

Agnès De Féo, 2024
The Niqab in France: Between Piety and Subversion
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The Niqab in France: Between Piety and Subversion (2024) is the latest book of Agnès De Féo, a sociologist and documentary filmmaker, who has been studying women who wear the niqab in France for more than fifteen years. The book gives a voice to full-face veiled women who experienced the impact of 2010 law banning the niqab in public spaces in France. Despite of the fact that the niqab-wearing French Muslim women represented around 0.5% of the Muslim female population and less than 0.003% of the overall French population, the law was passed. The author argues that an increased number of women wearing the niqab is a resistant response – *subversion* – against the prohibition of the niqab’s presence in public spaces. Further, she says that in an era of Islamophobic practices and discourses, the French mainstream society sees the niqab as a patriarchal custom and the women who wear it as oppressed. In an attempt to ‘civilize’ and ‘liberate’ them from the masculine pressure, the 2010 law actually fails to protect them. Women who continue wearing the niqab in public spaces in France are often subjects of racism, violence and exclusion by institutions and society. Agnès De Féo aims to challenge Orientalistic stereotypes surrounding Muslim women and practices of covering. In doing so, the book provides an in-depth look at the individual experiences of women who wear the niqab as a personal choice, demonstrating that they are not forced to wear this garment. Instead, women choose to wear the niqab for a variety of reasons, including feelings of freedom, superiority, protection, religious piety and subversion.

The Niqab in France: Between Piety and Subversion is an intimate study of women who choose to wear the niqab in public spaces in France. From the end of the twentieth century to the very beginning of the twenty-first, wearing the niqab in France has been the object of a long controversy. The media, opinion-makers and politicians have brought this topic to public attention by presenting it as the Islamization of society and a danger to social cohesion. The news has described it as a widespread phenomenon in multiple public spaces, such as schools and the workplace. Secularism has

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usually been used against the expression of religious freedom, which is guaranteed by the French Constitution. Public opinion has been shaped, and Orientalistic stereotypes about Muslim women who wear the niqab have reached the vast majority. Women who wear the niqab are thought to suffer from inequality, unfreedom and inferiority in relation to their husbands. Through participant observation and over 200 interviews, De Féo challenges these views, providing a voice to women who choose to wear the niqab. Her work aims to dismantle these stereotypes and shift the dichotomy between Western and non-Western identities and values. I believe that the author's choice to focus on a particular period – after 2010, when the law against the niqab's presence in public places in France was passed – is both interesting and effective for challenging stereotypes. Despite the law and its difficult and adverse consequences, Muslim women who continued wearing the niqab as both subversion and for their own multivalent motivations, prove to be active and reactive agents, dismantling myths on their supposed passivity. Framed in this narrative, these women, some of them mothers too, are represented as determined, autonomous, resilient and brave in a context characterized by hostility against them.

The book is divided in two main parts. The first is an introductory part, mainly presenting the aims of the book and providing significant background on the object of study – women who wear the niqab in France even after its ban – offering definitions of concepts and sociological theories. The second part is dedicated to sixteen detailed interviews with women who wear the niqab in France in the decade following the 2010 law. The author of the book, Agnès De Féo, presents these interviews as monologues. She hardly intervenes with comments or clarifications. Within a great linearity and coherence, the reader is completely 'abandoned' in the women's words and worlds. Past struggles and present difficulties, experiences and motivations to wear the niqab, emotions and aspirations – these are their stories. I believe that this stylistic choice creates a connection between the reader and women who wear the niqab. An impersonal view of them is challenged, and resulting in a more humanized image – as integral women and mothers – so that the reader can better comprehend their motivations to cover and empathize with their confessions. While reading the book, it became clear to me that their personal choice to wear the niqab actually stems from multiple factors. In this way, simplistic and essentialized views of covering are transformed into more complex ones.

However, I consider that interviewing exclusively women who choose to wear the niqab, and excluding men's voice from this discourse, is not completely effective. Stereotypes of women being imposed to cover by masculine pressure are rooted in public opinion. By including also Muslim men (a smaller number compared to that of women, though) would have helped deconstruct what the author wants to deconstruct. In this way, clichés about

Muslim men, such as being dangerous, paternalistic and violent against women, could have been questioned.

Linguistically, the book contains a plenty of arabic words and their meanings, such as *hijab*, *hegira*, *dawah*, *qamis*, *kopiah*, *mahram*, *inshallah*, *bi id-nillah*, and more. It is a great effort of the author to include arabic words and not to remove them from the interlocutors' interviews, or 'monologues'. I find it a very interesting and important aspect, because it gives a chance to the reader to connect and better understand the protagonists and their worlds. On the other hand, some terms in the book could have been better explained for the reader's understanding. For instance, in the first part, terms like 'Orientalism' and 'Orientalized woman' are mentioned without explanation or reference to Edward Said. I believe that is a relevant concept, and it should be considered that some readers may be outside the academia. Not explaining it briefly, may lead to overlook it, resulting to a partial understanding of the issue. Orientalistic stereotypes are mostly present among people who are outside the academia and failing to address this terminology, could limit to niche readers. For this reason, it would be more beneficial not to take the definition of some concepts for granted.

Despite this, Agnès De Féo provides an illuminating study of women who choose to wear the niqab in France, which comes highly recommended to everyone interested in these topics.