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Decolonizing "Muslim Questions" in Europe: Integration and Entanglements of Colonial Epistemologies

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ABSTRACT

Europe's so-called "Muslim question" is less an inevitable cultural clash than the prolonged imprint of colonial hierarchies, secular assimilation, and racialized security politics. This dynamic has roots in post–World War II labor migrations. These movements, far from simple economic exchanges, transplanted colonial hierarchies into Europe's social fabric. From the Rushdie Affair to the post-9/11 security turn, public debates, and state policies, however, have repeatedly reframe Muslim presence as a challenge to national cohesion and public order. Addressing this requires a decolonial rethinking of integration, one that dismantles colonial epistemologies and recognizes Muslims as co-authors of Europe's plural identity. Edward Said's critique of orientalism, analysis of secular power introduced by Talal Asad, vision of counter-hegemonic Islamism proposed by Salman Sayyid, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to "provincialize" Europe together reveal how colonial logics continue to shape Muslim integration. Foregrounding Muslim agency through Ramadan's reformist "European Islam" and Fanon's radical pedagogy, and guided by the insurgent energies of decolonial praxis, this study calls for a decisive rupture from assimilationist orthodoxies toward cultural equity and ethical pluralism. It thus advances a future that will help to weave a participatory polis that transcends postcolonial melancholia and affirms diversity as a civic strength.

Keyword: *europe*, *postcolonial theory*, *muslim integration*, *islamophobia*, *decolonial praxis*

ABSTRAK

Istilah "persoalan Muslim" di Eropa tidak semata benturan budaya yang tak terelakkan. Masalah ini berakar dari jejak panjang hierarki kolonial, asimilasi sekuler, dan politik keamanan yang rasial. Gelombang migrasi tenaga kerja pasca–Perang Dunia II yang alih-alih sekadar pertukaran ekonomi malah justru mendekatkan praktik hierarki kolonial ke jantung jaringan sosial Eropa itu sendiri. Dari Peristiwa Rushdie hingga tindakan keamanan pasca-9/11, perdebatan publik dan kebijakan negara membingkai keberadaan Muslim di Eropa sebagai ancaman bagi kohesi nasional dan ketertiban umum. Penyelesaian persoalan ini memerlukan refleksi ulang dan kritis pada integrasi Muslim di Eropa dengan menggunakan pendekatan dekolonial. Pendekatan ini akan membantu membongkar epistemologi kolonial dan mengakui Muslim sebagai bagian tidak terpisahkan dari kemajemukan identitas Eropa. Kritik Edward Said atas orientalisme, analisis Talal Asad tentang kekuasaan sekuler, Islamisme kontra-hegemonik ala Salman Sayyid, dan seruan Dipesh Chakrabarty untuk "memprovinsialisasi" Eropa menunjukkan bagaimana logika kolonial terus berlangsung. Dengan memusatkan agensi Muslim melalui "Islam Eropa" Ramadan dan pedagogi radikal Fanon, serta semangat praksis dekolonial, kajian ini menghimbau pemutusan yang tegas ortodoksi asimilasionis menuju keadilan budaya dan pluralisme etis, untuk menenun kehidupan partisipatoris yang beranjak dari melankolia pascakolonial dan menegaskan keberagaman sebagai kekuatan dari kewargaan.

Kata Kunci: Eropa, Teori pascakolonial, Integrasi Muslim, Islamofobia, Praksis Dekolonial

INTRODUCTION

From the Bataclan massacre in Paris to the drawn-out dispute over Cologne's Central Mosque and the nationwide furor surrounding France's 2010 burqa ban, Europe's public conversation about Muslims has been repeatedly ignited by high-profile controversies that combine tragedy, symbolism, and politics (Göktürk, Gramling, & Kaes, 2007; Scott, 2007). Those facts indicate that the encounter of Muslims with European culture evolves into a quintessential conundrum of the 21st century and represents profound sociopolitical tensions with the intersection of identity, integration, and security problems. The 2023 Special Eurobarometer records that 42% of Europeans perceive discrimination on religious grounds as widespread—a figure that, despite being five percentage points lower than in 2019, still reflects entrenched prejudice shaped by deeper structural and historical currents (European Commission, 2023). This contemporary anomaly of the "Muslim question" is the continuation of colonial epistemologies in which Muslims are constructed as the civilizational "other" and orientalist binaries are also perpetuated with the juxtaposition of a rational, secular West against an ostensibly irrational, premodern East (Said, 1978). The dynamics—with the Muslim population approximating 26 million in 2023 in Europe—demand a postcolonial reevaluation to address these reductive narratives (Pew Research Center, 2017; Statista, 2016).

The postcolonial theoretical framework provides crucial instruments to dismantle the entanglements. Edward Said's work "Orientalism" (1978) elucidates the Western discursive frameworks' exoticization and primitivizing of Muslims to legitimize its hegemonic dominance. Talal Asad (2003) elaborates on this argument by contesting secularism as a non-neutral framework that sprang from Judeo-Christian-Enlightenment paradigms and regulates religion through normative definitions of acceptable piety. This methodology often depicts Islamic sentiments as antiquated or perilous. Salman Sayyid's (2004) thesis posits that Islamism serves as a counter-hegemonic ideology that reinterprets political diversity within a postcolonial framework with subversion of Western universalist claims while Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) exhortation to "provincialize Europe" elucidates Eurocentric historicism and advocates for the acknowledgment of many modernities and subaltern epistemologies wherein Islamic traditions coexist with democratic aspirations. The frameworks illustrate the enduring impact of colonial logics on contemporary government, with the reinforcement of Muslim identities and obstruction of equitable integration.

The "Muslim questions" are not an intrinsic or essential conflict of civilizations or "the clash of civilizations," a term coined to Samuel P. Huntington (1993), yet a constructed phenomenon. The roots of these problems can be traced to historical power disparities and epistemic dominance that necessitate decolonial strategies for their disentanglement and for Europe's pluralistic coexistence in which the Muslim community can participate without feeling marginalized. The project of colonial disentanglement in this research needs to pose several questions: in what ways have colonial legacies influenced the perceptual and regulatory systems that oversee Muslim populations in Europe? With secular hegemonies inherent in parochial constructs, how can Muslims maneuver between subjectivity and rights? What novel concepts of modernity and conviviality emerge when we emphasize non-Western perspectives and canons? These queries stimulate the ensuing study, examining the historical-demographic underpinnings of Muslim migration, the difficulties of integration amid the waning of multiculturalism, the peril of radicalization, the emergence of Islamophobia, and the emancipatory possibilities of Muslim action. This research also analyses measures, including the EU's fortified borders after the 2015 migratory influx and their racially skewed disparities relative to other refugees, uncovers paradoxes that perpetuate exclusion (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023). This endeavor benefits two main perspectives aimed at fostering ethical polyphony as an offer to the problems. The former is a reformist concept, such as Tariq Ramadan's (2010) "European Islam," while the latter is Fanon's (1963) anti-colonial movements to advocate for radical modifications of pedagogy.

The following parts will outline the framework for a detailed analysis. The elaboration will trace the roots in postcolonial scholarship and offer possible options responsive to current demands, exemplified by the 2023 European Islamophobia Report's record of an increase in hate crimes and online anti-Muslim rhetoric amid geopolitical tensions (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023).

Europe's prioritization of subaltern viewpoints may overcome its postcolonial sorrow and create a political landscape with Muslims as essential contributors to the pluriversality of modernity, not as marginal outsiders (Gilroy, 2005).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical and Demographic Overview

The migration of Muslims to Europe is, by and large, linked to postwar migratory trends. Economic needs and colonial legacies profoundly influenced this. Western European countries' post-World War II was faced with significant labor shortages for reconstruction initiatives that necessitated the recruitment of workers from former colonies and other areas. France invited North Africans, especially Algerians and Moroccans, to stimulate its industrial expansion; Britain recruited South Asians from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; and Germany established labor agreements with Turkey to meet workforce demands (Haddad, 2002). The migrations were first perceived as transient with the characterization of the "myth of return," which posited that workers would return to their countries of origin (Sayad, 2004). Family reunion programs during the 1970s and 1980s, however, converted transitory migration into permanent residency and defied the "myth of return" with the integration of Muslim populations into Europe's social structure. This transition confronted host nations' beliefs on cultural uniformity, as migrants took root, constructed mosques, and developed community networks. The change also transformed urban environments in places such as Paris, London, and Berlin (Nielsen, 2004).

Muslim population growth to approximately 26 million in 2023 in Western Europe and their occupation of about 5% of the region's total population spread in key countries: France (around 6 million, or 9% of the population), Germany (around 5 million, or 6%), and the United Kingdom (around 4 million, or 6.5%). These figures also reflect their diverse but concentrated origins. Those from the North African Maghrebi are concentrated in France. Britain is significantly populated by those who come from the South Asian region, while Turkish communities are more prevalent in Germany (Pew Research Center, 2017; Statista, 2016). The emergence of second and third generations as native-born Muslims fluent in European languages and educated in local systems also shifted the demographic character. The increasing younger Muslims' assertion of "hyphenated identities," such as French-Muslim or British-Muslim, blends cultural heritages with European citizenship (Modood, 2007). Their integration, however, is faced with structural barriers, including socio-economic marginalization and discrimination, which fueled feelings of exclusion and, in some cases, identity conflicts. Unemployment rates among Muslim youth in France's banlieues often exceeded 20–30%, compared to national averages of 8–10%, and are among the most important problems (Adida, Laitin, & Valfort, 2010). These colonial hierarchies-rooted disparities that positioned Muslims as subordinate labor sources laid the groundwork for social tensions and the politicization of Islam.

Several prominent issues regarding Muslims in Europe revealed cultural and ideological divisions and intensified the politics of Muslim identity in Europe throughout the late 20th century. The Satanic Verses, Salman Rushdie's contentious novel, or widely known as the 1989 Rushdie Affair, provoked worldwide Muslim protests. This case contested Western concepts of free speech and secularism (Modood, 1992). The 1989 headscarf debates in France, during which three schoolgirls were expelled for donning hijabs, epitomized the conflicts surrounding laïcité, France's stringent secularism. The contention also positioned Muslim religious expression as a menace to national identity (Scott, 2007). These incidents signified a transformation in the European perception of Muslims via a security perspective, even prior to the significant September 11 attacks in 2001. The 1995 Paris metro bombings, that was linked to Algerian Islamist factions, heightened examination of Muslim populations. This case initiated preliminary counterterrorism actions such as mosque monitoring and immigration restrictions (Kepel, 1997). These trends indicated an increasing impression of Islam as incongruent with European norms, a narrative based on orientalist tropes that portray Muslims as intrinsically alien or regressive (Said, 1978).

The pre-9/11 securitization of Muslim populations set a precedent for later policies when governments began to frame Islam as a potential source of unrest. The Rushdie Affair led to increased monitoring of Muslim community organizations in Britain. In France, the headscarf

debates spurred legislative moves to restrict religious symbols that reached their culmination in the 2004 ban on conspicuous religious signs in schools (Bowen, 2007). Germany, initially slower to address its "guest worker" population, faced rising tensions over Turkish communities' cultural practices, such as mosque construction, which sparked local protests (Göktürk et al., 2007). These early controversies revealed a paradox: Muslim migrants integrated into Europe's economic recovery yet problematized in their cultural and religious presence and thus echoed colonial-era hierarchies that justified control over "native" populations (Asad, 2003). The politicization of Islam along with demographic growth laid the foundation for the intensification of post-9/11 anxieties, where Muslims were increasingly constructed as a "suspect community" requiring surveillance and assimilation (Cesari, 2013).

This historical and demographic overview of Muslims in Europe underscores the colonial roots of migration and the structural challenges Muslims face in Europe. The "myth of return," once a convenient "fiction," gave way to permanent and diverse populations that later challenged Europe's self-image as culturally uniform. The politicization of Islam through events like the Rushdie Affair and headscarf debates prefigured the securitization that would intensify after September 9, 2001, attacks on the US, and shaped integration policies and public perceptions. The dynamics traced in this section will set the stage for the analysis of the socio-economic and cultural barriers to integration, the drivers of radicalization, and the rise of Islamophobia. At the same time, this part also highlights the agency of Muslims in redefining European identity.

Integration, Identity, and Multiculturalism

The inclusion and social integration of Muslim populations in Europe are respectively hindered and complicated by considerable social discrimination. A significant number of young Muslims face problems such as unemployment. Unemployment rate in France's banlieues with a predominant population of North African ancestry often ranges from 20% to 30%. Those figures significantly exceed the national average of 8% to 10% (Adida et al., 2010). The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2023) report stated that 12% of non-EU nationals were unemployed between 2022 and 2023, with a predominantly Muslim share that indicates Muslims' difficulties in securing employment. This proportion is below the average of 21.4% in 2014; however, it remains double the EU average (Eurostat, 2023). In places such as Paris, Bradford, and Berlin, where most of the population is Muslim, educational institutions get little funding, and access to services is challenging. These issues are exacerbated by poverty and residing in disparate communities (Modood, 2007). Studies demonstrate that job candidates with Muslim-sounding names are less likely to obtain callbacks than those with "native" names, even when credentials are the same (Adida et al., 2010). Discrimination in hiring complicates the job search process. The scarcity of Muslims is not only in senior positions within politics, but also in academia and industry. This fact reinforces the concept of a "Muslim underclass," rooted in colonial systems that perceived Muslims as laborers rather than equal citizens (Haddad, 2002). Structural obstacles rooted in colonialism impeded the very notion of integration as a reciprocal process. The problem further perpetuates a cycle of poverty that fosters distrust and isolation among individuals (Cesari, 2013).

The fragmentation of identity among second and third-generation Muslims intensifies the obstacles to Muslim's integration. These individuals were born and raised in Europe and therefore have dual identities: European and Muslim. They must confront those who exhibit religious-based intolerance. The societal failure to understand their "hyphenated identities," such as French-Muslim or British-Muslim, is evidenced by the recurring question, "Where are you truly from?" (Modood, 2007). This exclusion engenders cultural differences as young Muslims are forced to balance their traditional traditions with European society, with neither group fully accepting the other, and results in insularity for some who withdraw into community enclaves; for others, it provokes identity crises that in severe instances lead to radicalism (Roy, 2017). Olivier Roy (2017) contends that this "deculturated" Islam, devoid of traditional grounding, renders teenagers susceptible to simple, global ideologies. Empirical instances encompass British-Pakistani adolescents in Bradford who articulate feelings of neither fully belonging to either British nor Pakistani identities, and French-Algerian teenagers in Marseille who face discrimination despite their proficiency in French and secular education (Cesari, 2013).

These tensions highlight the limitations of integration programs that favor cultural conformity over mutual tolerance (Sayyid, 2014).

Multiculturalism had a crisis as terrorist attacks and political discourse diminished its credibility following the 9/11 attacks in the US. The 2004 domestic jihadists-related bombings in Madrid and the 2005 assaults in London intensified skepticism among the populace and politicians about multicultural policies. This crisis fueled the previously fostered cultural variety (Kymlicka, 2012). Between 2010 and 2011, European politicians openly declared the "failure" of multiculturalism. Figures like David Cameron in the UK, France's Nicolas Sarkozy, and Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel associated this problem with separatism and extremism (Joppke, 2017). These responses were followed by significant policy alterations. The 2004 prohibition on conspicuous religious symbols in educational institutions, aimed against Muslim headscarves, and the 2016 Republican Integration Contract, mandating migrants to embrace French values, reinforced the notion of laïcité in France (Bowen, 2007). The UK transitioned from diversity to "community cohesion." The Prevent plan (2003), revised in 2023 following an independent assessment, monitored Muslim communities for indicators of radicalization. This plan also exacerbates their sense of isolation (Kundnani, 2014; Shawcross, 2023). The Netherlands transitioned from multiculturalism to enforced integration with the implementation of civic examinations that emphasized Dutch identity and values. Germany, conversely, changed from its initial rejection of immigrant reality to its advocacy for Leitkultur and insisted on cultural integration (Joppke, 2017).

These policy changes indicate Europe's significant shift from multicultural ideals towards assimilation. The securitization of Muslim communities undermines democratic inclusion with the initiatives of Prevent that depict Muslims as a "suspect community" (Cesari, 2013). Willem Schinkel (2017) critiques integration discourse as neo-colonial and emphasizes the difficulties minorities face and the institutional racism that is embedded in labor markets and housing regulations. The French *laïcité* paradigm disproportionately emphasizes the attire of Muslim women. This model is akin to colonial "civilizing missions" that portrayed Muslim women as symbols of progress (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Germany's Leitkultur discourse also overlooks the contributions of Turkish Muslims and excludes them from communal recognition despite their longstanding economic participation (Göktürk et al., 2007). These measures, although claiming to promote togetherness, often intensify estrangement as seen by the riots in French banlieues in 2005 and British cities in 2001 when disenfranchised Muslim youth expressed their discontent with institutional exclusion (Kepel, 2012).

The dilemma of multiculturalism and the shift towards assimilation illustrate a conflict between Europe's heterogeneous reality and its governance. Postcolonial-rooted institutional barriers and legislative reactions are the factors that hinder the integration. The second- and third-generation Muslims asserting hybrid identities play an equally important role in this complex problem. This section has discussed the interplay between socio-economic marginalization, identity conflicts, and the deterioration of multicultural frameworks. This part establishes further the framework for examining radicalization, Islamophobia, and Muslim action in the transformation of European identity.

Radicalization and the Specter of Terrorism

The post-high-profile jihadist attack that frequently associates Islam with terrorism has significantly contributed to the European negative perceptions of Muslim populations. The 2004 Madrid train bombings, along with the London Underground attacks and the Paris attacks in 2005, including the Bataclan massacre, contributed to the perceived association between Islam and violence. Media's false depiction of these instances as evidence of cultural incompatibility, unfortunately, reinforces the perception (Cesari, 2013). Some trends indicate a decline in the occurrence of accomplished jihadist attacks. Europol's 2023 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) reported there were just three executed jihadist attacks in the EU, with one fatality. This case is less than in prior years, yet 14 plans were halted, and arrests increased to 260 (Europol, 2023). These homegrown perpetrator-related attacks heightened public apprehension and necessitated that governments prioritize counterterrorism above integration and categorized Muslim communities as a "suspect population" (Kundnani, 2014). This

securitization narrative, while grounded in real occurrences, simplifies the many causes of radicalization into a singular account and omits structural and historical elements. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2023) stated 47% of Muslims experienced discrimination in 2023. This figure marked an increase from previous years. This trend also reflects the pervasive impact of these incidents on public mood. The following will examine the motivation and factors of radicalization, the traits of radicalized youth, and postcolonial criticisms that redefine terrorism as a reflection of broader socio-political processes.

The radicalization of European Muslims is attributable to a confluence of push and pull forces. Push factors encompass structural marginalization that cultivates hopelessness and alienation. The marginalization predominantly happened to Muslim youth, particularly in disadvantaged regions like French banlieues or British inner cities, where unemployment rates sometimes surpass 20–30% (Adida et al., 2010). Residential segregation and discrimination in school and work intensify identity crises. These developments fostered an atmosphere receptive to exclusionary emotions (Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq, & van Egmond, 2015). The allure of Salafi-Jihadist doctrines that offer a comprehensive worldview, a feeling of belonging, and purpose to disenchanted youth is an element of attraction. During this process, internet propaganda has played a crucial role, with organizations like ISIS creating sophisticated movies that glorify violence and distributing them via platforms such as YouTube and encrypted applications like Telegram (Neumann, 2013). Online ISIS propaganda motivated the 2015 Paris attackers, and this highlighted the significance of digital recruitment (Roy, 2017). The appeal of individuals seeking meaning in socially and economically challenged contexts is driven by a dynamic rooted in postcolonial disparities rather than only religious devotion, since these elements converge (Sayyid, 2004).

The profile of radicalized individuals typically includes young, second or third-generation Muslim men, frequently with histories of petty crime and limited religious knowledge. Olivier Roy's (2017) concept of "born-again" religiosity describes how these individuals, mostly in their late teens or early twenties, undergo rapid conversions to a simplified, globalized form of Islam detached from cultural traditions. Khalid Masood, the 2017 Westminster attacker, and a British-born convert with a criminal background, for instance, exemplified this pattern. He acted as a "lone wolf" with minimal direct ties to terrorist networks (Spaaij, 2012). Data from Europol's TE-SAT 2023 indicates that jihadist suspects in 2023 were predominantly EU nationals (73%), with many of them under 30 and linked to online radicalization. This figure also confirms patterns of homegrown extremism (Europol, 2023). Personal grievances and heroic narratives overcame their theological motivations. Roy (2017) terms the phenomenon as "Islamization of radicalism" rather than radicalization of Islam. This profile underscores the role of social disconnection over religious fervor and thus challenges stereotypes of inherent Muslim extremism.

Postcolonial criticisms offer a more profound and comprehensive perspective beyond security-focused interpretations. Talal Asad (2007), for instance, contends that "terrorism" is a Western fabrication. He argued that the Iraq War in 2003 and drone strikes in the Middle East used by jihadist propaganda as rationales for retaliatory action resonated with disenchanted European youth. Salman Sayyid (2004) conceptualizes radicalization as a manifestation of postcolonial frustrations. This situation underprivileged Muslims articulate resistance against a global order that undermines their identity. The very notion of necropolitics, introduced by Achille Mbembe (2003), highlighted the way racial hierarchies favor certain lives. This argument rendered Muslim corpses as expendable under both Western policy and jihadist discourse. The viewpoints contest the portrayal of Islam as intrinsically violent and put the analysis of radicalization in a broader framework of colonial legacies, socio-economic marginalization, and geopolitical conflicts.

Radicalization is not a monolithic religious phenomenon yet a complex interplay of structural exclusion, ideological appeal, and historical grievances, rather than a monolithic religious phenomenon. The focus on homegrown terrorism and its media amplification has deepened the securitization of Muslim communities and fed into Islamophobic narratives. This argument will prepare our deeper discussion on the rise of Islamophobia and the far right in the upcoming section. Using a postcolonial lens in understanding radicalization, the following part

will highlight the urgency of addressing socio-economic and cultural barriers to offer more inclusive and effective counter-extremist ideologies.

The Rise of Islamophobia and the Far-Right

Islamophobia in Europe is strongly linked to political, gender, and media trends that marginalize Muslim populations. Far-right populists frequently use "politics of fear" to boost their political appeal by amplifying anti-Muslim prejudice (Wodak, 2015). Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), France's National Rally, and the Dutch Party for Freedom normalize Islamophobia by presenting Muslims as a danger to cultural and national identity. Political campaigns used conspiracy theories like "Islamization" and the "Great Replacement" that Muslims are replacing Europeans to fuel the voters' sentiment. The economic and societal concerns also appealed to the voters (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023). The AfD, for instance, amplified anti-Muslim rhetoric and demands to ban minarets and headscarves to win 12.6% of the vote in 2017 (Guardian, 2017). France's 2010 burqa ban and the UK's Prevent policy focus on Muslim communities' radicalization concerns (Kundnani, 2014). The security measures label Muslims a "suspect population" and represent colonial rule over "native" subjects (Asad, 2003). The normalization of anti-Muslim prejudice supports exclusionary policies and leads to decreased democratic participation and increased social divide (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023). In 2023, the European Islamophobia Report found a rise in hate crimes in Norway, Spain, and Greece. Of the countries, Spain acknowledges the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, indicating systematic indifference (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023).

Gendered Islamophobia disproportionately affects Muslim women, especially those with headscarves or face coverings, who endure both verbal and physical assaults. One of the countries with the highest rate in 2014 is France, with more than 80% of recorded Islamophobic events directed against women. This is frequently because of their headscarf, with assaults varying from verbal abuse to physical violence (European Network Against Racism (ENAR), 2016). Policies such as France's 2004 headscarf prohibition in educational institutions and the 2010 burqa ban in public areas purport to safeguard secularism and women's rights, however, ironically undermine the autonomy of Muslim women (Scott, 2007). These initiatives reflect colonial "civilizing missions" shown by France's efforts to reveal Algerian women and portray Muslim women as persecuted victims in need of salvation (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Veiled women are concurrently seen as dangers to secular standards and embody a dualism that renders them both submissive and perilous. Discussions over the Netherlands' partial face-veil ban similarly portrayed the incongruity of Muslim women with Dutch identity and thus failed to regard their autonomy and contributions (Moors, 2019). This gendered perspective illustrates the intersection between Islamophobia and patriarchy. This utilizes women's bodies as sites of cultural and political contention while measures purporting to promote liberation frequently exacerbate exclusion and stigmatization (Asad, 2003). The effect is seen in the increase of hate crimes, with a 2016 surge in anti-Muslim assaults in France corresponding to the execution of the burqa ban (Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France, 2017). Recent studies from 2023 reveal enduring gendered trends. The European Islamophobia Report highlights a rise in harassment of Muslim women in public areas under geopolitical tensions (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023).

Media representations contribute to Muslims being the "other." Orientalist tropes from colonial narratives are reinforced, as Edward Said in Orientalism (1978) describes how Western media portrays Muslims as aggressive, primitive, or culturally unique. This portrayal maintains "us" versus "them" (Said, 1978). Stereotyping, according to Homi Bhabha (1994), limits media depictions of Muslims to terrorists, extremists, and downtrodden women. These designations eliminate its variety. Post-9/11 media coverage of the 2015 Paris Bataclan tragedy typically emphasized the terrorists' Muslim identity and ignored their socio-economic marginalization and criminal history (Cesari, 2013). X social media sites enhance "cyber-Islamophobia." Far-right memes and hashtags like *#StopIslam* legitimize anti-Muslim discourses (Awan, 2016). After the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017, anti-Muslim occurrences in the UK increased, demonstrating a link between negative media depictions and hate crimes (Ahmed & Matthes, 2016). This media-centric depiction devalues Muslims as professionals, students, and

community leaders. Instead, the media covered terrorism and cultural conflict (Poole, 2002). The amplification of anti-Muslim themes was also paramount in mainstream and far-right media in 2023 (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023).

The emergence of Islamophobia signifies a synthesis of political exploitation, gendered dominance, and media enhancement. All of them are grounded in postcolonial power relations. Far-right movements capitalize on economic and cultural worries to demonize Muslims while mainstream policies co-opt their rhetoric under the pretext of security or integration (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023). Gendered Islamophobia targets explicitly Muslim women due to their presence and hence legitimizes discriminatory policies that reflect colonial interventions (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Media, both conventional and digital forms, perpetuate orientalist clichés that shape public attitudes and incite hate crimes (Awan, 2016; Said, 1978). These factors not only marginalize Muslims but also exacerbate the alienation that may result in radicalization and establish a vicious cycle (Cesari, 2013). Islamophobia constitutes not just prejudice but also a systemic phenomenon ingrained in policies and ideologies that elevate European identity above pluralistic cohabitation (Asad, 2003). This section sets the stage for an examination of Muslim agency as communities counter these narratives through civic engagement and decolonial frameworks and urges Europe to rethink its identity inclusively.

The Politics of Identity and Muslim Agency

European Muslim groups actively shape their identities in reaction to exclusionary policies in Europe's varied environment. Tariq Ramadan (2004) proposed the very notion of "European Islam," in which Islamic faith and European citizenship may coexist without assimilation. With the ijtihad method in the reformulation of Islamic law, he shows Muslims may be civically active while remaining devout. This method encourages Muslims to participate in democracy and social justice. Muslim youth groups like the UK Muslim Youth Network demonstrate this agency. These agencies increase civic involvement through community events and voter mobilization (Mandaville, 2009). Recent developments include Religions for Peace's European Interfaith Youth Network (EIYN). This program brought together over 100 young leaders from different religions in 2023 to fight extremism and promote unity (Religions for Peace Europe, 2023). German House of One integrates Muslims, Christians, and Jews in communal worship spaces (Göktürk et al., 2007). French Islamic institutions like the European Institute of Islamic Sciences train imams in local languages and develop European Muslim leadership (Ramadan, 2003). FEMYSO launched youth empowerment initiatives and training workshops for 500 individuals in 20 countries in 2023 to increase political involvement and combat Islamophobia. These projects challenge the idea that Muslims are always outsiders. The second- and third-generation Muslims use their French or British Muslim identities to enrich European culture. Ramadan (2009) hopes Muslims and non-Muslims may work together to create a community to fight Eurocentric cultural homogeneity.

Portraying identity as a struggle against Eurocentric ideologies, postcolonial or decolonial perspectives offer a more critical comprehension of Muslim agency. Decolonial subjectivity regards Muslim identity as a counter-hegemonic force (Sayyid, 2014). This perspective radically criticizes Western universalism and thus marginalizes non-European narratives. Muslims' cultural and religious identity challenge European modernity as the sole viable paradigm. Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) call to "provincialize Europe" acknowledges the influence of Muslims on European intellectual traditions, particularly medieval Islamic literature. Paul Gilroy's conviviality encourages tolerance through daily variation, while postcolonial melancholia critiques Europe's homogeneous history, which in turn fosters Islamophobia (Gilroy, 2005). These dynamics are substantiated by recent research: Young Muslims from Balkan backgrounds in Europe combat anti-Muslim bias by cultivating hybrid identities that reject assimilation and promote interfaith connections (Cubas, Jamal Al-deen, Mansouri, & Beaman, 2023). Muslim artists enhance Berlin's urban culture. They conducted cultural festivals such as London's Eid in the Square, and drew a diverse audience (Mandaville, 2009). In 2023, Muslim-Jewish interactions in metropolitan Europe illustrate boundary work that promotes religious solidarity through shared marginalization in response to the escalating prevalence of hate crimes (Kasstan, 2023). Muslims employ political engagement, cultural innovation, and interfaith dialogue to

combat exclusion and reimagine European identity, as informed by postcolonial power critiques, as per Sayyid (2014).

Muslim agency resists against the stereotypes perpetuated by Islamophobia in various manifestations, including grassroots activism and institutional engagement. In the United Kingdom, organizations such as MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) advocate for legislative reforms to combat prejudice. Muslim women's organizations like Lallab in France, conversely, counter gendered Islamophobia by advocating for feminist interpretations of Islam (Amir-Moazami, 2013). The MENA Research Center (2024) reports that political engagement is on the rise. This is also evidenced by a 2023 study on Muslim voting behavior in German. The result reveals a decrease in support for the SPD from 32% in 2019 to only 13%, indicating a significant shift in preferences within the context of increased far-right influence. At the same time, the demonstration of Muslims' commitment to civic engagement and democratic principles dispels the "suspect community" stereotype (Kundnani, 2014). Decolonial academicians argue that this agency challenges Eurocentric notions, as Muslims assert multiple identities that integrate Islamic ethics with European citizenship (El-Tayeb, 2011). In the Netherlands, Muslim youth have launched campaigns to protest integration programs that necessitate cultural assimilation and thereby advocate for the recognition of their blended identities (Moors, 2019). These actions are consistent with Gilroy's concept of conviviality, which promotes a lived multiculturalism that opposes hierarchical assimilationist practices through daily interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims in enterprises, educational institutions, or community initiatives (Gilroy, 2005).

The interaction between Ramadan's (2010) reformist viewpoint and postcolonial ideas highlights the significance of Muslims in redefining Europe's identity. Ramadan (2010) underscores the importance of unity via common civic principles, whilst decolonial thinkers such as Sayyid (2014) and Chakrabarty (2000) advocate for the decentering of Europe's historical narrative and acknowledging Muslim histories as essential to global modernity. This twin strategy—practical involvement and theoretical opposition—provides a means to combat Islamophobia and discriminatory laws. Challenges, nonetheless, persist in institutional obstacles including discriminatory practices in employment and education, and restrict Muslim agency while securitization policies diminish public confidence (Cesari, 2013). By emphasizing Muslim perspectives, Europe might progress towards a pluralistic identity that regards variety as an asset rather than a detriment. This part prepares for an analysis of policy inconsistencies that obstruct this vision and investigates decolonial possibilities that use Muslim agency to promote ethical plurality.

Policy Responses and Their Contradictions

European Muslim integration policies that stress security over citizenship weaken democratic inclusion. Since the 2001 September 11 attacks, surveillance, mosque monitoring, and counter-radicalization efforts have increased, framing Muslim populations as dangers. The 2003 UK Prevent policy requires schools, medics, and community workers to report Muslim radicalization, typically based on imprecise indicators like "increased religiosity" (Kundnani, 2014). The 2023 independent review by William Shawcross found that prevent had overemphasized far-right extremism and underemphasized Islamist threats, recommending a priority shift to ideological risks. The government accepted all 34 recommendations, but critics said it stigmatized Muslim communities (Shawcross, 2023). A 2016 survey found that 60% of British Muslims distrust Prevent owing to its profiling (EUMC, 2006). France's *laïcité* enforcement, such as the 2004 school emblem ban and 2010 burqa ban, restricts Muslim behaviors under the pretext of secular unity (Bowen, 2007). Such practices, according to Talal Asad (2003), extend secularism's disciplinary authority and marginalize religious minorities by requiring Eurocentric public sphere conformance. Integration discourse is neocolonial, portraying Muslims as outsiders who must "prove" their commitment while neglecting institutional racism in housing and jobs, according to Willem Schinkel (2014). Germany's *Leitkultur* discussions demand cultural integration from Turkish Muslims despite their economic

contributions, recalling colonial hierarchies that ruled "native" people (Göktürk et al., 2007). Like the 2005 French banlieue riots, these practices destroy trust (Kepel, 2012). Muslim youth opposed structural exclusion. These policies alienate communities by stressing security above inclusion, which may worsen radicalization (Cesari, 2013).

Europe's reaction to predominantly Muslim refugees highlighted racist hierarchy after the 2015 migration crisis. Humanitarianism gave way to "Fortress Europe" policies when over one million refugees, mainly from Syria and other Muslim-majority nations, arrived (Yayboke & Faskianos, 2020). The 2016 EU-Turkey accord and Frontex expansion put security over asylum rights, leaving thousands in poor camps (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023). A racist double standard was shown in 2022 when Christian Ukrainian migrants were quickly integrated with visa exemptions and housing help (Fassin, 2022). Ukrainians were welcomed across Europe, while Syrian migrants encountered barbed-wire walls in Hungary and pushbacks in Greece (Amnesty International, 2021). The UNHCR reported 19.5 million forcibly displaced in Europe in 2023, including over 8 million Ukrainian refugees by April. Syrians and Afghans were the leading asylum-seekers. EU asylum applications reached 1 million in 2023. This is the highest since 2016, and irregular crossings, however, declined 30% from 2022 due to more onerous restrictions (Frontex, 2023). Bayraklı and Hafez (2023) argue that this difference highlights Islamophobia as a political construct and undercuts EU human rights promises. Postcolonial criticisms like Asad's (2003) secular governance analysis show how these practices reproduce colonial logics by considering Muslim bodies as dangers rather than citizens with rights. Although most Charlie Hebdo terrorists were European, tighter border restrictions and the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shootings connected migration to terrorism (Roy, 2017). The failure of policies to address the core causes of migration—war, poverty, and instability—and intensified anti-Muslim sentiment, as demonstrated in 2016's rise in hate crimes across Europe (European Network Against Racism (ENAR), 2016).

These contradictory policy approaches—securitization versus citizenship and restrictive migration regimes—indicate Europe's continuous attempts to reconcile the plural reality with its governance practices. Securitization measures such as *laïcité* also erode democratic inclusion and religious freedom with its portrayal of Muslims as "suspect communities" rather than equal citizens (Kundnani, 2014). The racialized treatment of Muslim refugees in the migration crisis response reveals a hierarchy of belonging that is anchored in colonial legacies (Mbembe, 2003). The previously discussed Islamophobic narratives received reinforcement. Muslim communities are alienated by both approaches, which prioritize control over justice (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023). These collectively emphasize the necessity of policies that transcend assimilation and security and thus promote inclusion through mutual recognition. The previous section's examination of the agency of Muslims provides a path forward, which the subsequent section will further develop by proposing decolonial frameworks for a pluralistic Europe.

Rethinking Muslim Integration: Decolonial Futures

European Muslim integration must shift from assimilationist approaches to cultural justice and participatory citizenship, with the acknowledgement of Muslims as co-authors of a diverse European identity. Asad (2003) argues that current integration programs, like France's laïcité or Germany's Leitkultur, promote cultural uniformity and perpetuate colonial traditions that marginalized non-European identities. Asad (2015) criticises these measures as a secular government that marginalises religious minorities by establishing a Eurocentric public realm. Decolonialists like Fatima El-Tayeb (2011), who value cultural justice, strengthen the notion of multiple identities without assimilation and make citizenship a participatory activity, not a formal condition. Muslims already exhibit this through activity and cultural contributions: the UK's Muslim Youth Network organizes voter campaigns, while Berlin's Muslim artists enrich urban culture (Mandaville, 2009). The 2023 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that 41% of Muslims were overqualified for their work, compared to 22% of the overall population. These highlight the need for equal measures. These attempts counter the

"suspect community" narrative and present Muslims as fundamental to European society (Kundnani, 2014). Decolonial policies like inclusive housing and employment that address structural racism, like those in France's banlieues, where Muslim youth unemployment surpasses 20%, would promote mutual recognition (Adida et al., 2010). Centering Muslim voices can help Europe move past colonial binaries of "us" and "them," and embrace its multiple identity (El-Tayeb, 2011).

This decolonial perspective requires structural changes. This is necessary to rectify the contradictions present in current policies that favor security above inclusivity (Cesari, 2013). The recognition of multiple identities may strategically help Europe alleviate the isolation that nurtured extremism and Islamophobia (Roy, 2017). The Netherlands' interfaith dialogues with Muslim youth can be an example of how community-driven initiatives, which have effectively mitigated societal tensions by cultivating common spaces (Moors, 2019). Policy modifications must encompass equitable resource allocation to Muslim-majority communities and the elimination of obstacles, including discriminatory employment practices evidenced by research (Adida et al., 2010). Recognizing Muslim agency via political representation, shown by the increase of Muslim MPs in the UK Parliament after the 2023 elections, and cultural events like London's Eid in the Square, promotes democratic participation (Modood, 2019). A decolonial future, shaped by the philosophies of Fanon (1963) and Ramadan (2010), perceives Europe as a domain where Muslims collaboratively construct their identities. In this model, people, regardless of their cultural background, regard themselves not as outsiders but as equal participants. This paradigm examines postcolonial melancholia, which sustains exclusion, and utilizes Muslim agency to foster a pluralistic Europe that views variety as an advantage rather than a danger (Gilroy, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The discussion about Europe's "Muslim question" through a postcolonial lens reveals the way colonial legacies, securitization, and Islamophobia shape the integration of Muslim communities in the region. Post-World War II migrations rooted in colonial histories established diverse Muslim populations that now reached 26 million in Europe as of 2023 (approximately 5% of the total population). This is, however, characterized by structural marginalization—high unemployment, segregation, and discrimination—that continuously persists, and this situation, furthermore, fuels alienation among second and third-generation Muslims (Adida et al., 2010; Eurostat, 2023; Haddad, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2017). The post-9/11 retreat from multiculturalism with policies like France's *laïcité* bans and the UK's Prevent strategy has prioritized security over inclusion. The retreat also exacerbated tensions and constructed Muslims as a "suspect community" (Cesari, 2013; Kundnani, 2014). Socio-economic exclusion and globalized jihadist ideologies-driven radicalization reflect not religious fanaticism but postcolonial grievances and identity crises (Roy, 2017; Sayyid, 2004). Islamophobia amplified by far-right populism, gendered policies with the target of Muslim women, and orientalist media tropes further marginalize Muslims and echo colonial control mechanisms (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023; Said, 1978). The European Islamophobia Report 2023 documents a significant increase in hate crimes, particularly in the wake of the October 2023 Gaza conflict. The incidents rose predominantly in countries like Norway, Spain, and Greece (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2023). However, Muslim agency—through "European Islam" and decolonial resistance—offers a counter-narrative with communities asserting plural identities via civic engagement and cultural contributions (Ramadan, 2004; Sayyid, 2014).

The adoption of a decolonial future may be the possibility for Europe's acknowledgement of Muslims as co-authors of its identity. This requires dismantling assimilationist practices and promoting cultural justice, affirming diverse identities without demanding conformity (El-Tayeb, 2011). Educational reforms with the integration of colonial legacies and Islamic thought can foster ethical pluralism, mitigate Islamophobia, and empower Muslim youth (Fanon, 1963; Ramadan, 2010). The priority of the policies should be redistribution of resources, tackling unemployment and housing inequalities while safeguarding religious freedom and transcending

securitization (Asad, 2003). By leveraging Muslim agency, as demonstrated by youth organizations and interfaith activities, Europe may foster a pluralistic identity that embodies its heterogeneous reality (Gilroy, 2005). This perspective corresponds with Chakrabarty's advocacy for the provincialization of Europe with the acknowledgement of modernities in which Muslims are central rather than marginal (Chakrabarty, 2000). This mutual respect and collective citizenship will overcome Europe's dichotomies of radicalism and Islamophobia and ultimately pave the way for a future of inclusive coexistence.

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