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# Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women

Sirma Bilge

*Engaging with a figure that came to operate as a powerful cultural signifier of otherness in debates over migrant/Muslim integration across the West, the ‘veiled woman’; the paper questions the idea of agency that inheres in the contemporary feminist discourses on Muslim veil. After showing the shortcomings and adverse effects of two dominant readings of the Muslim veil, as a symbol of women’s subordination to men, or as an act of resistance to Western hegemony, it explores an alternative avenue drawing on both the poststructuralist critique of the humanist subject and feminist intersectional theorising to answer the question of what kind of conception of agency can help us to think about the agency of the veiled woman without binding a priori the meaning of her veiling to the teleology of emancipation, whether feminist or anti-imperialist.*

*Keywords:* Agency; Feminist Discourses; Intersectionality; Muslim Veil; Orientalism

## Introduction

Contemporary debates over citizenship and immigrant integration are increasingly characterised by the prescriptive normativity of gender equality and sexual freedoms, articulating women’s rights and gay rights<sup>1</sup> to the nation to draw civilisational boundaries between Western modernity, framed as liberal and secular, and non-Western cultures, supposed to be illiberal and prone to religious fanaticism. Migrants from those imagined geographies, their real or presumed cultural practices, gender and intergenerational relations have become not only a major target of policy initiatives and media comments, but also central to arguments over the rights and wrongs of

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multiculturalism (Grillo 9). It is particularly with regards to Muslims, specifically to how far liberal democracies should accommodate ‘their difference’, that the *gender-equality-and-sexual-freedoms* frame has become the normative interpretative schema, in line with a new version of the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis, arguing that the ‘core value clash’, ‘the primary cultural fault line’ between the West and Islam is not about democracy but gender equality and sexual liberalisation (see Norris and Inglehart).

The increased entrenchment of the gender-and-sexuality frame, laying an ideological ground on which issues of citizenship, social cohesion and the limits of diversity accommodation are debated, and ‘failures’ of multiculturalism demonstrated, is evident within the West. Cross-national comparisons indicate its pervasiveness in the construction of Muslims as *essentially different* from liberal Western subjects and of their culture as *inherently* sexist and homophobic (Phillips and Saharso).

One figure has gained iconic status in these debates. Paradoxically portrayed both as a *victim* (passive) of her oppressive patriarchal culture/religion and male kin, and as a *threat* (active) to Western modernity and culture of freedoms, the veiled<sup>2</sup> Muslim woman has been turned into an allegory for undesirable cultural difference. Because the veil is an over-determined signifier constantly deployed to illustrate the ‘clash of civilisation’, women’s oppression in Islam, the fundamentalist peril and the pitfalls of multiculturalism (Kiliç, Saharso and Sauer 404), the question of whether veiled women should be tolerated or outlawed in public space has become a paradigmatic showcase of the antagonism between advocating universal rights for women and protecting minorities’ cultural rights (Freedman 31). Underpinning this dichotomy is the claim that accommodating Muslim minorities imperils gender equality, sexual freedoms and secularism – a claim endorsed by some strands of feminism.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, such a framing follows a single-issue politics’ perspective according to which one can either promote immigrants’ rights or women’s rights (Fekete) – a highly problematic claim from an intersectional perspective, which precisely intends, as we shall see, to offer an alternative to reductive analyses of power based on a single axis of social division, be it race, class or gender. The construction of minority/immigrant rights as menacing women’s rights is hence mostly achieved by the depiction of veiled women as *devoid of agency*, which has generated criticism within feminist scholarship, making the veil a site of contention between different strands of feminism.

The Muslim veil raises fundamental questions about citizenship, nationalism and diasporic meaning-making, as well as conceptions of freedom and emancipation that are hegemonic within Western feminist imaginaries, interplaying with national imaginaries. Arguing that feminist engagements with these debates need to be seen as part and parcel of larger civilisational boundary-drawing ventures, I address the idea of *agency* inhering in feminist discussions of the Muslim veil to capture the ways in which particular understandings of agency and subjectivity are tied to

questions of inclusion: who is considered a deserving citizen, who needs state intervention to be excluded or made into an appropriate citizen?

My focus on feminist discussions of the Muslim veil is influenced by two interrelated factors. The first resides in the tricky location the religious subject occupies in feminist analytics and politics. Historically, most feminist writings, in line with Daly's influential *Beyond God the Father*, have denounced religion as an intrinsically androcentric and oppressive institution. Despite more nuanced perspectives proposed by recent feminist scholarship on women and religion – gendering secularisation theories, examining women's devotional lives, exploring religious agency<sup>4</sup> and arguing that the problem is not with religion per se but its appropriation by men<sup>5</sup> – mainstream approaches equating religion, particularly Islam, with pre-modernity, tradition and backwardness, and feminism with modernity and secularism, remain influential in various political sites (see European Union), particularly within what Halley calls "governance feminism" (20).

The second factor relates to the problematic persistence of a gender-first approach to discrimination in governance feminism, which pushes feminist agendas within states, human rights establishments and supranational organisations, without critically engaging with specific overt and covert exclusions they may enforce, or social hierarchies they may consolidate. An eloquent illustration of this will be seen in the French *hijab* controversy. The influence of governance feminism on debates over Muslim integration should also be addressed because of the co-optation of its rhetoric and emancipatory goals by political forces pushing anti-immigration and monoculturalist agendas.

There are hence both theoretical and political reasons to examine feminist accounts of the Muslim veil, as well as their conceptions of agency, subject, autonomy and emancipation. Two underlying questions guide my inquiry: (1) in what way does the figure of the veiled woman help us rethink the normative liberal account of human agency informing most feminist interpretations? (2) Is it possible to redefine the concept of agency so that unaccounted-for forms of agency can be considered? My arguments are developed in two parts. First I take issue with the concept of agency and explore some of the problems it entails when framed according to a humanist model of personhood. Then I turn my focus to different feminist readings of the Muslim veil to tackle their conceptions of agency, and their shared assumptions about the free-willed subject as a source of agency. I conclude by outlining an alternative approach informed by both the poststructuralist critique of the humanist subject and the feminist theory of intersectionality, which opens, I argue, a viable path for a critical theory of agency. Such a theory can illuminate how contemporary debates on citizenship and integration – opposing migrant minorities from non-Western geographies to Western liberal democratic principles – are inextricably bound up with historical conditions under which agency is understood and some forms of agency become paradigmatic, while others are erased.

### Agency in Social Theory

Agency has been a central topic in social theory, particularly in debates over the correlation between the individual and system. Since the time of classical sociology, much of the literature has grappled with this relationship, usually referred to as the fundamental sociological dilemma between structure and action, following a *modernist* line (Sztompka 29): individuals are represented as being in relation to something *external* to themselves called system/structure/society; they are either determined by the system (structural-model, e.g. Durkheim) or they act upon it (action-model, e.g. Simmel, Weber). The structural-model argues that structures self-generate and determine the very nature of individual consciousness, whereas the more individualistic/liberal-oriented action-model claims that structures are abstractions created by individuals and cannot determine the action of their makers (Rapport and Overing 3–4). Agency is central to the action-model, which attempts to grasp individuals' capacities to act independently of structural constraints, or against them. Intrinsic in this questioning is a humanistic conception, linking agency to concepts such as rationality, wilful action, individual autonomy and moral authority (Davies 55).

#### *Liberal/Humanist Conception of Agency*

Defined as “the free exercise of self-willed behaviour” (Mack 149), agency is a deeply liberal concept in its philosophical sense, closely linked to the *transcendental humanist subject*, a rational, free-willed, choosing agent. Yet, its roots are not secular and can be traced to the old Protestant doctrine of individual responsibility that influenced thinkers like Locke: “individuals are agents because they are responsible for their own souls” (Asad 271). The concept of agency, argues Asad, is also tied to the spirit of capitalism, invoking “the mutually dependent figures of the entrepreneur and the consumer, or, more abstractly, the functions of initiating and choosing. Liberalism has worked these figures into its individualist theories of politics and morality” (271).

Since women, non-whites, minors and the insane were historically excluded from this liberal account of agentic subjects (Davies 55), agency became a key concern for emancipatory politics, in anti-racist, feminist and anti-colonialist movements. Asserting and denouncing women's lack of agency has been politically foundational for feminism, with early liberal feminist thinkers such as Wollstonecraft attempting to appropriate and extend the ‘modernist subject’ to include women (Hekman 195). Agency is also a divisive issue within social theory and movements, particularly in currents concerned with transformative knowledge and political action. While for many, agency has become a prerequisite around which other concepts were defined (Gardiner 9), others have criticised it for being “an abstraction greatly underspecified, often misused, much fetishized [...] by social scientists” (Comaroff and Comaroff 37), or have deplored the tendency to take it for granted in many theories for which political action is paramount (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 8). Undoubtedly, the most unsettling critique of agency came from poststructuralism.

*Poststructuralist Critique of Agency*

In response to humanist assumptions making agency, as poststructuralists argue, a universal trait of a pre-social, autonomous moral agent (individual), the post-structuralist critique posits that “human subjectivity is constructed by ideology (Althusser), language (Lacan) or discourse (Foucault), [therefore] any action performed by that subject must be also to some extent a consequence of those things” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 8). Attentive to the workings of language in subject-formation and critical of the antagonistic conception of the relation between the subject and social structure; poststructuralists have extended theories of subjectivity, substantially challenging humanist accounts. In many respects, Judith Butler’s work has been highly influential.

Drawing heavily on psychoanalysis, Butler refutes the linking of agency to a conscious expression of intent (purposeful action), for the subject is never fully self-transparent; her psyche is split, with inaccessible unconscious mechanisms and drives (Butler *Bodies That Matter*). Drawing on Foucault’s theory of ‘subjectivation’ and power, namely, on the discursive constitution of subjects and the ambivalence of power as both productive and repressive, Butler contends that a conception of agency relying on an ‘epistemological account of identity’, on a pre-discursive self, should be replaced by the one locating the problematic within ‘practices of signification’ (*Gender Trouble* 197). Tackling the subtle persistence of an *oppositional framework*, conceiving social agents as being outside the structure and trying to make their way through societal constraints, Butler argues:

Even within theories maintaining a highly qualified or situated subject, the subject still encounters its discursively constituted environment in an oppositional epistemological frame. The culturally enmired subject negotiates its constructions, even when those constructions are the very predicates of its own identity. (*Gender Trouble* 195)

Relocated within the meaning-making process, within the possibility of a variation in signification, the question of agency becomes therefore “a question of how signification and resignification work” (*Gender Trouble* 198).

Under poststructuralist critiques, the humanist account of agency started to lose some of its authority within feminist theory in the 1990s, generating disquiet within some strands of feminism about the political consequences of poststructuralist subject-deconstruction: “Do attacks on liberal human identity and essence disable the concept of agency, and therefore do they inhibit feminist action?” (Gardiner 8). For many, deconstructing the concept of human agent has meant dismantling agency, a task fundamentally incongruent with feminism.<sup>6</sup> For others, such as Butler, feminists do not need to assume the priority of the subject to safeguard agency; “the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency” (“Contingent Foundations” 46).

Whether the poststructuralist critique leads to a viable conception of agency is a vast topic of debate in contemporary feminist theory (Mackenzie and Stoljar 28), exceeding the scope of this paper. The specific interest of poststructuralism for us resides in its radical critique that urges a reflection on the hegemonic consequences of an uncritical use of humanist agency, as in the possibilities it creates for locating agency in seemingly irrational acts such as ‘religious submission’.

### **Feminist Readings of Veiled Muslim Women’s Agency**

The Muslim veil has drawn a variety of interpretations from social scientists across a broad political spectrum from various disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, focusing on aspects of the veil, such as its multiple and shifting meanings, women’s motivations in wearing it, whether it is a requirement in the *Quran*, as well as veil controversies across the West. Despite significant ethnographic works revealing the complexity of contemporary headscarf/veil cultures, a dichotomous frame prevails in the literature and, not insignificantly, in feminist scholarship: the veil as a *symbol of submission* of women to men, and the veil as a *symbol of resistance* against Western hegemony, commodification of women’s bodies and post-9/11 Islamophobia. This dichotomous framing of the Muslim veil either as a symbol of oppression or of resistance has its historical roots in the colonial subjugation where the ‘woman question’, caught between colonial domination and anti-colonialist national resistance, has been instrumentalised in both (Yegenoglu).

If the submission frame is typical of the liberal/universalist feminist discourse, it is the resistance frame that characterises postcolonial feminist accounts. While both currents intend to speak for women – whether generic ‘women’ or ‘racialised/subaltern’ ones – both fail to address the reasons most frequently given by veiled women; questions of piety, morality, modesty, virtue and divinity (Mahmood 16). Mahmood backs her point by giving the example of an Egyptian sociologist, Sherifa Zufur, who conducted research among veiled university students in contemporary Cairo. Although a majority of her interviewees have given piety as their primary reason for taking up the veil, the sociologist asserts that their ‘real’ motivations resided in socio-economic opportunities that veiling opens in Egyptian society (Mahmood 16). The underlying logic of this replacing of the religious explanations given by respondents about their veiling by the sociologist’s own rationale should be questioned. Is it because certain choices cannot be qualified as choices?

### *Subordination and the False Consciousness Thesis*

Predominant in European controversies about the veil, this mode of thinking equates the Muslim veil with women’s oppression by Islamic patriarchy, and asserts its incompatibility with ‘European values’ and ‘national character’. It argues that veiled women are either coerced to wear the veil or develop a false consciousness; in both cases they are *devoid of agency*. Yet, this mode of thinking simultaneously associates

the veil with political Islam, ultimately turning veiled women from unconscious agents into dangerous agents of Islam qua diasporic political force threatening Western *Weltanschauung*. These concurrent depictions, initially grounded on the same thesis, are well illustrated in feminist interventions in the French *hijab* debates.

In France during the decade-long controversies over veiling, feminists have predominantly adopted a position equating *voile* (veil) with women's subjugation, and have supported its banning from public schools in the name of women's rights, and as a defence of French *laïcité* (secularism) against the 'menace' of political Islam. The idea of (male) manipulated veiled girls threatening the Republic coloured not only right-wing rhetoric but also feminist discourse.<sup>7</sup> Depicting the veil as a proselytising symbol of religious affiliation created a chain of meanings making veiling anti-secular, hence anti-French (Keaton 181). Ultimately, being against the ban came to mean being not only against gender equality but also against the integration of Muslims, as argued by Bernard Stasi, the state ombudsman who headed the Commission on the application of the principle of *laïcité* which recommended a law against veiling (Duval Smith).

Central to this meaning-making is the equation of the veil with women's oppression, which is itself achieved by denying agency to veiled women – a pervasive reasoning among French feminists. For example, Yvette Roudy, the national secretary for women's rights in the Socialist Party, argued in *Le Monde* ("Affaire" 14): "The headscarf is a sign of subjugation, whether consented or imposed, in fundamentalist Muslim society [...]. Accepting the veiling would mean agreeing with women's inequality in the French Muslim society." If Roudy does not elaborate on 'whether consented or imposed', other French feminists unequivocally invalidate the possibility of consent, coupling the voluntary submission argument with a false consciousness. Anne Zelensky and Anne Vigerie argue in another *Le Monde* article (29 May 2003):

[W]earing the voile is not only a sign of belonging to a religion. It symbolizes the place of women in Islam as Islamism understands it. That place is in the shadow, downgraded and submitting to men. The fact that some women demand it does not change its meaning. We know that dominated people are the most fervent supporters of their domination. (in Bowen 229)

Evidently, what veiled women have to say about their veiling is irrelevant, and cannot change the meaning of the veil, since they are alienated and unwittingly adopt the views of their oppressors. In contrast, French feminists qua emancipated subjects have access to the 'real' meaning of the veil: it is both a symbol and an instrument of women's oppression by men. Yet in the contemporary economy of legitimate knowledge and authority over voice and representation, French feminists cannot credibly hold an authoritative speaking position without insider allies who can provide them *expert testimonies*. At that political moment, a new figure of native informant<sup>8</sup> akin to 'the classical anthropological sidekick' emerges to spread relatively constant ideas about her culture and community (Ansari 50), and justify state intervention to outlaw the veil. Far from being voiceless, this new subaltern is

urged to speak, for the conditions of speaking have been reconfigured in a way congruent with contemporary expectations of ‘self-representation’, but her speech should benefit dominant sites (52). These new figures,<sup>9</sup> who play an important role in contemporary feminist politics, can be thought of as ‘internal feminist Orientalists’ for they endorse ‘feminist orientalism’ (Zonana) and bestow on it the legitimacy and epistemic privilege of ‘cultural insiders’. Their contributions, uttered from the authoritative standpoint of insiders, have been central to making gender paradigmatic of the ‘civilisational’ gap between the West and the rest. Yet the ambiguity of their positioning, which entails a complex Orientalist dialectic, should be highlighted. Not only does their portrayal of veiled women as oppressed sustain the image of Western women as emancipated, but also it functions as a mirror to ‘good Muslims’, those who are *les évolués*; unveiled, enlightened Muslim women like themselves and secular, gentle Arab men who accompany them – a couple to be opposed to ‘bad Muslims’; veiled girls and violent Arab/Muslim boys (Guénif-Souilamas; Bowen).

In the French headscarf debates, these accredited insiders were French women of Muslim background who publicly opposed the veil, and received much media attention and political acclaim, whilst those who wore the veil were rejected as legitimate sources of knowledge. Their exclusion from public debates, particularly from the Stasi Commission’s hearings, relied on the submission/false consciousness thesis, as put by Delphy, one of the few renowned French feminists to have publicly opposed the ban, in a public lecture: “these women cannot be heard, since they are veiled, which means they are either alienated or manipulated into wearing the symbol of their own oppression” (“Intervention”). Conversely, those who opposed the veil offered highly praised expert testimonies to the Stasi Commission. Chahdortt Djavann, whose claim to expertise relied on her own experience in Iran after the revolution and who fiercely opposed the veil, offered sensationalist tales of women’s oppression in Muslim countries (Scott 163). Her incendiary pamphlet begins with: “For ten years I wore the veil. It was either the veil or death. I know what I am talking about” (Djavann 7). Another figure, Fadela Amara, the leader of the organisation *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (NPNS<sup>10</sup>), and a strong supporter of the ban, declared before the Stasi Commission: “I consider the veil to be first and foremost a tool of oppression” (“Audition”). She has received extraordinary attention and recognition from media and politicians. In early 2004, at the same time as French legislators were debating the bill banning religious symbols in public schools, Amara’s book, co-authored with a journalist from *Le Monde*, received an emblematic prize, the political book of the year, granted by the Parliament. As cogently put by Bowen:

[F]or politicians the NPNS analysis was a pure gift. NPNS explained the problem of violence in terms of sexism in the underdeveloped portions of urban France rather than the result of policies of labor migration and residential segregation. Problems of labor and discrimination would require imaginative, expensive policies; Arab sexism called for denunciation – and a law affecting Muslim women. (216)

The casting veiled women as *unconscious agents* of their own manipulation at the (male) hands of Muslim fundamentalism was reinforced by recurrent references to fundamentalist regimes, such as Afghanistan under the Taliban or Iran after the revolution where veiling has been violently forced upon women. Both ethnic French feminists and ‘cultural insiders’, who were given a priori epistemic privilege and legitimacy to represent their oppressed/alienated sisters thanks to their real or purported first-hand experience of those regimes, used these references to justify hard-line legislation in France. Élisabeth Badinter, a well-known feminist philosopher, for whom allowing girls to wear headscarves in public schools meant that the French republic had given up on gender equality for the sake of religious tolerance (Murphy cited in Bilge 122), invited European feminists to learn a lesson from the French ban:

Soon feminists in the rest of the Europe will realise the headscarf is a terrible symbol of submission. You cannot denounce what has been going on in Afghanistan while tolerating the veil in Europe – *even if women claim they are wearing it voluntarily*. (in Duval Smith, emphasis mine)

Of particular relevance for us, is the fact that her apparent distrust of what veiled women say about their veiling suggests that, for her, veiling cannot involve a choice since it signifies renouncing one’s personal autonomy. Indeed, for Badinter,

even if Muslim girls might appear to choose this practice autonomously, this does not mean that they are autonomous. This is because the content of their cultural norms – namely, the Muslim values of female restraint, modesty and seclusion – are opposed to personal autonomy. (in Mookherjee 33)

Tellingly, her understanding of agency does not refer to the ability to act in one’s best interests, but rather implies a value judgment on the action’s *content*. Such a ‘content-dependent’ definition of agency, a truly humanistic one resonating with the Millsian premise that “one cannot freely submit to slavery, nor prefer a slothful life to one of Socratic questioning” (Mookherjee 33), is not uncommon either in feminist scholarship on women and religion. For instance, Mack cites a study in which the voluntary commitment of a devout woman to an authoritarian religious order is read as an example of the *wrong use of agency*, since she abdicates her complete individual autonomy (150–51 emphasis mine).

It is worth noting that while most associations between veiling and the threat of political Islam depict veiled women as (non-agentic) political tools manipulated by male militants, recent analyses suggest a shift. Drawing on their analysis of the British controversy on the *niqab* following the October 2006 comments of Jack Straw, then Labour leader of the Commons, that *niqab* signified ‘separation’ and impeded communication, Khiabany and Williamson (77) argue that media representation of veiled Muslim women moved from the one of oppressed victims without agency who need to be ‘saved’ by the West to that of aggressors who have been conceded ‘too much agency by Western liberalism’. The idea of veiled women qua aggressors also coloured French debates. Once it was established that veiling troubled public order,

it was difficult to maintain the view that Muslim girls and women were victims; wearing the headscarf itself became an act of aggression. Jacques Chirac said as much in a speech in Tunisia in December 2003. "Wearing the veil, whether intended or not, is a kind of aggression." (Scott 158)

Ultimately, the veil has become an over-determined cultural signifier predominantly disqualifying its wearer as a free-willed agentic subject, since one cannot voluntarily choose to wear such a symbol of female submission, while at the same time making her a dangerous agent, a civilisational threat to Western modernity.

What needs to be underlined is the fact that throughout the *hijab* controversy French feminists have solely problematised intra-group (Muslim) gender relations, overlooking the politics of nation played through this very problematisation. From an intersectional perspective, such an exclusive focus on minority gender relations conceals forms of oppression operating on majority/minority level via other social divisions such as nation, class and race (Mohanty), and obscures how assumptions about gender are racialised and how cultural othering is modulated by gender. Feminist interventions in the French case demonstrate that "political strategies that challenge only certain subordinating practices while maintaining existing hierarchies not only marginalize those who are subject to multiple systems of subordination but also often result in oppositionalizing race and gender discourses" (Crenshaw 112–13). In such a polarised debate, one is called upon to choose between anti-sexism and anti-racism, and a political position combining the two and cognizant of the intersectionality of axes of oppression, is simply deemed unthinkable (Delphy "Antisexisme").

In sum, feminist readings of the controversy were saturated with Orientalist assumptions and heavily relied on a subordination/false consciousness frame, overlooking the social (relational and context-dependent) nature of agency, and resulting in a conception of the free-willed individual as a 'socially unfettered' concept (Ahearn "Language and Agency" 114). Their content-dependent understanding of agency, recognising as choices only those in line with Western secular/liberal values, maintain unequal power relations within which the ideal of the autonomous subject is always already embedded (Bilge 122). Accordingly, the eviction of veiled women from the realm of agency is achieved through a syllogism: *Agency involves free-will; no woman freely chooses to wear the veil because it is oppressive to women; thus veiled women have no agency*. The construction of veiled women as non-agentic and the veil as a tool for women's oppression are hence intertwined and inseparable meaning-making processes. What is less expected is that a similar conception of agency, one tying agency to the ideal of autonomous subject, also infuses the opposite interpretation: the veil as resistance.

#### *Resistance and the Subversion Thesis*

In reaction to the subordination/false consciousness thesis, denying agency to veiled women, a new frame has been elaborated mainly by postcolonial scholars, who fervently engaged with the concept to make visible agentic capacities of formerly non-agentic non-subjects, and underline their ability to resist/subvert Western hegemony.

Taking issue with subtle forms of Western ethnocentrism hidden in the universal discourse of women's human rights, postcolonial feminist scholarship tackles, following Saïd's critique of Orientalism, the dialectic constitution of normative emancipated Western womanhood through the depiction of veiled women as oppressed by their men (Khiabany and Williamson 76). Their refusal to address "the oppression of women by indigenous patriarchy and by colonialism as two separate issues" (Yegenoglu 122) unquestionably constitutes a crucial theoretical and political step in the production of oppositional knowledge, which uncovers the politics of nation and race that are played through liberal discourses of gender equality and sexual freedoms. By considering in-group (Muslim) patriarchy inside the *matrix of domination*<sup>11</sup> between Western states and their Muslim minorities, which is what an intersectional analysis is about, postcolonial feminists accomplish an important task of decolonising representations of gender relations ascribed to Muslims and reveal how, in the current discursive environment which makes women's rights and gay rights a key civilisational marker of the West, veiled Muslim women living in Western societies find themselves at the intersection of race and gender domination.

While this literature provides an essential antidote to previous hegemonic accounts obliterating subjectivities and experiences of subordinated groups, the conception of agency it circulates is deficient, for it reduces agency to resistance (Mahmood), which is only one of the many configurations that agency may take, and expels social action involving "complicity with, accommodation to, or reinforcement of the status quo – sometimes all at the same time" (Ahearn "Agency" 8) from the agentic realm. Linking the veil systematically to resistant/subversive agency produces a series of assumptions and elisions, which encumber the exploration of non-resistant agencies (Mahmood) and hints to a thorny 'research' issue: the ascription of political consciousness – generally in line with researchers' own political or ethical affinities, whether feminist, post-colonialist or anti-imperialist, to those for whom these categories may not constitute meaningful political or ethical categories of practice (Abu-Lughod 47). Hence, there is need to be wary of the category of resistance, which seems to impose

a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power – a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms. (Mahmood 9)

With their eagerness to 'give voice' and inspire activism by finding or reinventing traditions of resistance (Ahearn "Language and Agency" 115), resistance-oriented approaches, biased by a certain romanticism, significantly impoverish the analysis of power – researchers being too concerned to find resisters and not attentive enough to explaining the workings of power (Abu-Lughod 42). What is therefore needed is a way to keep the intersectional analysis embedded in postcolonial readings, while at the same time dissociating the interpretation of veiled women's agency from the *doxa* of resistance. But, before considering how this can be achieved, we need to illustrate

how resistance-oriented approaches discount veiling to what it may help achieve in a given context, amalgamating motivation and outcome and reducing the veil to its functions – a tendency I call instrumentalist reductionism.

These approaches tend to locate veiled women's agency in *resistance*, whether against Western imperialism, global capitalism, commodification of women's bodies or post-9/11 Islamophobia. In this frame, the veil becomes a symbol of contest, as well as a marker of self-authored difference and authenticity. It bestows dignity and makes young veiled women “part of the great anti-imperialist Islamic movement” (Afshar 143); it is “a symbol for struggle against encroaching materialism and imperialism and more importantly a symbol for [...] [Muslim women's] identity that is rooted in their own tradition” (El-Hamel 303), or a ‘political choice’ to contest social exclusion and anti-Muslim racism by publicly branding oneself as Muslim and displaying an outward sign of solidarity with Muslims, in the post-9/11 climate of rampant Islamophobia (Afshar, Aitken and Franks 262; Wilson 24).

They also emphasise deployments of religious rationales to meet “extra-religious ends such as economic opportunities, domestic relations, political ideologies, and cultural affiliation”, thereby locating agency in “the strategic use and navigation of religious traditions and practices to meet the demands of contemporary life” (Avishai 411). Several authors highlight the ‘emancipatory ends’ veiling serves. For Bartkowski and Ghazal-Read (88), although veiling is “a traditional practice reinforcing gender difference”, it is used strategically by Muslim women to promote equal opportunity in co-educational schooling and paid employment, and to liberate themselves from the oppressive beauty culture of the West and the objectifying male gaze. Qualifying veiling as an ‘adaptive strategy’, Hoodfar claims that, while the majority of her informants, veiled young women in Canada, explained their veiling as a part of their religion saying “they wanted to be good Muslim women”, “a closer reading of the interview transcripts regarding women's decisions to take up the veil reveals a somewhat different story” (17–18). She gives the following ‘causes’ of their veiling: mitigating parental control and community gossip, symbolically communicating to Muslim and non-Muslim men their unavailability for dating, resisting unwanted marriage arrangements without alienating their parents, actively asserting an Islamic identity in a context of exclusion and ostracism, making public their Islamic expectations regarding their prospective husband (Hoodfar 18–35). Tellingly, her analysis mixes up motivation and outcome, and replaces the religious reasons of her informants by what veiling may also help to accomplish in a given context. Such an instrumentalist interpretation reduces the veil to (some of) its functions, and erases questions of piety, resonating with the aforementioned analysis of Zufur, which is critiqued by Mahmood (16).

It bears remembering that I do not refute the fact that veiling, in particular contexts, may help attain extra-religious ends in secular domains. Rather, I want to call into question the prevailing instrumentalist reductionism that obliterates religious reasons given by the majority of veiled women, and reverses cause–consequence relations. What is obscured in the process is *religious agency*, which

is not driven by a desire to resist social pressure, but by a desire to submit to God. The resulting relative autonomy vis-à-vis social environment produced by such desire needs to be recognized as an *effect* of the desire to submit to God (Bracke 63)

not as its cause.

In that respect, Tarlo's anthropological study of *hijab* in contemporary London offers a refreshing frame by exploring less the agency of veiled women than the agency of the veil. Focusing on the contextual interactive aspect of *hijab*, Tarlo (132) affirms that "for many women the adoption of *hijab* transforms not only their sense of self but also their relationship to others and the wider environment", which is not only in line with Mahmood's analysis of veiling as a transformative technique of the self, but it also foregrounds "the agency of *hijab* in people's lives" (Tarlo 132). For Tarlo, real and imagined effects of the *hijab* fit into Alfred Gell's conceptualisation of the secondary agency of objects, that is, "the capacity of artefacts which are the products of human agency to take on agency in the lives of humans" (Tarlo 151). Such an approach does not merge the veil with its various functions in given contexts of social interaction.

When feminist analysts are not silent on the question of religious agency, they seem mostly to portray religious devotion as counterproductive for women's agency (Mack 150) or translate religious drives into intelligible categories from a secular perspective, such as rational-choice-oriented strategies, whether for upward socio-economic mobility or avoiding an unwanted marriage. The root cause of these deficiencies resides in their conception of the relation between the subject and social forces, which follows a modernist line, crafting subjects in oppositional relation to an external system. Although their readings of veiled women are diametrically opposed (the subordination thesis casts them as non-agentic, since one cannot choose freely to submit oneself, while the resistance thesis turns them into rational-choice-oriented dissidents), they rely on the same understanding of agency, the one that reduces agency to the "capacity to realize one's own interests *against* the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles", thereby locating "the political and moral autonomy of subjects *in the face of power*" (Mahmood 112, 116, emphasis mine).

Consequently, in both perspectives religious reasons for wearing the veil are translated into something else. Because "religion posits an authority higher than the individual" (Mack 150), the humanistic agency, which overtly informs the subordination thesis of liberal/universalist accounts, and covertly nourishes the resistance thesis of postcolonial/anti-Orientalist perspectives, remains unable to deal with (or to take seriously) religious motivations given by social agents. While for the subordination thesis, religious motivation is a mask of domination, the resistance thesis transforms it into a strategy of resistance/subversion, and insists on the emancipatory and extra-religious ends veiling may help meet. In sum, both perspectives fail to address religious motivations. Then, what would be an approach capable of that task?

### Taking Religious Motivations Seriously

As we have demonstrated, in their normative assumptions about the autonomous subject, most feminist analyses have proven unable to make sense of religious life experiences of contemporary Muslim women. While the universalist frame portraying religion as a site of pure male domination and denying any agency to veiled women is called into question within feminist scholarship, the contradictions of the postcolonial frame, eager to take the views of subaltern women seriously and to confer them with agency and subject status, yet unable to seriously engage with their religious motivations, are insufficiently addressed. Clearly, women's involvement in conservative religions endorsing principles of female subordination and the ideals of feminine virtues such as modesty poses a serious quandary for feminism (Mahmood 2–5). Feminist (and liberal, for that matter) scholars need to rethink their analytical tools and their assumptions about religious agency and subjectivity, and about the forces that constitute and drive subjects (Bracke). The dilemma they are said to face – “how to take seriously the agency of the other [...] when the other seems intent on ascribing her agency to God” (Hollywood “Gender” 524) – needs to be extended by another question inspired by Asad: why does it seem so important to us to insist that veiled women are ‘agents’? What kind of theoretical and political work do we achieve by insisting on their agency and by avoiding their claim that they were ‘made into’ (veiled) Muslims by a supernatural force? Why do we discard this invocation of the supernatural causality (or divine agency), to explain their action of taking the veil? Unquestionably, discussions of the empowering impacts of the veil need to go beyond the resistance paradigm to attend to “ends other than those of emancipation” (Hollywood “Gender” 528) and to take seriously the meanings and workings of religious devotion in women's lives. This requires asking how people conceive their own actions, whether they attribute responsibility for events to individuals, to fate, to deities, or to other animate or inanimate forces (Ahearn “Language and Agency” 113).

Since both the universalist and the postcolonial frame rely on an understanding of agency tied on the idea of a subject acting upon/against social forces, which defines the ideal of individual autonomy, the critical point resides in the way the relation between the subject and power is theorised, in other words in modernist epistemology's shortcoming regarding the link between the subject and society. According to that account, the subject is solely understood as *constituting*, that is, as acting upon/against structures; the *constituted* subject, since it is viewed as determined by external social forces, and does not, in this frame, even deserve, the label of ‘subject’ (Hekman 201–202). The aforementioned poststructuralist deconstruction of this normative assumption of subjecthood and agency as coterminous with acting *against* the system proves crucial. Following Foucault's theory of power, poststructuralist approaches claim that the constituted subject is not interchangeable with the determined subject, since power is not synonymous with oppression/repression that constrains individuals' freedom, because it is also productive,

constitutive of subjectivities – hence, poststructuralists’ claim that “subjects are always both constituted and constituting” (Hekman 198).

A new conception of agency can be drawn from these insights: if subjects are both constituted and constituting, and are not prior to social actions and discourses, then agency in the context of submission (to the divine) can be thought of as constituted within the act of ‘taking the veil’ without translating pious motives into something extra-religious. Butler’s work on ‘enabling constraints/subjugations’, which elaborates on how these limitations are constitutive of one’s subjecthood and agency without determining them entirely (*Psychic Life of Power*), may help chart new ways of conceiving agency within ‘irrational’ acts such as surrendering oneself to the divine/supernatural. Significantly, Butler locates agency “not only in transgressive acts but also in the work one does on oneself to become a willing subject of a particular discourse” (in Avishai 412); in so doing she attempts to extend the analysis of agency beyond the subordination/resistance<sup>12</sup> dichotomy, or determinism/voluntarism. If the subject is produced on the condition of a foreclosure, then subordination and subjection are not only constraining her agency, but also constitutive of its conditions.

Bringing to the analysis poststructuralist insights, particularly the Foucauldian concern with subject-constitution, rather than assuming her existence as does the humanist approach, enables a dynamic analysis of power as both constraining and constituting, and a conception of agency without normalising/homogenising categories and ontological pre-givens. Yet, if poststructuralist perspectives indisputably avoid taking agency as a self-explanatory concept tied to a pre-discursive self, they cannot be said to sufficiently address socio-historical processes shaping subjectivities and agency through discourse. In fact, socio-historical processes remain largely underspecified in most poststructuralist accounts since the latter do not adequately pose agency within particular contexts. Their criticism of the humanist account for being ‘culturally enmired’ or ‘socially unfettered’ has yet to produce a viable way of assessing a socially-fettered-and-culturally-mired agency. The elaboration of a truly social and contextual conception of agency<sup>13</sup> commands a thorough consideration of situated and historicised structures and operators of power that constitute, not determine, subjects. Here intersectionality, as a meta-theorisation of power and domination, proves invaluable to anchor the formation of subjectivities and agency within a nexus of social relations and structures (of race, class, gender) that work together to (re)produce power and privilege. Given that intersectionality provides a critical lens to analyse articulations of power and subjectivity in different instances of social formations (economic, political, social and cultural), an intersectional approach to agency, informed by the poststructuralist deconstruction of the humanist subject, would insist that there is no ontological priority of agency to context, and would turn its focus instead to specific contexts and articulated social formations from which different forms of agency and subject positions arise.

The larger picture provided by intersectionality can productively supplement overly symbolic poststructuralist accounts, namely, the Butlerian account of agency/

subjectivation which primarily relies on linguistic processes of (re)signification, by bringing essential tools for an improved integration of socio-historical specificities<sup>14</sup> of material and symbolic conditions that give rise to agency, and for fine-tuning their articulations. For me, Collins' perceptive framework, proposing an analysis of intersecting systems of domination (race–class–gender) according to their organisation in four distinct yet interrelated domains of power – structural, hegemonic, disciplinary and interpersonal – can be effectively combined with the poststructuralist dialectic of the subject as both constituting and constituted, to push the inquiry about agency into new territories. The study of subject-formation can thereby be related to systemic and relational concerns with interlocking power structures, examining their enabling and disabling effects on individuals, and their context-dependent compound configurations, without reducing the many contradictory and intersecting ways in which human life is experienced.

Making intersectionality converse with poststructuralist accounts to rethink (religious) agency will also push intersectionality scholarship into new theoretical grounds; where it should systematically attend to the religious/secular divide, which is rarely integrated to the collection of social divisions (gender, race, class) typically taken into account, and comprehensively engage with the concept of agency, which remains either under-theorised or taken as a self-explanatory concept in many accounts which claim to be using intersectionality. Given the centrality of locating people socially, that is, elucidating their material and symbolic realities and the social forces constituting them, intersectionality scholars cannot dispense with the poststructuralist input without risking the pitfall of tying their meticulously situated subject to a pre-discursive self who remains the trustee of agency. If agency cannot be reduced to a (universal) property of (transcendental) individuals, but is tied to historical possibilities (Asad 271), I believe combining intersectionality and the poststructuralist critique is necessary in order to chart the contours of particular historical possibilities whereby particular forms and understandings of agency arise. Such an exchange also pushes feminist thought on agency to new theoretical and political terrains beyond over-polemical quarrels between structural vs. symbolic interpretations to better address current citizenship issues, particularly mechanisms of exclusion which pit cultural group rights against gender equality and sexual freedoms.

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### **Notes**

- [1] Unlike the women's movements which had to deal, for several decades now, with hegemonic uses of the 'women's question' to legitimise colonial domination and exclusion of racialised minorities from citizenship, for the global LGBT/queer movements the incorporation of

- their 'cause' and rhetoric into the sexual and racial politics of the Western nationalism and imperialism represents a new political moment. See Puar.
- [2] Much of the literature uses synonymously veil, *hijab* and headscarf, which are distinguished from other forms of more covering Islamic dress such as *jilbab*, *niqab* and *burqa*. I conform to this use.
  - [3] One notorious formulation of this antagonistic frame is Okin's 'multiculturalism vs. Feminism'.
  - [4] For a recent questioning of agency in the context of religious submission, see Mack; Hollywood ("Gender"); Avishai; Bracke; and the groundbreaking work of Mahmood, offering an invaluable critique of the conflation of agency with resistance, which remains, unlike the subordination frame, largely uncontested.
  - [5] Alternative Biblical and *Quranic* reinterpretations proposed by feminist theologians aim precisely to reappropriate religion.
  - [6] For the Habermasian feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib, feminism cannot afford to adopt the rhetoric of the 'death of the subject' and reject notions such as agency, autonomy and selfhood (Mackenzie and Stoljar 28). Departing from the orthodox humanism relying on the Kantian conception of the subject as independent from the social world, and hence capable of being the sole author of her own actions, Benhabib's liberal approach to agency sees humans as profoundly situated, embedded in social life and discourse which condition their personhood and agency. Yet her *situated subject* constituted through a complex net of social relations still bears the trace of pre-discursive self (however small), which remains the source of agency (Barvosa-Carter 125).
  - [7] Michèle André, the Secretary of State for Women's Rights declared: "adolescent girls should not become the object of controversies that are beyond them, and the Republican school should not be submitted to religious pressures of fathers and brothers" ("Affaire" 14).
  - [8] From an anthropological perspective, the native/indigenous informant is an intercultural mediator translating her culture for the researcher/outsider, hence the term 'cultural insider'.
  - [9] Such as, Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Netherlands), Necla Kelek and Seyran Ates (Germany), Irshad Mandji (Canada) and Fadela Amara and Chahdortt Djavann (France).
  - [10] Neither Whores, Nor Doormats/Submissive.
  - [11] I draw here on stimulating conceptualisations by Collins (299), who defines it as "the overall organization of hierarchical power relations for any society" having "(1) a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression, e.g. race, social class, gender [...]; and (2) a particular organization of its domains of power, e.g. structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal".
  - [12] Yet we should remind that the Butlerian approach's capacity to transcend the subordination/resistance frame has been called into question, because of her propensity to read as politically positive resistant/subversive resignification processes, for instance, agencies. See Hollywood ("Performativity" 107) and Mahmood (19–22).
  - [13] Pritchard (278) makes a similar claim in her materialist account of 'relative agency'. I prefer the term 'intersectional agency', for I specifically attempt to bring the normative and empirical insights of intersectionality to supplement the poststructuralist conception.
  - [14] As pointed out by McNay (191), Butler herself acknowledged this lack in her work.

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