

The Headscarf as a Discursive Battlefield

Positions of the Current Discourse on Muslim Veiling in Austria and Germany

Gabriel Malli

Universität Graz, Österreich

Abstract Practices of Muslim female veiling are a frequent object of concern in the political debate in Austria and Germany. Reviewing current empirical and theoretical literature on the issue, I will try to trace relevant positions of the current debate employing a theoretical framework based on poststructuralist discourse theory. As I want to show, dominant discursive positions frequently refer to the oppressive element of the headscarf, understand it as opposed to shared 'Western' values or interpret it as an element of a process of Islamisation. Other, often marginalised speakers try to constitute veiling as a matter of freedom of religion, as a spiritual endeavour or as an act of resistance. Many of the positions represented in the public discourse, I argue, tend to overlook the variety of experiences Muslim women face at the intersection of various forms of dominance, and make invisible some of the multiple layers of meaning the practice of veiling is imbued with.

Keywords Headscarf. Headscarf debate. Veiling. Hijab. Islam. Discourse. Discourse analysis.

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1 Introduction

For more than twenty years, practices of Muslim female veiling have been a prominent issue in public debates of German-speaking countries, starting with the controversy around the Stuttgart teacher Fereshta Ludin in the late 1990s: with reference to the principle of religious neutrality of state education, courts forbade her to teach with a headscarf in a public school, resulting in a year-long legal dispute in which Ludin tried to claim her right to do so.¹ Since then, the Muslim veil regularly returns into the political arena as an object of concern. Discussions, however, go far beyond the garment and its religious meanings: instead, the headscarf inhibits the status of a ‘floating signifier’ pointing at broader normative social concepts and issues, such as secularity, freedom of religion, gender equality or migration. Not least, those debates allow for insights into the self-understanding of a non-Muslim majority society as well as into their relationships to an ‘other’ marked as Muslim.²

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 the privileged status of the headscarf as a signifier in political discourse became evident: especially right-wing populist politicians mobilised the headscarf as a symbol for criticising Corona-related measures as oppressive. Constructing parallels between mandatory face mask wearing and an alleged pressure for veiling in Muslim milieus, the German member of parliament Ulrike Schielke-Ziesling from the right-wing AfD remarked in a blog entry in April 2020 that obligatory masks “give a small insight into the everyday life of millions of Muslim women”.³ In the same context, Dominik Nepp, the Viennese chairman of the nationalist-conservative Austrian Freedom Party, referred to the mask as a “governmental burqa” on a demonstration against federal Corona-policies in May 2020.⁴ Detaching the veil from any religious context and re-signifying it as a general symbol of unfreedom and oppression, those instances again point at the complex sociopolitical layers of meaning the headscarf is imbued with.

This article primarily aims at tracing and contextualising regularities and recurring statements in contemporary debates on the headscarf. After a short explication of the notion of discourse and a brief review of relevant literature, I try to reconstruct dominant ascriptions to the headscarf in a first step, taking into account theoretical and empirical analyses from the German-speaking scientific discourse of the last twenty years. With ‘dominant’ I here refer to

1 Schieder 2005.

2 Amir-Moazami 2007, 16-17.

3 Schielke-Ziesling 2020. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

4 ORF Wien 2020.

statements which take central positions in the discourse, are broadly recognised as true and, not least, are translated into concrete policies. In a second step I want to make visible the often marginalised positions questioning dominant meanings and offer alternative readings to the practice of veiling. I would like to remark that my aim is neither the reconstruction of the historical development of these positions, nor a systematic empirical analysis of current debates. Instead, I try to offer an overview on a tense and affectively charged discursive field, which can function as a basis or orientation for future scholarly work on the subject.

2 On the Notion of Discourse

First of all, I want to give some specifications on the notion of discourse: following Foucauldian lines of thought, I understand discourse as an abstract system of statements and knowledge forms about an object, embedded in a specific sociohistorical constellation.⁵ Comprising orders of classification and evaluation as well as concrete narratives and interpretation frames,⁶ such systems allow for the social intelligibility of their objects. Consequently, a discourse defines what can be said about an object at a specific historical point. What I do *not* mean when I talk about discourse is a process of democratic and rational negotiation in the public sphere, as implied by a Habermasian concept of discourse.⁷ Instead, I assume that discourses play out in a field of conflict and tension on which agents with divergent interests and resources constantly struggle for the power of interpretation and definition. Trying to establish hegemonies and to set certain statements as true and absolute, dominant agents seek to exclude speakers producing deviant knowledge from legitimate speech by means of different mechanisms of regulation and control.⁸

In this sense, the contemporary discourse on the headscarf in Germany and Austria can be described as a complex of knowledge forms which classify and evaluate the practice of Muslim veiling and thus constitute it as a 'problematic' object in need of negotiation. Empirically, such a discourse becomes graspable in many linguistic and semiotic events, such as spoken and written texts, but also visual media and performative action, in public, as well as in non-public contexts. Generally, those discursive 'fragments' form a system of dispersion with

⁵ Diaz-Bone 2010, 81-2.

⁶ Keller 2007.

⁷ Habermas 1990.

⁸ Foucault 1981.

specific regularities and densifications emerging.⁹ This also holds for the discourse on veiling which densifies in public debates and in which certain speakers and statements are put forth in privileged positions.

Finally, the question about direct and indirect effects of discursive events is an empirical one: it would be a failure to assume that discourses automatically produce social order and are mechanically translated into follow-up action, but clearly they exert power on subjects, encourage certain practice forms and prevent others.¹⁰ Furthermore, they materialise in so-called *dispositives* – ensembles of heterogeneous elements such as legal arrangements, institutions or architecture – which solidify certain forms of knowledge and power relations.¹¹ Concrete legislative restrictions for veiled women thus can be understood as elements of such a *dispositive* which on the one hand are informed by a certain discursive knowledge, and on the other hand support and actualise this knowledge.

3 Literature on the Topic

The public and political debates on the headscarf of the last twenty years motivated a series of scholarship informed by concepts of discourse analysis in German-speaking countries. From the mid-2000s studies emerged primarily in the sociological academic context, but also in cultural, religious and legal studies, as well as in political sciences. I want to give here a brief review of the current research. In almost any case, scholars stress that headscarf debates point at broader normative social questions: in her pioneering study, Oestreich (2004) interprets the debate around Fereshta Ludin as a struggle between the conflicting political ideals of secularity on the one hand, and religious pluralism on the other.¹² Also Schieder (2005) emphasises that the headscarf debate must be located in the intersection of political, legal and pedagogical discourses on the role of religion in an allegedly secularised society.¹³ Armenkow (2009) analyses the headscarf as a “projection theatre” in which boundaries between the “West” and the Islamic or oriental other are actualised and re-negotiated.¹⁴ Similarly, Amir-Moazami (2007) in her extensive comparison of the German and the French discourse on veiling shows how the headscarf and its alleged layers of meaning are con-

⁹ Foucault 2004, 41.

¹⁰ For the relation of discourse and practice see Butler 1997.

¹¹ Foucault 1978, 119-20.

¹² Oestreich 2004.

¹³ Schieder 2005, 19.

¹⁴ Armenkow 2009, 136.

stituted as contradictory to shared national values.¹⁵ In a later paper (2014) she argues that headscarf controversies must also be considered performative processes drawing affective boundaries between veiled and “secular” bodies.¹⁶ Investigating the symbolism of the veil in dominant discourses on migration Jäger and Jäger (2007) find that it is associated with notions of societal regression such as war, terrorism or female oppression.¹⁷

Discussing the manifold social tensions materialising in the headscarf debate in the introduction, Berghahn and Rostock (2009) assembled in an extensive handbook contributions from cultural research, legal studies, moral philosophy and feminist theory.¹⁸ Between 2006 and 2009 the international research project VEIL (Values, Equality and Differences in Liberal Democracies) dealt with discourses on the headscarf in different European contexts: debates on veiling, so claimed the authors of the final report, can be considered a focal point in which sociocultural conceptions, as well as national policies concerning religion, gender and minorities materialise.¹⁹ Similarly, Korteweg and Yurdakul (2016) reconstruct national narratives manifesting in media discussions on veiling in different European countries. In the German case, the authors reason, the headscarf debate engenders a struggle between the political desideratum of a hegemonic culture (*Leitkultur*) and the ideal of cultural diversity.²⁰

Shooman (2014) more generally investigates gendered representations of Muslims in German media discourses in which the headscarf is mobilised as a symbol of female oppression and danger for the shared values of the ‘Western’ society.²¹ At the same time, she finds the voices of veiled Muslim women marginalised in the discourse, and their status as legitimate and competent speakers constantly challenged. In a recent essay, the sociologists Hark and Villa (2017) take the media coverage of the events at New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne as a starting point for a intersectional-feminist analysis of the relationship between discourses on Islam and gender discourses. In this context, they reflect on the role of the headscarf in processes of *othering*, tracing how the veil is signified as a bodily symbol of backwardness in dominant discourses.²²

15 Amir-Moazami 2007, 108-9.

16 Amir-Moazami 2014, 84-6.

17 Jäger, Jäger 2007, 127.

18 Berghahn, Rostock 2009. Berghahn presents similar findings in an article from 2017 in which she discusses current developments on the debate.

19 Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012, 199

20 Korteweg, Yurdakul 2016, 218-20.

21 Shooman 2014, 95-7.

22 Hark, Villa 2017, 71.

4 The Headscarf in Mainstream Politics

As the existing research shows, there are primarily two interconnected complexes of ascriptions, which frequently take dominant positions in debates and locate the headscarf and its wearers in opposition to 'European' values (which themselves are re-constructed this way): on the one hand, discourses mobilise the topoi of female oppression and control through the headscarf; on the other hand, there is the narrative of Islamisation, denoting the idea of a gradual replacement of 'Western' institutions and value systems through Islamic ones materialising in the headscarf. The headscarf, I want to argue, is constituted as dangerous in a twofold way: first, it is a danger for the individual wearer, and second, it is a threat for the social order in total. One could say, that a *double objectivation* takes place: the veil is imbued with allegedly objective meanings that are conceived as true and valued higher than the attributions veiled women make themselves.

Employing current quotations of relevant public speakers in Austria and Germany, I want to show how these positions, one could denote as parts of hegemonic discourses, find expression in the debate. With hegemonic discourses I here refer to those patterns of classification and evaluation which constitute a normative frame for legitimate speech about the headscarf in public discussions. Related elements can be found in diverse social contexts: they are employed by left- and right-wing speakers,²³ in the feminist discourse,²⁴ in non-Muslim migrant milieus or by "secular" Muslims,²⁵ in legal disputes²⁶ or in (popular) scientific publications.²⁷ Not least, such positions inform rhetorics of ruling politicians as well as concrete policies.

4.1 Oppression and Individual Danger

A first frequent scheme in debates interprets the headscarf as an instrument of oppression, segregation and disciplinatioin of women in Islam. Such ascriptions - which may have validity in some Muslim milieus, as reports and investigations suggest²⁸ - are constituted as a historically constant truth, accurate for all strands of Islam and all forms of veiling. The approval of such statements seems to be wide-

²³ Korteweg, Yurdakul 2016, 209.

²⁴ Hark, Villa 2017, 77-9.

²⁵ Shooman 2014, 100-2.

²⁶ Barskanmaz 2009.

²⁷ Schröter 2019.

²⁸ Toprak 2012; Wiesinger 2018.

spread: for the year 2019 a representative survey conducted in Austria showed that 71% of Austrians agree with the statement that the headscarf is a symbol of female oppression.²⁹ Also the federal minister for integration, Susanne Raab from the conservative ÖVP, stated in an interview in the context of discussions about a headscarf ban at public schools as follows:

From my perspective, girls never wear the headscarf voluntarily, there is always force. Either the pressure comes from the family, or from a group.³⁰

The same argument, but in a more elaborated way, is brought up by Susanne Schröter, German ethnologist and prominent academic speaker in recent headscarf debates. In a 2019 bestseller book titled *Politischer Islam. Stresstest für Deutschland* (Political Islam. Stress test for Germany) she states:

The headscarf is burdened by a patriarchal-theological discourse which impinges on girls from Quran schools and mosques, and which forces them with the thread of hellfire to submit to Islamist norms. [...] [This] has to be repelled in schools, and girls must be given the possibility for a carefree development of their personality.³¹

At the same time, subjective perspectives of veiled women are often devaluated: as speakers argue, their religious and cultural position and the resulting 'wrong consciousness', the manipulation by family and peers, or simply fear make it impossible for them to recognise the true and evident meaning of the headscarf, as well as the underlying power structures.³² Such an approach mirrors older discourses on the 'Orientals' which emerged in European politics, sciences and popular culture of the 19th century and constructed a dichotomy between the enlightened and rational European on the one hand, and the irrational Oriental, determined by religious emotions, on the other.³³ Also in the contemporary discourse, veiled Muslim women are denied agency and not recognised as wholesome subjects. They are represented as manipulated, conditioned or even brainwashed. Similar arguments can be found in the liberal-feminist discourse. So for example the German women's rights NGO *Terres des Femmes* in 2019 started

²⁹ Aschauer 2019.

³⁰ Böhmer 2020.

³¹ Schröter 2019, 341-2.

³² Amir-Moazami 2007, 122.

³³ Said 2012, 52-3.

a petition demanding a headscarf ban for women younger than 18 in Germany. The campaign's accompanying text says:

The veiling of girls is not a harmless religious covering of the head. It is a gender-specific discrimination and danger for (mental and physical) health. Their chances for equal participation at social life are massively restricted. Early veiling conditions girls to an extent, that they cannot take off the headscarf later anymore.³⁴

Similar arguments can be found with Muslim speakers promoting a liberal and secularised Islam: for instance, Seyran Ateş, German lawyer and Imam of a liberal Mosque in Berlin, is a prominent proponent of a modernised Islam rejecting the headscarf as a mere symbol of patriarchy.³⁵ Also, Bassam Tibi, scholar of political sciences and much-noticed expert on Islam in the public debate, makes the same point when he draws a differentiation between an enlightened Euro-Islam and a regressive "headscarf Islam".³⁶ However, many empirical studies found evidence that the subjective meanings of the headscarf can vary a lot depending on generation, social position, religious affiliation or ethnic background of the wearer.³⁷ This polysemic character is rejected or ignored in dominant discourses. At the same time, differentiations in belief and practice, as well as discursive struggles *within* the broad and heterogeneous field of "headscarf Islam" are overlooked, while possible negative effects of the headscarf on the psychic health and the development of Muslim women are accentuated. Consequently, legal restrictions on veiling are often legitimised with concerns about the well-being of especially – but not only – minors. Again Raab in an interview from February 2020:

The headscarf among children for me is not a religious symbol, but a sign of oppression and force that comes with early sexualisation. Our concern as government is the protection of girls, because being the minister for women I want to secure that every girl in Austria can unfold freely and autonomously and is not forced to veil.³⁸

All of the arguments quoted above hold a similar structure: an ideal of female autonomy marked as European is contrasted with an oppressive and regressive 'outside', while other forms of domination based on patriarchy, racism or socioeconomic marginalisation are not

³⁴ Terre des Femmes 2019.

³⁵ Evangelisch.de 2019.

³⁶ Röther 2016.

³⁷ Klinkhammer 2000; Nökel 2002; Droogsma 2006; Şahin 2014.

³⁸ Baier 2020.

mentioned. Consequently, a hierarchising demarcation of difference emerges which postulates the need for protection of Muslim women by a Western culture deemed superior in terms of civilisation.³⁹ Also here figures from the cultural imaginary of Orientalism are applied, as coercive violence against women is represented as a specifically Islamic cultural problem which can be overcome with Western support and guidance only.

4.2 Islamisation and Social Danger

Following the second central line of the dominant discourse, the headscarf not only endangers the individual well-being of its wearers, but also the social order of Western societies in total and consequently the well-being of non-Muslim citizens. In an essentialist manner, veiling is interpreted as a uniform symbol of political Islam, of conservative Islamic legal opinions or of a process of Islamisation.⁴⁰ Consequently, it is framed as contradicting Western principles of liberalism, secularism and gender equality. Such statements are often based on the finding that specific practices of veiling were historically appropriated and promoted by Islamist movements in different ways⁴¹ and may imply proximity to certain political Muslim groups also in the Western context.⁴² Speakers of the hegemonic discourse, however, tend to absolutise those findings and privilege them at the expense of other layers of meaning. A quotation from Alice Schwarzer puts this in a nutshell:

The *subjective* motives of girls and women who ‘voluntarily’ go under a headscarf in democracies [...] are only one level and, by the way, diverse and changing (if these women at all have the freedom to change their opinions). The second level, however, the *objective* meaning of the veil, is clear: [...] the headscarf is the flag of politicised Islam – and the full-body veil is its total victory.⁴³

A central aspect of the Islamisation narrative focuses on the alleged undermining of consensual Western values through the headscarf: the veil here is marked as a symbol of political Islamic groups, an Islamic legal system and a corresponding gender ideology standing in opposition to the ‘achievements’ of Western culture. The appearance

³⁹ Hark, Villa 2017.

⁴⁰ Berghahn, Rostock 2009, 12.

⁴¹ Almila 2018, 10-11.

⁴² Şahin 2019, 174-6.

⁴³ Schwarzer 2010, 232 (emphasis in the original).

of the headscarf in public space and institutions of 'Western' societies thus is interpreted as a kind of infiltration, as part of a process of establishing Islam in historically non-Muslim contexts.⁴⁴ As Alice Weidel, then chairwoman of the right-wing AfD, made clear in a speech in 2019, it is nothing less than *freedom* which is at stake:

The freedom of European citizens is a precious good which is also threatened by the compulsion to veil of the Islamic shariah. This has to be stopped as early as possible.⁴⁵

In this context, we can see that identity and self-understanding of the non-Muslim dominance society is constantly re-negotiated in such discursive events: by invoking threats, different conceptions of consensual values are steadily actualised. For Weidel it is freedom, Schröter sees democracy threatened,⁴⁶ Raab mentions the rule of law and "constitutional values such as the equality of women and men".⁴⁷ The idea of consensual liberal values, however, becomes blurry, when critique on the headscarf appeals to explicitly anti-liberal thought systems constituting a conservative Christian or an ethnic-national cultural heritage as endangered by veiling.⁴⁸

A more aggressive variant of the Islamisation narrative marks veiled women not only as carriers of 'a flag of Islamism', but considers them instruments in the pursue of a demographic strategy: the conception of Muslim women as oppressed and un-emancipated in some strands of political discourse comes along with the figure of 'fertile' Muslim women who foster Islamisation through childbearing while simultaneously weakening the welfare state through social fraud.⁴⁹ Most prominently, such theories appear in the broadly discussed bestseller books of the German economist Thilo Sarrazin,⁵⁰ until 2020 member of the Social Democratic Party. A quote from an interview in 2009, in which he introduced the pejorative label "headscarf girl" (*Kopftuchmädchen*) into the German-speaking debate, summarises the position:

The Turks conquer Germany as the Kosovars conquered the Kosovo: with a higher fertility rate. [...] I don't have to accept someone who lives from the state, who rejects the state, who does not care

⁴⁴ Shooman 2014, 92.

⁴⁵ AfD Fraktion im Bundestag 2019.

⁴⁶ Schwarzer 2019.

⁴⁷ Marchart 2020.

⁴⁸ Amir-Moazami 2007, 108-9.

⁴⁹ Shooman 2014, 97.

⁵⁰ Sarrazin 2012; 2018; 2020.

for his children's education and who steadily produces new little headscarf girls. That holds for 70% of the Turkish and 90% of the Arab population in Berlin.⁵¹

Though sharply criticised, Sarrazin insisted on his theses and constantly actualised them in publications and interviews. Similar statements can be found in the rhetoric of mainly right-wing politicians and groups: in 2018, Alice Weidel in a parliamentary speech stated that "headscarf girls" are not able to secure prosperity and the welfare state.⁵² Similarly, the FPÖ and their leading politicians over years produced associations between veiled women, demographic change and welfare fraud in numerous Facebook posts as documented by the Austrian NGO *SOS Mitmensch*.⁵³

5 Questioning Hegemonies

At the same time, there are positions in the public discourse who offensively contest hegemonic meanings and try to detach the headscarf from the dominant ascriptions circulating around the themes of oppression or Islamisation. I want to briefly examine three strands here: first, there are voices trying to re-align hijab with Western values. Second, there are positions highlighting the religious meanings, while third, some speakers try to re-signify hijab as a tool of resistance against processes of alienation and objectification fostered by capitalist logics.

5.1 Hijab as an Expression of Autonomy and Religious Pluralism

When speakers want to contest dominant statements, inverting their arguments seems to be a common discursive strategy: accordingly, wearing a headscarf should not be regarded as an undermining of female autonomy, but as an expression of it instead. In a liberal society with freedom of religions, accepting women's subjective faith-related decisions should be of high value. Veiling consequently does not endanger 'Western' values, but is fully aligned with them: wearing a headscarf is constituted a matter of free choice, of freedom of dress and equality of religions in this discourse. In a list of demands published in 2019 by the *Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich*, the official representation of Muslims living in Austria, the

⁵¹ Welt.de 2009.

⁵² Faz.net 2018.

⁵³ SOS Mitmensch 2019.

committee of Muslim women called for “respect for the right of self-determination”:

- No prohibition policy on our heads!
- No intrusion into the freedom of religion!
- No discrimination through a Lex Islamica with explicit prohibitions for Muslims!
- ‘Protection’ must neither lead to paternalism, nor to incapacitation!⁵⁴

In such statements constitutional civil rights are a major point of reference.⁵⁵ In a democratic, liberal and pluralistic society, religious symbols should all be accepted alike, while legal restrictions exclusively targeting Muslim religious practice are understood as illiberal and discriminatory. Speakers attempt at a re-framing of veiling within a broader discursive framework of citizenship and democracy. Left-wing and liberal commentators partly make similar arguments, but also non-Muslim religious agents share the position. In January 2020, the Catholic cardinal and archbishop of Vienna Christoph Schönborn intervened into the ongoing headscarf debate and lobbied against a ban in schools, making a plea for the acceptance of different religious symbols in public space.⁵⁶ Similarly, also the German episcopal conference in 2015 publicly took a stance against bans in public space, framing the headscarf as a matter of confessional freedom.⁵⁷

5.2 Hijab as a Religious Symbol

Second, there are speakers who accentuate the religious character of the headscarf and call for an acceptance of explicitly religiously argumentations. In this context, it must be noted that the concrete religious function of the practice of veiling itself is object of discourses within the field of Islam mirroring the vague and ambiguous character of the foundational verses in the Quran.⁵⁸ Research literature points at a broad range of meanings ascribed to the headscarf from a religious perspective: It can be understood as a tool for erecting and maintaining a God-willed gender order,⁵⁹ as a symbol allowing for the recognition of the wearer as Muslim,⁶⁰ or as a ‘behaviour check’ re-

⁵⁴ IGGÖ 2019, 4.

⁵⁵ Amir-Moazami 2007, 130.

⁵⁶ ORF 2020.

⁵⁷ Kölnische Rundschau 2015.

⁵⁸ Knieps 1993.

⁵⁹ Ruby 2006, 58.

⁶⁰ Droogsmas 2007, 302.

minding the wearer of her religious duties.⁶¹ It can be an expression of submission and obedience to God's will,⁶² or a signal of the wearer's modesty within a community of faith.⁶³

In the public discourse, however, the collective and community-related religious components are often subordinated to an individualised and subjective religious approach to veiling, centring around spirituality, experiential qualities and an enriching relationship to Allah acquired through the practice. For example, the brochure quoted above defines a self-determined "religious-spiritual approach to the conduct of life" as the central motivation for veiling which is considered to be shared by all headscarf-wearing women.⁶⁴ Also, the German blogger and journalist Merve Kayikci frames the headscarf as a symbol of trust in God in one recent blog entry.⁶⁵ A similar instance was given by Carla Amina Baghajati, former spokesperson for Women's affairs in the IGGÖ, when she said that for her "the headscarf means a feeling of security [*Geborgenheit*] in religion".⁶⁶ Another prominent speaker is the German headscarf-wearing author Kübra Gümüşay who in her 2020 bestseller book *Sprache und Sein* (Language and Being) investigates everyday processes of linguistic Othering mostly from a Muslim feminist perspective. Criticising the constant pressure on Muslims to explain and rationalise religious practices in secular terms, she passionately pleads for a full acceptance of religious and spiritual approaches to veiling in the public discourse.⁶⁷

Such an approach meets broader trends of the spiritualisation and subjectivation of religious practice, as described by scholars of sociology of religion: The individual quest for spirituality, transcendence and authentic religious experience becomes the central and most accepted religious form in "postmodern" social formations.⁶⁸ Re-framing the wearing of the headscarf as an element of a subjective spiritual endeavour thus can also be read as an alignment of the practice with broader religious discourses centring on experiences and spirituality.

61 Droogsma 2007, 304.

62 Mahmood 2005, 4-5.

63 Abu-Lughod 2005.

64 IGGÖ 2019, 7.

65 Kayikci 2019.

66 ÖIF 2017, 18.

67 Gümüşay 2020, 74-7.

68 Knoblauch 2009, 270-2.

5.3 Headscarf as a Symbol of Resistance

Though marginalised in the public debate, some speakers constitute the hijab as a tool of resistance, opposing dominant ascriptions to femininity and stereotypes about Muslim women. Wearing hijab in this discursive framework is not only a matter of religious freedom, but can actually be source of freedom and emancipation itself, as it liberates women from constraints related to ‘Western’ ideals of beauty or the commodification of the female body.⁶⁹ Instead, it stresses inner capacities and the dignity of women as persons, and thus has a self-empowering component. One of the most prominent speakers in the German-language discourse is the journalist and declared Muslim feminist Khola Maryam Hübsch, who in her books interprets practices of veiling as a counter-model to alienation fostered by a capitalist system.⁷⁰ Following her argumentation, the wearing of the headscarf encourages an overcoming of egoism, prevents a commodifying gaze on bodies, and helps wearers handling the overabundance of a capitalist society on an individual level. Thus, it can facilitate the experience of real love, prototypically manifesting in a succeeding relationship to God.⁷¹

Mobilising the headscarf as a symbol for the resistance against Western capitalist hegemony, this discursive strand may have historical predecessors in political struggles in traditionally Islamic societies: In these contexts, veiling often became a resistant act against Western dominance and inferiorisation of non-Western cultural practices.⁷² As the anthropologist Homa Hoodfar argued, it was only its problematisation through “modernising” political forces that constituted the headscarf as a central symbol of Islam.⁷³ Also, the more recent cases traced in this paper indicate that Islamic speakers in a Western context constantly have to find strategies to position themselves towards the dominant discourse on veiling.

⁶⁹ Amir-Moazami 2007, 30; Tarlo 2007, 153.

⁷⁰ Hübsch 2014, 2018.

⁷¹ Hübsch 2014, 13-16.

⁷² Ahmed 1992, 164.

⁷³ Hoodfar 2001, 423.

6 Towards an Intersectional Approach to Veiling?

Although my findings cannot be considered empirical claims in the strict sense, the fragments discussed so far indicate that in contemporary discourse a dominance of positions critical of the headscarf in terms of media coverage, visibility and public acceptance can be found. Associated with oppression, dis-integration and political Islam, the practice of veiling is constituted as conflicting with a secular legal order and liberal democracy. Being attributed with a 'wrong consciousness', veiled Muslim women themselves are often marginalised in discussions and not taken seriously. These dominant notions, however, are steadily contested from different standpoints: Most likely these contestations utilise 'liberal' arguments emphasising the value of freedom of religion and autonomous choice, but there are also speakers demanding acceptance for religious explanations or raising more general criticism on capitalism.

What is one problematic point about the discourse as a whole, is that only few agents seem willed to stress the openness and contingency of meanings evolving around the hijab. Although speakers of the second fraction address the polysemy of the headscarf at some points, the real variety of concrete practices and meanings attached to them remains invisible in the public discourse. The sociohistoric situated-ness of meanings of veiling within a very diverse field of Muslim beliefs and lifestyles is seldom made explicit in a debate which exhibits the tendency to push its speakers either in a pro- or in a contra-veiling position. Also, veiled women present in the public discourse often act as affiliates of specific religious associations or speak from an educated and privileged standpoint. By focusing on the level of subjective spirituality, other perspectives are made invisible and the multiple realities of Muslim life are hardly represented. Reyhan Şahin aka Dr. Bitch Ray, artist, linguist and author of one of the most extensive scientific studies on veiling practices in Germany,⁷⁴ in a 2018 article and a 2019 book⁷⁵ critically assessed this misrepresentation:

The diversity of different meaning variants stays a taboo this way. [...] [In] a feminist-intersectional sense *all* women of the Muslim spectrum should be made visible and not only representatives of a certain Islam. [...] All emancipatory processes must become visible, either by conservative Muslims with or without headscarf, by converted Muslims, or veiled Muslims who consciously distance themselves from Islamic associations. [...] Also secular Muslims,

⁷⁴ Şahin 2014.

⁷⁵ Şahin 2019.

Alevi, Kurds – all those women stay invisible so far. Lacking knowledge [...] regarding Islamic diversity as well as the suspending of a differentiated critique on political Islamic patriarchy [...] promote spaces for generalising critique.⁷⁶

Furthermore, an emancipatory discourse on the headscarf has to acknowledge that the practice of veiling is complex even on an individual level and can never be fully understood by means of underlying gender ideologies, political interests or subjective religious meanings. Instead, it always happens in intersectional environments in which Muslim women have to re-assert their agency towards manifold modes of dominance at the same time. Class domination, ethnic constellations, racist discrimination, religious and political affiliations, generational issues, patriarchal structures of the mainstream society as well as of Muslim communities, and many more structural factors constitute Muslim women's experiential horizons and shape their knowledge as well as the meanings the headscarf has for them.⁷⁷ They are not passive victims but try to take action and make sense of their selves within a multilayered web of structural constraints.

Finally, I suggest that the productions of the German YouTube channel *datteltäter*⁷⁸ can be regarded a practical implementation of a discourse on the headscarf breaking with the notions discussed in this paper and making visible different modes of dominance: reaching a mostly young audience of millions, the videos of the channel address a variety of problems young Muslim Germans are confronted with in their everyday life in a humoristic way.⁷⁹ The racism and sexism of the dominance society is made visible just as patriarchal structures in Muslim communities and familial milieus, subjective religious motivations are pictured, stereotypes are satirically countered, conflicts of identity and belonging evolving around practices of veiling voiced by actors and actresses with different Muslim backgrounds.

⁷⁶ Şahin 2017.

⁷⁷ Volpp 2001, 1192.

⁷⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/c/dattelt%C3%A4ter>.

⁷⁹ Braun 2019.

7 Appendix. Notes on the Performativity of Discursive Knowledge

Below, I want to briefly share some observations on the conference this volume is the result of and try to contextualise them within the conceptual framework provided so far. In fact, I would argue that the dynamics of the event gave some interesting insights into the reproduction mechanisms of discursive knowledge on the headscarf. Referring to the first afternoon panel, when Karl Prenner, Carla Amina Baghajati and me gave presentations on Muslim practices of veiling, I want to show how (a) the hegemonic discourse was challenged by the speakers and (b) how attendees tried to 'repair' the order of discourse.

Generally, the very organisation of an academic conference on the headscarf points at a certain social need of negotiating this subject. Whether the setting of a conference allows for debate offside hegemonic discourses is an empirical question, depending on the positioning of the organisers and the selection of speakers. In case of the Graz conference, however, none of the speakers of the afternoon panel on Islam was expected to raise perspectives explicitly dismissive of Islam or veiling practices. Strikingly, this panel attracted much more visitors than the others: around 60 people attended the three presentations and the following discussion, at least twice as much as the presentations before. As the conference was open to a general public and advertised in a local newspaper as well as in an adult educational organisation, the audience comprised not only university affiliates, but also other people interested in the subject matter who were mostly of non-Muslim background. Furthermore, one can assume that the current debates on a headscarf ban in schools, as well as the presence of Carla Baghajati, who is a quite prominent speaker in those debates, have triggered additional interest.

7.1 Challenging Dominant Discourses...

While Karl Prenner's presentation focused on the Quranic foundations of veiling practices, it was especially Carla Amina Baghajati who rejected dominant ascriptions to the headscarf on several levels in her contribution: first, she framed veiling not as contradicting notions of female autonomy or civil liberties, but as an expression of it instead, in line with the positions I discussed under 5.1. Second, she strived for a historical contextualisation of the current debate within discursive and legislative developments of the last decades. Third, she accentuated the possibility of veiling practices based on subjective religiosity and reflexivity; fourth, she referred to the heterogeneity of the (discursive) field of Islam and expressed her dissent with particular positions. In general, Baghajati performed a subject

position that may have appeared suspect from the logic of the dominant discourse: trying to break with the image of the oppressed and voiceless headscarf-wearer *and* with the figure of the threatening Islamist, she both criticised mainstream and conservative-Islamic ascriptions to the veil. Subsequently, my own presentation challenged the dominant discourse in so far as it explicitly addressed the regularity and stereotypy of its statements.

7.2 ... and Repairing Them

In the discussion following up the three presentations, almost all of the around ten questions from the audience addressed Carla Baghajati and her talk. Strikingly, the speakers mostly did not refer concretely to her arguments, but rather targeted at making general statements on veiling – one could say, that they tried to restate an attacked discursive order by *correcting* Baghajati's discourse in performative action. So some attendants stated that the headscarf cannot be discussed without referring to its symbolism in the context of international Islamist movements. Others interpreted the practice of veiling as an expression of dissent with 'Austrian' values of gender equality and secular legal order, even raising the topos of a 'clash of cultures'. Both positions can be interpreted as elements of the Islamisation narrative, framing the headscarf as a danger for the social order of Western societies in general. But also the oppression theme was brought up in a cluster of remarks referring to the current debate in Austria: So speakers stressed the deliberative potential of a headscarf ban in schools for young female Muslims.

Interestingly, many of the statements were made in an emotional way, with some discussants displaying a high level of arousal. This points at an entanglement of discursive knowledge with affective states, implying a bodily attachment of the speakers to abstract notions of secularity or liberalism,⁸⁰ and undermining the discursively constructed dichotomy between the rational European on the one hand, and the emotional Oriental on the other.⁸¹ Affect here can be interpreted as a productive instance in the sense of Sara Ahmed, as it established relations between agents, created a sense of togetherness and drew boundaries between the 'own' and the Other.⁸² Investing discursive statements with emotional tangibility, affective dynamics in general seem to play a crucial role in the reproduction of discourses.

⁸⁰ Amir-Moazami 2014, 85.

⁸¹ von Scheve 2017.

⁸² Ahmed 2004.

In her reaction, Baghajati noted that she sees her work as a superintendent for Islamic religious education in schools exactly in countering coercion and promoting subjective and unconstrained approaches to veiling through pedagogical work. In response, one person from the audience accused Baghajati to consciously obfuscate facts and to transport a biased picture of her work and the Islamic community in Austria as a whole. The few more differentiating comments of the discussion received less attention: so one person pointed at the diversity of Islam, while another stressed the situational character of veiling practices. Their statements, however, did not really affect the overall dynamics of the discussion.

7.3 Conclusive Remarks

Given its small scale, one may be tempted now to marginalise the social impact of the conference. Still, it has to be considered that similar discursive 'dramas' with comparable affective dynamics are constantly played out on way bigger stages, e.g. in TV talk shows, parliamentary debates, social media discussions or newspaper columns. The analysed conference was only one exemplar in a sequence of disputes lasting more than twenty years which generate real consequences for the everyday life of Muslim people in German or Austrian context, ranging from legal restrictions, over exclusionary practices, to open violence. Although discursive practices do not necessarily motivate follow-up action, in their reiteration they regularly cause effects reproducing social hierarchies.

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