and "to fight the sexist and violent practices targeting women". Although they had sought support from state officials and social services since

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'Arab' to refer to the Muslim French men and women who live in France and are of Maghrebi origin. 'Arab' also has a negative connotation in popular discourses, which is what I would like to draw attention to here.

<sup>2</sup> The banlieues are low income suburbs at the periphery of major French cities and are predominantly composed by immigrant families of Maghrebi origins

2000, it was not until 2003 that the women from NPNS received the attention needed to start the organization. The year of 2003 was indeed marked by a sudden media attention given to *Arab* women from the *banlieues*. A few months earlier two stories had been highly mediatized: the first one was the life story of Samira Bellil who revealed in an autobiography the gang rapes she had been the victim of as a teenager in the *banlieues*, and the second story was the one of Sohane, a 17 year-old girl, who had been burnt alive by two young *banlieues* men in a basement. This media focus on *banlieues* women gave NPNS an opportunity to be heard and expand their ‘movement’: the NPNS women were soon portrayed as the representatives of *Arab* women.

This rapidly-gained role of representatives can be explained by two structural factors. First, they filled a gap in the association world which lacked efficient coordination between feminist and antiracist groups (Freeman 301). The second reason for their promotion as the voice of *Arab* women is that the solution NPNS offered to fight sexism in the *banlieues* was to impose and respect a very controversial French value, namely *laïcité*. *Laïcité* is a form of secularism based out of the French Republic’s foundational ideology called ‘republican universalism’, or ‘republicanism’. Republicanism, which is still today the dominant theory in debates about religion, ethnicity or gender in France, demands that citizens “transcend their particular affiliations in the public sphere towards full membership in a wider community of citizens” (Stychin 352). Equality between citizens can only happen when differences are put aside in favour of the celebration of neutral common values. So, the concept of *laïcité*, which derives from this republican ideology, demands that religious markers are relegated to the private sphere to preserve a universalist and neutral vision of French citizenship in the public sphere.

But as a specialist in immigration law, Kiren Grewal, points out, Muslim immigrants are often presented in popular discourses as being opposed to the value of *laïcité* (57). The

ideological support for *laïcité* of the *Arab* women of NPNS therefore made the organization appealing to the French state and a great ally in the defense of Republican values. For instance in 2003 and 2004, NPNS was a powerful advocate for the government when the law banning religious signs in high schools was being debated and the concept of *laïcité* being subjected to criticisms. NPNS's message was even incorporated in the celebration of the Bastille Day in 2003, when fourteen of its members were photographed dressed as *La Marianne*, which is a symbol of the French Republic, and their photos were exhibited on the front columns of the French National Assembly. In turn, the cooperation with state officials allows NPNS to receive financial and political support to develop as the direct link between the state and women in the *banlieues*.

Nonetheless, while the NPNS leaders are recognized (by state officials and in the media) as the voice of *Arab* women from the *banlieues*, their stances and statements also perpetuate gendered and racialized discourses that produce and shape the 'good' *Arab* subjects. To begin with, NPNS conveys essentialized stereotypes about the *Arab* men and women, and their relation to one another. For instance, the former President of NPNS, Fadela Amara<sup>3</sup> describes the heterosexual relations among young *Arabs* in the *banlieues* as "unbearable for the girls" (Amara, 58). Another example is Samira Bellil, of Algerian origin and one of the spokespersons of NPNS, who was quoted in *Libération* saying that she "would never date any men from her culture because they are either religious (fanatics) or scumbags" (qtd in Grewal 61). This depiction of the men of her Maghrebi culture as inapt for 'regular' gender relations, which, if we follow her logic, she could find in the 'better' French culture, serves the old colonialist rescue narrative in which brown women need to be saved by the white men, in this case the French patriarchal Republic. In addition to that, the stereotypes conveyed by NPNS introduce the *Arab* male subjects as oppressive to their women. Hence,

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<sup>3</sup> Fadela Amara is since 2007 the State secretary in charge of urban politics for the Ministry of Work, of Social Relations, of Family, of Solidarity and of the City

by stigmatizing men and by victimizing women, NPNS presents the *Arab* women as potentially ‘rescuable’ subjects if they adopt French cultural norms, while men are seen as ‘inapt’ for assimilation. These discourses thus shape the gendered behaviours expected from immigrants in order to assimilate.

Moreover, NPNS also perpetuates assimilationist discourses and norms that control the ‘acceptable’ cultural behaviors of the *Arab* subjects. Indeed NPNS strongly condemns some cultural and religious practices of Maghrebis, and thus turns the assimilation question into a problem of cultural origins. The hijab is for instance demonized by the leaders of NPNS as being a tool of oppression and of discrimination.<sup>4</sup> In her book, Breaking the Silence (2003), the former President of NPNS, Fadela Amara portrays veiled Muslim women as either victims of their cultural traditions, or as what she refers to as “soldiers of green fascism” (48). In the first case, Muslim women would have no agency: they would be forced to wear the headscarf and/or would be lacking education that would give them the tools to resist the cultural norms that oppress them (77). This first portrayal of veiled women by Fadela Amara is aligned with what, as Saba Mahmood would call, is a tendency of “secular liberal feminists” (8-10), to locate female agency only where there is resistance to patriarchal norms. In the second case, Fadela Amara suggests that Muslim women have this time chosen to wear the headscarf as part of an anti-democratic agenda that would disrespect French values of secularism. These “soldiers of green fascism” would have chosen to wear the veil for a political purpose rather than for religious reasons. The problem here with Fadela Amara’s binary analysis (of the use of the veil) is that she, and NPNS through her, does not leave any room for an interpretation of the veil that entails both religious consciousness and women’s agency. Instead, the only way for these women to recover agency is by adopting French norms, and thus the French value of *laïcité*.

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<sup>4</sup> “the veil is a tool of oppression, of alienation, of discrimination, an instrument of men’s power over women.”, in Fadela Amara, Breaking the Silence, Paris: La Découverte, 2003, p.79

Also, the standards for what is ‘acceptable’ from *Arab* subjects are being constituted through NPNS’s frequent tendency to blame culture for individual behaviors. As Leti Volpp argues, an immigrant is “more likely thought to be governed by cultural dictates” (89) than a white native is. In particular, the reason for an individual’s ‘bad’ behavior is commonly linked to cultural origins when he or she belongs to an immigrant culture. This phenomenon happens with the women of NPNS: when they criticize the behaviour of *Arab* men and women, they usually give a cultural justification for it. In her book Dans L’Enfer des Tournantes, (2002) one of the spokespersons for NPNS Samira Bellil (implicitly) connects ethnicity and religion with the collective rapes occurring in the *banlieues*. In her preface, written by the journalist Josée Stoquart, it is stated that:

Young men [in the *banlieues*] are pulled between the strict discipline of their cultural origins (religious fundamentalism, the untouchability of the woman, polygamy) and a cultural environment which is heavily eroticized ... These adolescents have no points of reference and are not conscious of the gravity of their actions. For them, gang rape is a game and the girls, the objects (13).

Comments like this turn acts, which are considered immoral, into a problem linked to the boys’ cultural origins. Hence, as Leti Volpp would argue, the marker of difference between the immigrant culture (here the Maghrebi culture) and the majority’s culture (here the French natives’ culture) becomes not only ethnic but also moral: the moral values within the immigrants’ culture are presented as incompatible with the dominant society. Such conception of immigrants’ culture further suggests that the condition for those of Maghrebi descent to adapt to French society is to reject their supposedly ‘morally-charged’ cultural values. Here again, the ‘acceptable’ *Arab* subjects are produced through a discursive system that controls their gendered but also their cultural behaviors.

While such discursive system, which NPNS participates in, expects the ‘good’ *Arabs* to adapt to the prevailing French norms and culture, it also excludes the men and women of Maghrebi origins, whose behaviors (both private and public) are considered contrary to

French values. As the sociologist Nacira Guénif argues in “The Other French Exception” (2006), NPNS serves the common perception in France of a clear division between the ‘reassuring’ *Arab* figures on one hand (like the women from NPNS or the ‘secular’ Muslim men), and the ‘obscene’ *Arab* figures on the other (like the veiled women or ‘patriarchal’ men) (31). Indeed, by applauding only efforts of ‘assimilation’, NPNS disdains men and women of Maghrebi descent who show signs of affiliation to their culture of origin.

This line of separation between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Arabs is also the line of integration/exclusion within immigration politics. For instance this division can be found in the state’s decisions to grant citizenship to immigrants. In 2008, for the first time a Muslim woman’s private practices were the reasons she was denied French citizenship. This woman, Faiza M., came to France from Morocco in 2000, is married to a French man, and speaks French well. But according to the administrative judge,<sup>5</sup> she has adopted a “radical practice” of her religion by wearing the burqa and by living in “total submission to the men of her family”. Thus, her dress codes and her level of practice of Islam were considered “incompatible with the essential values of the French community and particularly with the principle of equality between sexes” (Conseil d’Etat n°286798).

Such judicial decision mirrors the gendered and racialized discourses that circulate in French society about *Arab* subjects: a Maghrebi woman’s individual behavior is conflated with a culture whose moral values are considered threatening for the French Republic. The judicial decision about Faiza M. has been applauded by the NPNS women, who claim in their message of support, that it is a relief to see the Republican values once again prevail. What is noticeable here is that while the discourses enabled by NPNS shape and control the assimilation of French women of Maghrebi descent, they also prove here to literally exclude the ‘inadequate’ Maghrebis out of the French community of citizens.

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<sup>5</sup> or the *commissaire du gouvernement*, in charged of giving the judicial decision.

In the French Republic, which claims to be based on a universalist vision of citizens, examples like NPNS's gendered and racialized discursive practices towards an immigrant minority reveal the cracks and stakes in the republican model of integration.



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