

## The Headscarf Debates: Conflicts of National Belonging [book review]

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## BOOK REVIEW

### THE HEADSCARF DEBATES: CONFLICTS OF NATIONAL BELONGING

by Anna C. Korteweg and Gokce Yurdakul  
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The human need to belong to a community. That is the theme that runs through *The Headscarf Debates: Conflicts of National Belonging*. Standing out from the multitude of binary examinations of the Muslim headscarf as liberal or authoritarian, liberating or misogynist, this book asks the more important human question: what do the headscarf debates tell us about who we allow into our political community.

Acknowledging the agency of Muslim women in the different meanings they attribute to the headscarf – multiple modernities, liberal self-expression, a claim to dignity denied to Muslim immigrant groups, or simply covering up one’s messy hair – the book avoids the common trap of viewing Muslim women through the prism of a mere piece of cloth. Instead, the authors use the so-called “headscarf debates” as an interpretive tool to explore how these debates revisit, reaffirm, and potentially rearticulate the meaning of national belonging in four countries – France, Turkey, the Netherlands, and Germany.

The book situates the topic within the contentious, longstanding debates between multi-culturalism and assimilationism gripping Western and Eastern nations experiencing transformative demographic changes. Notably, the discourse is not analyzed through “Muslim versus non-Muslim” actors’ views of the headscarf, but rather how existing discourses are employed by politicians, government officials, and activists of various religious backgrounds to reaffirm, rearticulate, and transform national narratives of belonging.

But what does it mean to belong? According to Korteweg and Yurdakul, it is a subjective feeling of being at home in one’s country through its places and spaces as well as the ability to articulate complaint without renouncing the claim to belonging or being told to leave. But just as national narratives of belonging define who is in, it also determines who is out — often premised on a myth of homogeneity. National narratives based on a purportedly common religion, shared history, shared political practices, and a sense of shared origin are constructed by those in power to entrench their material interests. In doing so, non-conformists are rebuked as a threat to national unity.

France’s checkered past with the Catholic Church animates the French’s deep suspicions of religion in public life. When coupled with its brutal colonization of Algeria that has produced deep seated prejudice against North African immigrants, France’s strict secularist approach to the headscarf is

paradoxical. While proclaiming to be citizens of a modern, liberal state that protects individual freedoms, the French feel little qualm in dictating secularism on the individual as a requirement of French citizenship.

Furthermore, any public expressions of group or collective identity-based particularities are deemed infringements on the national narrative of belonging. Thus, French (non-Muslim) elites narrowly define *laïcité* as the conditions of a common life where the “chosen” community (France) supersedes one’s “other” community of origin (Muslim, Islam, Algeria, Turkey, etc.).

But who defines the norms and values of the chosen community? In answering this question, the book triggers an important conversation about how headscarved women have become agents of change insofar as their very presence has shaped the national narratives – either through their acceptance or rejection. As a result, society is forced to face itself and ask what values matter, who defines those values, and whether such values are applied equally to all citizens.

Meanwhile, French Muslim interlocutors claiming to speak on behalf of Muslim headscarved women fail to acknowledge the framing of national narratives as rooted in racism and Orientalism. Instead, they seek to persuade the French public that headscarved women can be trained to be French through persuasion rather than coercive headscarf bans. This approach blames Muslim women for failing to participate in the public sphere rather than rebuke secular elites for excluding them from the public space through legal bans or social censure.

Turkey and France’s similar pro-secularist response to Muslim women’s public displays of religiosity by covering their hair or faces highlights a common fallacy – that majority-Muslim countries are inherently different than non-majority Muslim countries. To the contrary, Turkish secularists have been as dogged, if not more, than their French counterparts in rejecting the headscarf as a threat to modernity, reformation, and enlightenment.

In the place of racist undertones found in the French headscarf debates, the Turkish debates are animated by classism. Situated within Turkey’s responses to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire that led to Kemalism, the headscarf triggers feelings of backwardness and regression thereby making the headscarf a class symbol of the religious, rural underclass.

Further detracting from the fundamental struggle for power is the framing of the headscarf as an issue of gender equality. The French and secular Turks myopically equate women’s freedom with uncovering, placing the woman’s body at the center of the debate. Hyper-feminine and sexualized depictions of the “free woman” produce the very subordination that opponents of the headscarf decry – objectifying women and denying them agency over their life choices.

In the Netherlands, pragmatism animates the Dutch’s national narrative of belonging. The Dutch embrace pluralism and tolerance so long as they offer practical benefits. At the same time, however, Dutch society is highly conformist and classist with regard to secular or religious beliefs. Although the Dutch presume Muslims are unassimilable, there is no need to ban the headscarf so long as Muslim women remain in the lower socio-economic rungs of society. Thus, similar to Turkey, the headscarf

signifies an inferior outsider status that bars the wearer from high status positions such as judges, politicians, or civil service.

For opponents of the headscarf, however, a legal prohibition is warranted to defend against a purported Islamic assault on Dutch liberal values. Calls for state neutrality are thinly veiled anti-Muslim racism that triggers discrimination against Muslim women. Racist Eurabian discourses attempt to scare white Dutch into believing that Europe will be taken over by Muslim immigrants as a basis for opposing a Muslim woman's choice of how she dresses. Not to be coerced into waiving their individual rights, some Dutch Muslim women put on the headscarf as an act of protest to rebel against a society they feel rejects them. As a result, Dutch national narratives of belonging are being revisited and redefined by changing demographics.

Meanwhile, Germans view the headscarf as a social threat to their imagined homogeneity. While legal prohibitions are begrudgingly rejected as illiberal, the headscarf is limited to purely private acts. As such, public school teachers cannot wear the headscarf lest it infect the minds of German schoolchildren with tolerance of Islam. In stark contrast, Christian symbols are permitted to be part of German public life because they are innocuous "cultural" relics as opposed to odious Muslim "religious" symbols. Socially constructed rules and outcome oriented laws perpetuate arbitrary lines of demarcation for who may lay claim to an imaginary homogenous national identity.

In the end, the authors insightfully shift the conversation from tripe talk about Muslim women's hair and bodies to the factors that define a country's narrative of belonging, and how such factors are deployed to interpret and respond to changes in a nation's demographics. In doing so, the book successfully elevates the quality of the so-called "headscarf debates" to what matters most to us all: the need to belong.