Faux Feminism: France's Veil Ban as Orientalism

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Abstract
In the early months of 2010, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy told Parliament that the burqa is "not welcome" in France, citing this as a step to defend France against extremists. Employing Edward Said's theoretical notion of "Orientalism" as means of discussing the "Other," I argue for a more critical look at France's role in limiting religious freedom and denying notions of female agency. More specifically, I urge a more diversified view of feminism and female identity outside of the Western paradigm. By viewing the veil as a rhetorically universal symbol of oppression, Western feminists and political figures are missing the opportunity to recognize the diversity of religious adherence and feminist agency that exist in a variety of forms, some of which are highlighted in this paper. While touting the ban's role in promoting gender equality, Sarkozy employs "faux feminism"–a specious appropriation of feminist sentiment to rationalize Orientalist aims. In effect, this approach reifies Muslim women as victims in need of Western "heroes" while promoting a unique form of sexist Islamophobia.

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