Unveiling 21st Century Representations of Muslim Women in French Cinema

by

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Declaration of Committee

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Abstract

This thesis examines how recent French films (2015-2017) represent veiled female characters. The three films of this corpus (*Fatima*, Faucon 2015; *Le Ciel Attendra*, Mention-Schaar 2016; *Cherchez la Femme*, Abadi 2017) are selected for they not only highlight the limited representations that conform to the dominant views of the Muslim female ‘other’ in contemporary French society, but they also present the three archetypes common to representations of veiled characters: the submissive Maghrebi mother; the veiled woman as a subaltern; the radicalised Muslim girl. Since the early 2000s (Tarr, 2015), Maghrebi-French actresses are increasingly present in film, marking a growing visibility of 2nd-generation Maghrebi-French in contemporary France. Cinema is particularly powerful in its capacity to challenge or perpetuate the prejudices that contribute to societal discrimination toward minority groups. Despite their aim at challenging stereotypical views of veiled Muslim characters, these films also reinforce hegemonic views and social prejudices.

Keywords: French cinema; Muslim women; veiling; mediated representations of the veil; representation

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my parents for their constant and unwavering support. I am grateful for the life lessons you have conveyed onto me; without which I surely would not be the person I am today. From athletics to academia, you have always urged me to take whatever I am undertaking to the furthest of my abilities and you taught me that the beauty is in the journey, not the destination. You also taught me – through your own actions – how to be resilient. Most of all you taught me not to back down from a challenge, but rather to pursue that which makes one grow. I climb mountains (rather than just stairs) thanks to you.

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Chapter 1.

French News Media Representations: Reification of the Veiled Muslim Woman as the Societal 'Other'

Images contribute largely to our understanding of our social context, so when we consider the places and communities that we have limited knowledge of, images with underlying messages and stereotypes come to mind and help us shape our beliefs and perceptions of the latter. Our understanding of the Middle East, for example, is commonly summarized by images of desertic lands filled with oil, bearded men, and veiled Muslim women: shrouded characters, hidden, and silenced by their veil. Such images have become both powerful and familiar due to their common usage in the Western media. Keaton (2006) identifies how both politicians, and news journalists have created a narrative and image about the suitable enemy; an individual or community that the larger public has been taught to fear. In France, the suitable enemy are "youths of immigration and of color from the outer cities […] [t]he sum and summation of all such enemies are Muslims, and most visibly headscarf wearing Muslim girls" (Keaton, 2006, p.2). During the time that I have undertaken this project, numerous articles have come out in France relating to the veil as an object in constant opposition to French secular values, including the following article from the journal *Marianne* published in September 2019. The cover story titled: "Il y a 30 ans, Creil, quand la République a capitulé" shows three photographs of veiled Muslim women each taken in a different year (from 1989 to 2019). The photographs (see figure 1.1) when linked with the title send a clear message that wearing the Islamic headscarf is at odds with – and represents a threat to – French secular values.

Figure 1.1 *"Il y a 30 ans, Creil, quand la République a capitulé" (Marianne, Sept. 2019)*

In this chapter I will offer a brief *état de lieu* to illustrate how the French news media represents veiled Muslim women, and how these representations solidify social anxieties surrounding the Islamic veil in France leading to prejudices and discriminations for veiled Muslim women. By first understanding mediatic tendencies towards this minority group we will better recognize the duality or representational practices of Muslim women between media and cinema. Where French news media marks the Muslim woman as a societal 'other', French cinema seems to offer a more hopeful possibility for integration and recognition for this social group (to be discussed in the following chapter).

In the past, the integration of Maghrebi migrants and their descendants has been a source of both political and public concern. In 1946, France recruited workers from Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria; which were still under French colonial rule (Tribalat, 2004). These workers were for the most part employed in low-paying labour jobs. They were placed in shared housing developments outside of the city limits known as the *banlieues* (Higbee, 2013). After the former French colonies regained independence[1] male Maghrebi workers were given the option to either return to their countries of origin, or they had the possibility of immigrating to France permanently. Later their wives (some

[1]Both Tunisia and Morocco became independent in 1956, while Algeria regained independence in 1962, following the Algerian war.

of which would be headscarf-wearing Muslim women) and children would arrive to France, due to family reunification (Kealhofer-Kemp, 2016). Today, it is estimated that over 3 million French citizens are of Maghrebi descent (in the sense that they have at least one grandparent from the Maghreb) (Tribalat, 2004).

Over the past few decades Maghrebi-French youth have been depicted by the media in stories relating to the banlieue and the integration (or lack thereof) for their community (Guénif-Souilamas, 2000). According to Keaton (2006) outer-city Maghrebi-French youths are rarely seen as legitimate French citizens, but rather they are "assigned many of the same social labels, such as 'oppressed' or 'submissive Muslim girls,' 'immigrants, and 'kids from the projects'" (Keaton, 2006, p.33). Both Guénif-Souilamas (2000) and Geesey (2012) note that young Maghrebi-French women are not perceived in the same manner as their brothers. These women are assumed to be more desirous of a successful integration and so they tend to be left out of most political debate (save for concerns relating to the Islamic veil) (Guénif-Souilamas, 2000). Public discourse concerning these young women leans on their success as it illustrates what an exemplary integration in the host culture should look like (Guénif-Souilamas, 2005).

By using them as the image of a supposed successful integration (one that focuses primarily on adopting current cultural practices and foregoing old traditional practices reminiscent of previous cultural ties), politicians demonstrate the possibility and viability of integration for Maghrebi-French youths. Subsequently, the message then becomes one that inserts full blame (of failed integration) and responsibility on the shoulders of Maghrebi-migrants (Guénif-Souilamas, 2000). French socio-political discourse maintains the importance that the responsibility to integrate is that of incoming migrants (Prost, 2009). To fully integrate to French culture, migrants must learn French, and adapt to French social practices; veiling not being amongst them (Sanna, 2011). Under such conditions, the challenge for Muslim women's successful integration is connected to their personal religious practices and their success relies on their veiling choices; that is, to veil or not to veil. Geesey explains that "Maghrebian women's attempts to negotiate change and integration in France are often a delicate dance between the need to maintain a sense of continuity and the need to adjust to influences and expectations of the host society" (Geesey, 1995, p.146). The choice for some Maghrebi-French Muslim women to continue veiling could be interpreted as this attempt to maintain cultural continuity all the while adjusting to the host society. When taking into

account current mediatic representations of veiled Muslim women, it becomes all the more noticeable that Maghrebi women are “seen [either] as potential agents of integration or victims of Islamic fundamentalist agendas” (Geesey,1995, p.137), whereby the veil becomes emblematic of a failed integration. Seta (2016) adds another dimension to the stereotypes affecting Muslim women. Beyond the portrayal that they are weak, oppressed, brainwashed by Muslim men, and lacking significant control of their lives, they are paradoxically also viewed as “proselytes willing to spread a certain conception of Islam, as Trojan horses just waiting to impose their views on others” (Seta, 2016, p.13). Following this logic, we may deduce that according to these negative but largely accepted stereotypes of veiled Muslim women, the fight against religious fundamentalism focuses on women’s veiling practices as these have become major political acts.

In the West, the image of the veiled Muslim woman is used to articulate the potential threat of an Islamic invasion (Seta, 2016). This fear sets Muslim women as the supposed threat to western principles (equality amongst genders and secularism). Stereotypes are fed by a constant stream of mediatic images, headlines, and caricatures. In France, magazines and newspapers such as *L’Express*, or *Marianne*, contribute to the view that Islam challenges core French values, specifically through veiled Muslim women (Seta, 2016, p.14). Heated debates about the rights of Muslim women to wear the veil in public contexts in secular countries such as France continue to erupt, most recently in the wake of the French government’s decision to ban overt religious dress symbols in schools from September 2004. That so much can be invested in a symbol of religious adherence suggests the lingering potency of a trajectory of repeated imagery and narratives, and the efficacy of those modes of representation in silencing the diversity of Muslim women’s voices (Macdonald, 2006, p.19). By representing the veil as intrinsically threatening to French secularism, French media depicts hybrid Franco-Muslim identity as an impossibility. According to Yardim (2015), the act of “[r]epresenting Muslim women as ‘primitive’ retrograde, and subjugated individuals, best serves colonialism as it reinforces and justifies their interference in the Middle East, as they had the intention of ‘saving’ oppressed and vulnerable Muslim women” (Yardim, 2015, p.312). Westernized visions of the veil as being oppressive to Muslim women offers a poor understanding of those who wear it and fails to properly reflect their experiences. Bullock explains that this constructed and stereotypical

depiction of Islam has “always served Western political ends, and it continue[s] to do so even in the late twentieth century” (Bullock, 2002, P.XV). Macdonald (2006) adds that “[b]y constructing veiling as an aberrant practice, Western commentators imply that unveiling marks a return to a “natural” and “normal” body” (Macdonald, 2006, p.12). Consequently, the veil is regarded as “unnatural” but is also inherently symbolic of oppression and inequality between men and women in the Middle East, as well as rising xenophobic views about Islam in the western world (Afshar, 2008; Yardim, 2015). For a part of the French people, as shown in some of the French press publications, Muslim women have become representative of an identity regression and a menace to basic human rights principles (Anex, 2006, p.73).

Unsurprisingly, when both first- and second-generation immigrants face hostile and unaccepting conditions at the hands of the host society, they find it harder to adapt to their new country. According to Keaton (2006), young Muslim women who face antagonistic and negative reception from members of their host society, find it harder to adapt and assimilate. Hostile reception of these minorities subsequently leads to furthering difficulties in Muslim women’s self-understanding as a reflection of those complications (Keaton, 2006). The veiled Muslim woman living in the Western world is stuck between a rock and a hard place, that is to say she is burdened by societal pressures to conform and integrate into a new host society (Afshar, 2008). However, in French society, the Muslim woman is often made to feel unwelcome in public spaces due to laws and regulations forbidding her from practicing her personal religious beliefs publicly (Bakht, 2012). In an article published in the French magazine *Le Point* (2019) entitled: *En France, les musulmans sont davantage victimes de discrimination*, a recent phone survey conducted in 2019 with 1,007 participants (all of which self-identify as Muslims) demonstrated that about 42% of Muslims living in France have experienced some form of discrimination linked to their religious beliefs. The survey showed that more women than men (46% vs. 38%) expressed experiencing religious-based discrimination, and of those participants, those who actively wore the veil experienced higher numbers of discrimination than their non-veiled counterparts (60% vs. 44%). This leads me to the belief that stereotyped perceptions about Muslim women have important consequences on the latter’s sentiments of belonging, or not belonging—within a community. Due to stereotypical images of their community, Muslim women frequently

experience sentiments of rejection, non-desirability, and alienation caused by feelings of being confined to private spaces of existence (Joly, 2017).

In France, when Muslim women wear the hijab, they risk facing prejudice and stereotypes because the veil is regarded by many as a political statement (Beaugé, 2019), which is incompatible with a secular and democratic vision (Breeden, 2019). In France, as argued before, the headscarf has often been depicted in the media as suspect, intrinsically violent, and those who wear it are regarded as the "terrorist other" living among us in Western society (Pinto, 2019). Veiling has become a central topic of debates concerning modernity, freedom of speech and beliefs, the place of religion in contemporary societies, and also in the feminist platform (Lamrabet, 2015; Motha, 2007). According to Lamrabet (2015), the actual discourse about veiled Muslim women is a continued reproduction of the orientalist and colonialist vision. To remind us of this vision, let us consider the work of Edward Saïd. In his book on Orientalism, Saïd critiques the way artists of the 19th century represent the Middle East as submissive, exotic, and unnatural. He explains how this orientalist depiction informs Western perspectives towards the East. Saïd argues that "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Saïd, 1979, p.10). The dynamic between the East and the West is in nature one of domination. Our views of the "oriental other' (and more importantly the figure of the oriental woman) are informed by Western male perspectives (Saïd, 1979). Today, the situation for women in Islam is a primary concern largely due to numerous stereotypes and prejudice that has accumulated on the subject (Lamrabet, 2015). Even the most inconspicuous of stereotypes and prejudices may contribute to ongoing discrimination toward this demographic.

Macdonald explains that when people express surprise during the 21st century that veiled Muslim women could be politicians, feminists, comedians, and even compete as elite athletes, this is due to the continuous belief that it is impossible for women to veil, all the while maintaining personal agency and autonomy (Macdonald, 2006, p.19). This persistent and limited vision of veiled Muslim women as oppressed and therefore unable to pursue or achieve the same things unveiled women go on to achieve on a regular basis, is explained by the fact that in many European countries, including France: "[Muslim women] mostly appear in the media as victims, involved in some incidents or legal procedures. Any social, economic or political participation of Muslim

women that differs from the image of a victim or a threat is usually neglected" (Seta, 2016, p.13). The 2016 European Network Against Racism (ENAR) report shows that the media is the main source of information about Islam for the broader public (Seta, 2016, p.14). In the news, media stories are meant to educate us on current affairs; however, the stereotypes found within them have significant effects on both the perception and reception we have towards certain minorities. According to Bullock, this view is the "most simplistic and unsophisticated view of the veil […] underpinned by an unconscious adherence to liberalism and modernization theory, compounded by an ignorance of any cultural details about Muslim women's lives" (Bullock, 2002, P.XV). The effects of stereotypes have harmful and lasting consequences because "once formed, stereotypes are resistant to change on the basis of new information" (Aronson, et al., 1999, p.502). Stereotyping allows oppression to continue between both oppressive, and oppressed social groups (Bullock, 2002), furthering and contributing to a perpetual cycle of systemic discrimination.

After having discussed the manner in which media is influenced by stereotypes of a racialized societal minority group, we come to the conclusion that mediatic depictions have important and tangible consequences for members of this societal group, that is, women who either self-identify, or are perceived as, Muslim women. Gorham (1999) defines racial stereotypes as "a particular subset of social reality beliefs: (they are) understandings about particular social groups that we have learned from our social world" (Gorham, 1999, p. 231). In other words, stereotypes can be defined as widely held perceptions, interpretations, fixed and oversimplified images about people or things, learnt through societal interactions. Negative stereotypes lead to inequality because they inform people's perceptions on various social groups (Sherman, 1996). Consequently, this allows people to form judgments about both groups and individuals (Allport, 1954). Through judgement based on stereotypes about certain social groups, we inform our prejudices against members of that community, solely based on their belonging to said group. As Aronson, Wilson, and Akert put it, prejudice is "a hostile or negative attitude towards a distinguishable group of people, based solely on their membership in that group" (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1999, p.501). We are limited in this study to studying the effects of stereotyping Muslim women only so far as how stereotypes lead to inequality, judgement, and prejudice; however, it is worthwhile to note that discrimination stems from prejudice. Reskin (2000) suggests that both

stereotypes and prejudice lead to discrimination; by taking this relationship into account, it becomes clear how an analysis of film can lead us to better understand the recurring stereotypes that contribute to the prejudiced views of veiled Muslim women. The next chapter will study how films both contribute to disseminating stereotypes and challenge them. We will find that comparatively to French news media, films generally offer more complex representations of the veiled female characters. Using a post-colonial paradigm, these negative representations indicate the continuation of the colonial era attitudes towards Muslims.

Chapter 2.

French Cinema, the Maghrebi Migrant and the veiled Muslim character: A System of Social and Racial Representation

Given a few exceptions, characters belonging to various minority groups have rarely been given central roles in French films. In fact, between the 60's and early 90's, French cinema has been rather reluctant to include immigrant characters in the forefront of their larger budget films. When present on screen, immigrant actors were offered the roles of supporting characters appearing alongside ethnic French actors (Gastaut, 2001). Such examples of these films include: *L'œil au beur(re) noir* (Serge Meynard, 1987), and *Laisse béton* (Serge Le Péron, 1983). In sight of the visible increase of these representations after the 1990's – such as *Cheb* (Rachid Bouchareb, 1991), and *Bye-bye* (Karim Dridi, 1995) – we must analyze how minority groups are being represented in films, and how this impacts our views of them. Studies show that representations circulated in film and television, about minority groups, continue to be heavily stereotyped, which has important consequences on minorities (Billings, 2003; Miller & Ross, 2004; Planchenault, 2015, 2017). In this study we will focus our attention specifically to cinema, although I would argue that certain similarities extend beyond film, to television as well. Mental images and perceptions of certain social groups shape and influence public opinions and can be learned through character portrayal as they appear in both film and television (Tan, Fujioka, & Lucht, 1997; Tan, Fujioka, & Tan, 2000). Film, for example, as a medium of storytelling offers a social environment that is particularly powerful as spectators form beliefs towards certain social groups based on the understanding that they gained from the cinematic representation of minoritized social groups (Fujioka, 1999; Kealhofer-Kemp, 2015).

Cinema has a considerable influence in both shaping and occasionally combatting hegemonic understandings towards individuals that are labeled as the societal 'other' (Hastie, 2017). This is because cinematic representations of minorities have the ability to activate racial stereotypes through visual images (Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996). According to French cinema critic, André Bazin, cinema is an idealist phenomenon containing idealized world philosophy, cultural ideologies, and imagined

universal realities (Bazin, 2010, p.9). Therefore, Cinema is a valuable asset in our attempt to make sense of Modern French culture, values, and ideologies, in relation to the minoritized social 'other'. When considering the 'oriental other', one would be amiss not to reflect on the words of Edward Saïd. He stresses that "a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed" is partly due to todays' "electronic postmodern world" (Saïd, 1978, p.34). Saïd (1978) proposes that the proliferation and standardization of stereotypical representations contribute to *othering* those from the Near East (Said, p.34). Messages about the social 'other' that are widely distributed contribute to popular cultural perceptions about the 'other' which will then inform hegemonic views towards racialized French citizens.

In this chapter, I examine how films characterize Muslim women and I theorize how this can influence cinema-viewers' perceptions of them. I chose to examine characterizations of Muslim women in my research because, much like any cultural text, cinema allows us to examine and analyze societal discourse (Hall, 1997), in this case, discourse concerning veiled Muslim women living in contemporary France.

2.1. Cinema as reflection of society?

In this section we will reflect on the relationship/dynamics between cinema and society to better understand how they affect one another. We will attempt to answer the following questions: does cinema reflect society? or is society shaped by cinematic discourse? Perhaps more specifically, does cinema play an important role in how ideologies regarding important social themes[2] are being circulated amongst cinema viewers? I argue that cinema works in both ways, it is both affected by, and affects social discourse and ideologies. I will answer these questions by first discussing how cinema acts as an efficient vehicle to disseminate social ideologies to cinema viewers, then we will analyze how current sociopolitical and cultural themes become the focal points of films, while others are erased.

More specifically, when discussing films, what we are truly dealing with is representation. Cinema cannot fully embody reality, it can only mimic and reflect reality

[2] Such as wearing of the Islamic headscarf, immigration and its effect on French national identity, integration of ethnic minorities, etc.

to its best capacity. In other words, cinema is limited to representation. Because cinema is only a representation of society, we must first clearly define what representation is and how it works to understand how individual films operate within a larger system of representation.

Representation is the action of making perceptible a thing, person, or idea through any of the following modes of communicating: drawings, figures, signs, language, etc. (Larousse, en ligne, 2019 – my translation). Representation works in the following manner: to communicate the idea of a drawing, one must employ the word "drawing" in designation of the object. In other words, representation of the drawing cannot be understood as the object itself, but the action necessary to talk about it. In linguistics this refers to the *signifier* and the *signified.* Language itself is a production of signs, images and sounds used intentionally to communicate an idea from a person to the next (Hall, 1997). In other words, cinema, like language, employs or creates images in order to communicate ideas and feelings clearly to cinema viewers.

2.1.1. Cinema as vehicle for societal ideologies

Cinema as a medium of storytelling can be an extremely powerful tool when it comes to circulating and changing societal ideologies. According to Bazin (2010), both photography and cinema effectively fulfill human obsession for realism (Bazin, 2010). Because these mediums are so satisfying for the viewers' need to view 'the real world', this allows for certain confusion to the spectatorship between reality and fictitious representation. For example, neo-realism (as can be observed in the works of Italian director Antonio Rossellini) as a style of filmmaking, uses specific elements such as colloquial spoken dialect and language, usage of non-professional actors, modest shooting locations, and unglamorous movie stars to make his films appear more realistic to the average spectator (Binh, 2006; Brunette, 1985). I observe that two out of three of the films studied in my thesis use such techniques. In *Fatima* (2015) the central role is played by non-professional actress, Soria Zeroual, and in *Le ciel attendra* (2016) the secondary character Dounia Bouzar (played by herself) contribute to a realist method of filmmaking where usage of non-professional actors contributes to the perception that what is represented on screen is *realistic* (Binh, 2006). Additionally, both films use modest shooting locations; both films are set in the French banlieues (*Fatima* is set in an unspecified banlieue of Lyon, while *Le ciel attendra* is set in the Parisian banlieue of

Créteil). Consequently, it is all the more important to question representation and the elements that go into making certain images appear more realistic than others, that is, especially when they conform to pre-existing hegemonic understandings of minorities. Considerable amounts of work must be done in order to identify bias and debunk the myth of 'authentic' film. This can be done by considering the creative processes that films go through before becoming the final product (filmmakers, producers, actors, costume and set designers, etc.). And so, no film can be considered as an unmediated representation of the real world. Films are limited to illusion. I believe that 'authenticity' becomes an issue when films concerning minority demographics are celebrated based on the very idea that they are considered 'realistic'.

One of the films selected in my thesis especially deals with the question of *authenticity. Fatima* (2015) directed by Phillipe Faucon has been celebrated for representing a middle-aged Muslim woman – who works as a cleaning woman to support her two daughters – as a highly authentic film depicting the struggles faced by Muslim women in contemporary France. *Variety* magazine praised "three main actresses, despite their general inexperience, [as] utterly persuasive individually and as a family unit. Zeroual, in particular, lends Fatima a warmth and dignity that never feels less than lifelike" (Chang, 2015). *Gala* magazine's review of the film described Fatima as "the ultra-realistic portrait of a single Algerian mother, raising her two daughters" (Serfati, 2015). When film reviews use words such as "lifelike" and "ultra-realistic" in describing the film, they contribute to such myth of *authenticity*.

Faucon argues that there exists a disparity between French film and the current socio-political reality in French society. Through his films, Faucon explores those characters who have been prominently absent from the screen (Faucon in Strauss, 2015). In an interview with *Télérama* (Strauss, 2015), Faucon revealed that his desire in his portrayal of Fatima was not to idealize her, but rather to show a certain consideration, esteem, and fraternity. And a desire of comprehension (Strauss, 2015). He elaborates that his responsibility as a filmmaker was in producing images that resist dominant audiovisual stereotypes (Chèze, 2016).

However, Fatima's character does little to disturb hegemonic and dominant views of her as an uneducated cleaning lady with linguistic difficulties. This is problematic as it does not allow for other representations to be regarded as *authentic*. We will discuss this

further in the second section of this study, when we examine the films of the corpus. In making my selection of films for my corpus, I felt it was of utmost importance for veiled characters to be the primary characters of the films, rather than occupying secondary and supporting role. It is important to highlight that not many French films include veiled Muslim women, let alone center them in the film's narrative. This somewhat limited my options to a handful of films, amongst which I chose only three. Limiting my corpus to three films permitted me to analyze each-film rigorously, while also allowing me to explore the manner in which three different cinematic genres would characterize veiled characters. Now that we have discussed the effectiveness of cinema in shaping perceptions about minority groups, we will next consider whether what is represented is a reflection of French society.

2.1.2. Cinema as ideological vehicle for important sociopolitical and cultural themes

Although cinema primarily deals with fiction, it does carry many social values that are prevalent in the mainstream culture. Hall (1997) explains there are two ways of understanding how the process of representation works. Either representations act as a visual language which reflects a pre-existing reality of the world, or as a visual language that produces meaning about the world through the process of representing it. For the purpose of this study, I propose that French cinema is a vehicle containing and communicating societal ideologies acting in both of the following ways. Firstly, French cinema *influences* our sociopolitical views concerning Muslim women in contemporary French culture, while adding social commentary. Secondly, film sets for itself the objective of recording and *reflecting* a nuanced reality, perhaps in order to criticize certain societal behaviours, ideologies, and events affecting Muslim women living in contemporary France. As it stands, Muslims throughout Europe have sentiments of exclusion or alienation within their own societies, or in extreme cases, as "societal threats" (Choudhury, et al., 2006, p.7). Through the analyzes of the films in my corpus, I believe that it is possible to form an understanding – even if just partial –of the French societal ideologies regarding this minority. To better understand whether cinema is able to reflect the concerns and ideologies held by the French population, we must first see what themes are currently at the heart of contemporary French social preoccupations.

Beur cinema has largely been written about in the past, and is specific to French films. This phenomenon is not exclusive to France and one could compare it with Germany where Turkish-German directors have occupied an important place in German cinema. Beur cinema shares similarities with accented cinema – term coined by Hamid Naficy – in that accented cinema deals with the themes of displacement (Naficy, 2001). This genre of cinema differs from other popular films which are free from overt ideological themes and are intended for pure entertainment (Naficy, 2001, p.23). Beur cinema is either created by, or centering on post-colonial subjects (and their descendants) who have been displaced though migration (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015). According to Naficy, these films reflect the "double consciousness" (the multiple facets of an individual) of those involved (Naficy, 2001, p.22).

Durmelat and Swamy (2015) state that all films are products of complex negotiation practices between concurring and at times contradicting injunctions to best ensure films' viability and commercial success. For this reason, underlying messages found in film must represent the interests of French citizens and ethnically marked minorities, all the while supporting French republican ideological discourse (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015, 21). This explains why a recurring theme in Beur cinema deals with second generation Maghrebi-French characters' negotiation between conformity to French identity and ideologies and preserving heritage identity and values. Identity politics have become a main object of both public and political debate, raising questions regarding French identity, integration and immigration, and secularism in the new millennium (Piser, 2019; Vicher, 2017).

France's changing cultural demographics can be felt in cinema as well. According to Higbee (2013), since the late 90's and early 2000's there has been a shift portraying France as an increasingly multicultural society. This enabled a greater number of Maghrebi-French actors to occupy leading roles on screen (Tarr, 2015). It is perhaps not coincidental that the five most successful actors of Maghrebi descent to date, are all male[3], each of them capable of playing both ethnically and non ethnically

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[3] Samy Naceri (co-star of the *Taxi* series : 1998, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2007), Jamel Debbouze (*Le Ciel, les oiseaux...et ta mère!* :1999, *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cleéopâtre* : 2002), Gad Elmaleh (*La Vérité si je mens* : 2001, *Chouchou* : 2003), Dany Boon and Kad Merad (*Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* : 2008).

marked characters (Tarr, 2015). We will discuss this further in the next part of this chapter.

2.2. Representation of Maghrebi migrants and their descendants in French cinema

In this section, we will first consider the biased construction of characters belonging to the Maghrebi/Middle Eastern community. Then, we will analyze how Islam is being represented in cinema, and we will end with a discussion of how Muslim women are subjected to erasure in films.

2.2.1. Cinematic characterizations of minority characters of Maghrebi Arab descent from the 70s onwards

During the 1970s, mainstream French cinema represented Maghrebi migrants in roles showing the trajectories of male workers mainly recruited to work in construction, factories, and similar manual labor jobs. These films were habitually situated in the French ghettos (banlieues) and centralized the themes of police brutality and racism (Keaton, 2006). According to Tarr (2015), the characters themselves were often represented in strict binary terms. Either they were portrayed as social deviants (criminals or prostitutes) or victims of white racism, consequently contributing to "dominant media construction of ethnic others as deviants and/or outsiders" (Tarr, 2015 p.297). Hall (1997) explains that "people who are in any way significantly different from the majority – 'them' rather than 'us' – are frequently exposed to this *binary* form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarised, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and exotic. And they are often required to be *both things at the same time*!" (Hall, 1997, p.229). While Hall's work is not related to the representation of Maghrebi migrants, but deals with the representation of the black male body in the media, we draw important parallels between both racialized minorities and their representation in mainstream media. During that same time however, the number of films made about or relating to the Beur experience[4] began to increase. These films

[4] Mixed couples, youth violence between the French and immigrants, the imaginary of a successful integration, police violence, societal and familial exclusion faced by young women from immigrant backgrounds.

followed a stylistic tradition of immigrant documentary. Thanks to project financing, festivals, and newly accessible video technology of the 70s, young filmmakers from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds had a newly found ability to tell their stories (Bloom 1999).

Both Tarr (2015) and Higbee (2013) note that it wasn't until after the early 2000s that mainstream cinema began to represent the diversity of migrants coming from the Maghreb and the Middle East. This renewal can be attributed to the Beur cinematic movement. An important theme that is highlighted in Beur cinema is the intergenerational differences felt by members of both generations, each of them facing distinctive struggles within their communities (Bloom, 1999). Despite the racism and Islamophobia experienced by this community, Beur cinema does not represent migrants' home countries as a valid, and desirable option for second generation migrants of Maghrebi origin (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015). The Islamophobia against this minority group is exemplified by the skepticism regarding their successful integration in France. Bloom (1999) observes the cover image from the September 1991 issue of *Le Figaro*, which showcases the indecisiveness regarding the possibility of integrating the Beur (i.e., Muslim) population into French society. The image "foregrounds the fully exposed face and open neck of Marianne (symbol of the French republic) in opposition to an unknown woman in the Islamic headscarf, both of which are cast in white alabaster and titled, 'Immigration ou Invasion?'" (Bloom,1999, n.p). This exemplifies the mixed reception amongst French citizens towards immigrants, and a certain amount of confusion about what it means to be 'Muslim'. Considering media and films' tendency to erase important cultural distinctions between Maghrebi migrants highlights the confusion surrounding migrants of Maghrebi descent and their relation to Islam. In the next section we will discuss how cinematic representations depict Islam in films.

2.2.2. Representations of a cultural Islam, detrimental to religious practices

Unlike its overwhelming presence in French media, where concerns regarding French Secular values are constant topic of public debate, Islam remains an unspoken topic in French films (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015; Gaertner, 2008). If present in films, Islam is mainly represented when practiced by men, or elderly women, but rarely by young women. Even within Beur cinema, Islam is rarely the films central topic (Durmelat

& Swamy, 2015). However, in films that include male characters who are practicing Muslims, the characters tend to embody some kind of danger, or threat, the exception to which is when they are represented in comedies[5]. Only then do they no longer represent threats to dominant society. This representational feature is one shared with the characterization of black men in films. They too are represented as two very different and opposing types of character: either dangerous or comedic (Hall, 1997).

These recurring characteristics help us identify the underlying messages found within these film's ideological positions. Hall's argument that

> "images do not carry meaning or 'signify on their own [...] at the broader level of how 'difference' and 'otherness' is being represented in a particular culture at any moment, we can see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another" (Hall, 1997, p.232).

In other words, it is not these images of the dangerous or comic Muslim man alone that signify meaning, but rather that these images fit within a larger framework of representation, upon which we assign meaning. The assigned meaning associated with the image becomes stronger as that image is recycled from one film to the next with only slight variation to distinguish itself from the last. The dangerous Muslim man has become a recurring trope within French cinema (Higbee, 2013), because it only accentuates the differences between migrant and non-migrant French citizens. Gaertner (2008) observes such stigmatization of Muslim characters is present in films such as: *Nos amis les flics* (Swaim, 2004), and *L'Union sacrée* (Arcady, 1989). While the latter film does portray the character of Karim Hamida (played by Richard Berry), a practicing Muslim and undercover police officer, his character is nonetheless placed in direct opposition with the film's villains; radical Islamist immigrants who represent a veritable terrorist threat to France. Higbee (2013) adds that these two-dimensional and heavily stereotyped Maghrebi protagonists are typically paired with "a more sympathetic and complex white protagonist; be they a cop, a confidant or even a pimp" (Higbee, 2013, p.8). This is certainly the case in *L'Union sacrée* with Patrick Bruel playing the role of Simon Atlan, a Jewish police inspector. This way of perceiving Muslim men fits well within the larger schema, as media during the last 30 years, has done the work of

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[5] For example: Roschdi Zem in *Mauvaise foi* (2006), Ramzy Bedia in *Il reste du Jambon* (2010), Kad Merad in *L'Italien* (2010), and Medi Sadoun in *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au bon dieu ?* (2014).

highlighting cultural and religious differences between the minority and the ethnic majority population (Kealhofer-Kemp, 2015, p.2). Difference and opposition are important because it is from the tension that meaning is created. Hall explains that "meaning depends on the difference between opposites […] binary oppositions […] have the great value of capturing the diversity of the world within their either/or extremes, they are also a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning" (Hall, 1997, p.235). Creating such a binary and simplistic character archetype and assigning it to the figure of the Muslim man serves to reaffirm in the minds of film-viewers the contrast between the so called "good guys" and the assigned "bad guys" in a way that is both familiar and comforting to those who are familiar with this cinematic narrative.

In her article, Tarr (2014) analyzes films that centralize the themes of secularism and multiculturalism. Tarr observes that the films in her corpus attempt to demonstrate how Muslim characters in French cinema negotiate between both identities while trying to live both simultaneously, without one gaining more importance than the other. Depending on the film, we are left questioning the viability of forming a perfectly hybrid Franco-Muslim identity, or if characters' identities will perpetually be in constant negotiation (Tarr, 2014, p.518). According to Tarr, the Muslim population in France has largely been stigmatized in order to draw attention away from the failure of urban politiques to properly integrate a new multi-ethnic population in France (Tarr, 2014, p.518).

2.2.3. Muslim Women living on the margins

This section will offer a brief illustration of the veiled religious figure, originating from the veiled Maghrebi woman, and their experience living in the Western world. Due to the visibility of the veil, it is extremely difficult for veiled Muslim women to go unnoticed in modern French society (Keaton, 2006; Chakraborti and Zempi, 2012). Geesey notes that Maghrebi women have become the

> "objects of political and sociological discourse – with other people speaking for them – notably in the context of debates on the integration of Maghrebis and their descendants in France. This discourse sets out a pair of binary oppositions where Maghrebi migrant women 'are alternately seen as potential agents of integration or victims of Islamic fundamentalist agendas'" (Geesey, 1995, p.137).

By choosing to wear the Islamic headscarf, these women are subsequently viewed as manipulated and lacking in self-autonomy; as such the headscarf represents a violation of human rights (Anex, 2006, p.73) or if they choose not to they subjugate themselves to white colonialism (Guénif-Souilamas, 2000). In this respect, one may digress that such attitudes vis-à-vis the French Muslim woman population indicates a categorical and oppositional interpretation of Maghrebi women. Such societal perceptions of Maghrebi women as either oppressed or conforming to white colonial expectations is potentially very restrictive for this population of women. The homogeneity of representations of Veiled Muslim women erases the important diversity existing within this population (Wagner et al.. 2012). To begin with, there are numerous types of Islamic veils including the *Hijab,* the *Chador*, the *Burqa*, and the *Niqab.* The *Hijab,* is a piece of cloth worn only around the head and neck. The *Chador* is a long cloak wrapped around the head and shoulders. The *Niqab* veils the entire face, except for a small portion for the eyes. And lastly, the *Burqa* which is the most concealing of the Islamic veils covers the eyes (as well as the face) with a piece of mesh fabric (Laurent, 2015).

Islamic veils do more than symbolize the wearers' religious identity, but they also signal cultural belonging as different types of veils are worn in different Islamic countries (Wagner et al., 2012). Furthermore, not all Muslim identifying women wear the veil. A large percentage of Muslim women in France choose not to veil for personal reasons. According to a 2019 inquiry, an estimated 68% of Muslim women are unveiled in France and of the remaining 32% relatively few of them wear the integral veil (El Karoui, 2016). Meanwhile, it is important to note that the accuracy of this study was put into question, I will still include them as they do provide some insight regarding the context of this research. Seen in this light, one can understand how the choice to veil or unveil in the Western world is a significant act of agency and self-autonomy. I argue that choosing to veil in a Western context actually demonstrates self-determination as it is not an easy choice to make when one takes into consideration the pressure placed on Muslim women to unveil as a sign of integration (Guénif-Souilamas, 2000). I propose such binarity is perpetuated in cinematic representations of Maghrebi women where veiled and unveiled female characters are created as the antithesis to one another.

Even within Beur cinema there is a certain reluctance to represent veiled Muslim women (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015). When present, Islamic women tend to belong to just a few character groups. When veiled, they are characterized as: old women, mothers,

nurses, cleaning women, or as submissive women married to male characters who have more prominent roles on screen. These female characters are often portrayed as poor and/or uneducated. As unveiled women, they are more often depicted as westernized, non-practicing young women fulfilling the role of the 'sexy' beurette (Tarr, 2015). This vision conforms to orientalist perspectives about the hyper-sexualization of the Muslim woman with naked breasts and masked faces clothed in light robes and scarves, lounging around in a harem, or the opposing images of silent oppressed, veiled women, victims of masculine brutality (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006: 22). Sellier (2011), compares the careers of actors Isabelle Adjani and Denis Podalydès and attributes the differences to the fact that "French actresses [sic] are seen principally to incarnate sexuality, whereas the image of male actors is much richer and more socially and culturally complex', then the roles enabling female actors to construct a distinctive star image will be proportionately fewer" (Sellier, 2011, p.153). Based on these limitations affecting actresses, it becomes all the more understandable how Maghrebi-French actresses have occupied a far more limited space on the big screen in contrast to their male counterparts over the past decade, although recently this is no longer the case as actresses such as Nawell Madani, Sabrina Ouazani, or French-Algerian pop singer and actress Camélia Jordana are becoming more and prominent in the media. However, despite the important increase of Magherbi-French actresses occupying the limelight, the depiction of veiled characters continues to be sparse.

2.3. Beur Cinema: an incomplete vision

For filmmakers of migrant origin, film production goes further than artistic expression and formal vocation: it also deals with issues of identity. Filmmaking takes the form of cultural activism (Ginsburg, 2002). Around the 1980s, films produced by, and/or about second-generation migrants were released. Today, they occupy an important place in French cinema (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015 p.7): a genre that has been called *Beur* cinema (Higbee, 2013).

The Beur youth population (the majority of which is born in France and of Algerian, Tunisian, or Moroccan descent) is frequently, and extensively, covered by the

media. A large cause of the attention is due to both the 2005 riots[6] taking place in the suburbs of Paris, Marseilles, and Lyon, as well as the 1989 Islamic headscarf controversy[7] (Bloom, 1999). Since then, many male actors of Maghrebi Arab heritage have had success in commercial films such as Smaïn in *Les Deux papas et la maman* (Smaïn and Longval, 1996) and Jamel Debbouze in *Le Ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!* (Bensalah, 1999), both of which attracted over a million spectators in France (Higbee, 2013). Tarr (2015) notices "the importance of comedy, and the ability of the actors in question to play both ethnically marked and unmarked roles, but also the fact that these stars are all male" (Tarr, 2015, p.298). This may be because French cinema viewers tend to have a preference for comedies, and that this genre habitually privileges men (Tarr, 2015).

In spite of the negative experiences (racism, xenophobia, and high unemployment rates) that Beur youth face daily in France, a recurring trope in Beur cinema shows that a return to their respective countries of origin is not a viable, or desirable, option for the second generation (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015; Higbee, 2013). Today, Beur cinema remains rather fragmented, and for the most part is filmed with a rather limited budget (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015). In spite of both national and international cinematic success for films produced by or with protagonists of Maghrebi descent, funding for these filmmakers remains uncertain. Certain filmmakers, amongst which Abdelatif Kechiche, have expressed bitterness towards the lack of financial backing (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015, p.9). In this third and final section we will discuss how second-generation Maghrebi filmmakers turn to cinema with a desire to recount a new perspective on Arabic and Maghrebi migration in France. This will lead us to understand the manner in which this new vision is still fragmented due to an unwillingness to characterize an important demographic (veiled Muslim women) in all its diversity. We will then delve into an exploration of the nature of those limitations.

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[6] Riots followed the death of two Maghrebi-French youths from the Banlieue after they hid from the police in an electricity substation and were subsequently electrocuted. This sparked a three- week period of riots in the major suburbs (banlieues) of France between October and November 2005.

[7] The suspension of three Muslim girls of Tunisian and Moroccan origin for wearing the headscarf caused the controversy. The Creil school headmaster (30 miles North of Paris), Ernest Cheniere, claimed that by wearing the Islamic headscarf in school, the girls were consequently engaged in a form of proselytism, and violated the secular nature of a state-run educational institution.

2.3.1. Desire for a new vision: retelling the stories or Arabic migrants in France

In her article, Tarr (2005) observes that second generation migrants of Maghrebi descent turned to film with a desire to depict the muted stories of the first generation of Maghrebi women who came to France in order to join their husbands, through family reunification (*regroupement familial*). These cinematic stories include the films *Vivre au Paradis* (Guerdjou, 1998), and *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (Benguigui, 2001). They are often told by the children of these immigrants, with the desire to make visible their voyage, and the circumstances of how they came to have been raised in France (Higbee, 2013; Levine, 2008). This cinema of migration and exile, or accented cinema as Naficy (2001) prefers to call it, showcases personal experiences regarding exile. He observes that films with the theme of 'expatriation' share stylistic similarities, and are influenced by nostalgic, memory-driven, and multilingual narratives. Cinema of migration also emphasizes political agency relating to identity concerns (Naficy, 2001). Their works are oftentimes projects of recognition and reconciliation. They function both as acknowledgement of the quiet and silenced struggles faced by the first generation, and as reconciliation as the second generation forms a new hybrid identity between both new and old cultures. Such films are often met with large critical success and are celebrated at international film festivals.

2.3.2. An Incomplete Vision

By examining which topics are most often treated in Beur cinema, and by whom the stories are told, we realize that the vision we have of the Maghrebi Arab community living in France is incomplete. Because these stories take place mainly in the French suburbs and deal most often with the question of integration in France, we limit our understanding of that community as one living only in impoverished areas. Furthermore, the identity of the person telling the stories can have an impact on which stories are told, and which ones are not. Tarr explains that it is primarily ethnic minority women directors who "foreground socially and culturally complex roles for ethnic minority women" (Tarr, 2015, p. 299) which may partially explain the sparse opportunities for Maghrebi actresses in leading roles. Between 2000 and 2010, less than 1% of French films were directed by French women of Maghrebi heritage (Tarr, 2012), while those directed by French women as a whole during those same years was 18% (Ince, 2013). In keeping

with Tarr (2015)'s observation that Maghrebi women filmmakers are generally the ones who create more diverse and complex roles for Maghrebi actresses, it is unsurprising that a majority of ethnic minority characters of Maghrebi Arab descent remain marginalized to limited and specific types of characters who largely conform to the dominant and accepted vision of Maghrebi women. Hafsia Herzi's character, for example, in *La graine et le mulet/couscous* (2007) by Maghrebi-French and male filmmaker Abdellatif Kechiche, demonstrates what the stereotype of the sexy beurette looks like in her role (Higbee, 2013). One of the film's most renowned scenes involving a seductive belly dance casts an orientalist view on women with Muslim backgrounds. In this scene, the woman becomes an object of lust, and a submissive offering to the masculine gaze. I argue that such characterizations do little to subvert the fetishization of ethnic Maghrebi women. In this case, the male gaze functions by fetishizing the 'oriental' female body. If an ethnic Maghrebi woman is unveiled (as is the case in *La graine et le mulet* (2007)) her body becomes spectacle. Meanwhile, I would argue that veiled women are similarly fetishized as the male gaze focuses on unveiling that which is hidden. Neither veiled or unveiled women are free from such fetishization since the pervasiveness of the male gaze ignores women's subjectivity by objectifying the female form.

Comparatively to the frequency that veiled Muslim women appear and occupy central roles in French news, public debate, and politics (as discussed earlier in chapter 1), the veiled Muslim woman's presence in contemporary French film is practically erased. The character of Zouina (played by Fejria Deliba) in *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (2001) exemplifies how Islamic practices are basically effaced, as the film leans on establishing the protagonists' cultural practices rather than religious ones. When Muslim women characters are placed in submissive societal roles, their voices are silenced, and their lives are limited to marginalized spaces of existing.

2.3.3. The marginalized Muslim woman

Perhaps not coincidentally, both female filmmakers and actresses of Maghrebi descent are becoming more and more prominent in French cinema (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015; Tarr, 2015). Since the turn of the century, three young actresses of Maghrebi Arab descent have received recognition at the renowned César ceremonies. The parts that brought them to the spotlight were for their parts in the following films: Rachida Brakni in

Chaos (2001, by Coline Serreau), receiving the award of “meilleur espoir féminin” Hafsia Herzi in *La Graine et le mulet/Couscous* (2007, by Abdellatif Kechiche) receiving the same award, and Leila Bekhti in *Tout ce qui brille/All That Glitters* (2010, by Géraldine Nakache and Hervé Mimran). More recently, in 2017 Oulaya Amamra received the award for here role in *Divines* (2016, by Uda Benyamina), and in 2020 Lyna Khoudri received the same award for her role in *Papicha* (2019, by Mounia Meddour). It is worthwhile to note that four out of five of these films have female filmmakers, confirming Tarr’s argument that female filmmakers originating from the Maghreb are more likely to create roles for Maghrebi women actors (Tarr, 2015).

Two out of three of the films selected in my corpus have women filmmakers (*Le Ciel Attendra* by Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar, and *Cherchez la Femme* by Sou Abadi). Through an analysis of how these filmmakers choose to represent characterizations of Muslim women, I will determine how each of them build respective understandings of that character. Phillipe Faucon, for example, a non-Maghrebi male filmmaker (and the producer of the third film in my corpus) might choose to highlight different aspects of the character than that of Franco-Iranian female filmmaker, Sou Abadi. Female characters created by women are generally more diverse and in depth (Kealhofer-Kemp 2015). Maghrebi actresses turned to filmmaking, driven by their motivations to create films with more feminine (if not feminist) perspectives (Tarr, 2012, p.191). In other words, these women recognized a lack in representation, and had the desire to fulfill the void.

There is an unwillingness to represent young Muslim women as practicing their faith, in contrast to young Muslim men: “it is notable that in no case is the young woman of Maghrebi heritage represented as a practising Muslim” (Tarr, 2015, p.303). This restriction tends not to affect male actors as much. This tendency to depict young Maghrebi women as ‘assimilated’ can be the flip coin of a reluctance to bring headscarf-wearing protagonists to the big screen. In the following chapters of this thesis, I examine three films each of which showcases veiled characters.

Chapter 3.

Fatima: the Figure of the Submissive Veiled Mother

In Philippe Faucon's film *Fatima* (2015), the veil is a symbolic object characterizing submissiveness and traditionalist values reminiscent of past cultural heritage. Faucon's social realist narrative centers on Fatima (played by first-timer Soria Zeroual), an Algerian Muslim migrant who works as a house cleaner to provide for her daughters, Nesrine (Zita Hanrot) and Souad (Kenza Noah Aïche), until the day she takes a bad fall down the stairs leaving her unable to work. She turns to writing her journal in Arabic to retell her struggles, and her hopes and dreams. Faucon, the only male filmmaker in my corpus, is not himself considered a minority filmmaker but, he is a *pied-noir* [8] from Algeria (Erensoy, 2018). It is relatively well known that Faucon's films focus on various social perspectives; in the past, he has made films about unveiled migrants, such as in *Samia* (2000). Faucon was inspired to create the film after reading Fatima Elayoubi's book of poems: *Prière à la lune* (2006). Elayoubi's work stands out as it is uncommon for "women of [her] generation [to] wri[te] their own stories or [document] their experiences" (Kealhofer-Kemp, 2015, p.4). In her own words, Elayoubi's objective (Elayoubi in Boudaoud, 2008) in writing the book was to speak for those who do not, for those whose work is generally invisible (cleaning women, cashiers, sweepers, etc.). Her book tells the story of the young woman she was when she had to quit school at a young age, follow her husband to France, even as she remained illiterate in French, and how she found herself in precarious work situations as a cleaning lady (Boudaoud, 2008). Kealhofer-Kemp (2015) notes that the wide-ranging corpus of films centralizing characters of first-generation Maghrebi women is rather surprising, "given the general invisibility of first generation women from the Maghreb in the public spotlight, compared with the much greater visibility of their children and grandchildren" (Kealhofer-Kemp, 2015, p.1). For example, films like *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (Benguigui, 2001), *Dans la vie*

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8 Pieds-noirs is the term used to refer to the European French citizens that settled in the French colonies of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco since the 19th century, many of which returned to France following the Algerian war of independence in 1962.

(Faucon, 2008), and *La graine et le mulet* (Kechiche, 2007) remind us of the usual treatment of such characters (see Figure 3.1).

Figure not available.

Figure 3.1 Figures of first-generation from the Maghreb (Fejria Delida in Inch Allah Dimanche, 2001; Zohra Mouffok in Dans la vie, 2008; and Bouraouïa Mazrouk in La graine et le mulet, 2007)

However, when films bring to the forefront what exists in the periphery (veiled Muslim women), they still maintain a certain level of separation between us (the viewer) and them (characterizations of veiled Muslim women). Because first-generation migrant women are often shown to speak the heritage language (Arabic) (Kealhofer-Kemp, 2015, p.76), this separation is achieved through the film's use of subtitles that reinforce the feeling that even as we watch the events of the film occurring on screen, we are constantly reminded of the linguistic barrier separating members of the French audience from the central character of the film, Fatima. On the other hand, spoken Arabic adds an element of 'authenticity' to the film especially when one takes into account that Arabic is spoken by non-professional actress, Soria Zeroual. The combination of spoken Arabic (while employing subtitles) and the casting of a non-professional actress effectively adds an element of 'reality' and 'authenticity' to the film, simply due to the fact that Zeroual is in real life a cleaning woman who immigrated to France from Algeria in 2002 (Coulaud, 2018). This 'authenticity' seduces French film viewers as they experience the film and its characters in an intimate fashion. According to Moura (2011) "subtitles draw attention to the limits of translation, as well as, the text's intermediation on the screen" while simultaneously providing "the audience with a new pathway to the characters' thoughts and feelings" (Moura, 2011, p.191-192). In the film (with Fatima acting as the main

example) veiled women are characterized as relatively powerless (especially when we consider that no other veiled character acts as the antithesis of the Islamic veil being associated with lack of power in the film). This is accomplished through a series of events demonstrating the violent reality that in this westernized context, veiled figures are synonymous with powerless figures.

In this section of my thesis on the figure of the submissive veiled mother I will be discussing the two following characteristics: 1) the veiled first-generation migrant as submissive to the ethnic majority, and 2) limited competences in French communication skills leave veiled women in precarious positions both in private and the public settings ultimately marking veiled women as particularly vulnerable and isolated. This analysis will highlight that the film does nothing to contest the limited and limiting view of veiled Muslim women. Veiled mothers are represented as experiencing great difficulties that call into question their parental abilities and are subjected to unstable work situations. Veiled characters are depicted as having little access to additional assistance due to their linguistic competences, and because veiling is associated with submissiveness within larger societal contexts (Bullock, 2002; Keaton, 2006). Due to the precariousness these women face outside of the family sphere, their children are left to navigate their social context alone with minimal parental help or guidance (Touati, 2012, para.23). First, by analyzing the film's visual choices in the way the characters are presented (such as their costumes, hairstyles, and body language) the audience is given insight into their personality traits. The veil is a particularly important object of analysis for its symbolic qualities which characterize the wearer as submissive and traditional (Bullock, 1999; Parikh, 2019), as well as contrast with the second generation's more contemporary expression of values through clothing. Secondly, we understand that linguistic difficulties or her lack of fluency in French leave Fatima in unfavorable situations both in her home life and in her work life. Coupled with the veil, we view such characters as particularly isolated. By taking all of these arguments into account we recognize that, in spite of its best efforts, *Fatima* (2015) contributes to a narrow perception of veiled Muslim women as it glorifies a submissive character archetype reminiscent to that of a servant: Fatima voices no personal desires of her own, preferring to focus her energies towards providing a better life for her daughters.

3.1. Stylistic Representations: Unveiling Disempowerment

Through a brief analysis of the visual representation of the three central characters – amongst which only one of them is veiled – we will better understand which ideological values are associated with the veil and by association, those who wear it. We will accomplish this first through analysis of visual elements of the three main characters, aiding us in gaining insight into their respective personalities, values, and temperament.

Figure 3.2 Actresses Soria Zeroual, Zita Hanrot, and Kenza Noah Aïche are pictured sitting from left to right for the poster of the film (Fatima, 2015)

Figure 3.2 presents the image used for the cover of the film. Positioned from left to right Fatima, Nesrine, and Souad are seated against a neutral and rather dull backdrop (Fatima's apartment's faded wallpaper) forcing our attention to the three subjects of the image. Based on the characters' distinctive appearance in the photo (clothing, postures, and hairstyles) we recognize that all three characters have different character and personality traits that separate them from the other two. We recognize Fatima's clothing as far more traditional than her daughters, reminiscent of her culture. In the poster as seen in Figure 3.2, Fatima wears loose clothing that hide her feminine figure. The colors of her garments are muted earth tones. She arguably looks better in the poster than she does in the film, as she appears less tired, and is even wearing a small amount of makeup. This differs from the rest of the film, where she tends to wear clothes that hide her figure, make her appear older than she is, and the color and prints she opts to wear are usually sober and unassuming. This may be a creative choice to illustrate the fact that she is worn out from the harshness of her job, or because she is supposed to hide

under the veil. She shies away from bold prints and colors in her wardrobe and this is reflected in her personality where she tends to fade away into the background. In her appearance, Fatima is the antithesis of glamour. Even in this photo, Fatima blends into the background of the frame due to the colors of her garment being of a similar tone to the wall behind them. For Fatima, the veil becomes the object that marks her character archetype as 1) being a part of an older generation, 2) having roots to a different culture, 3) a specific set of values, like piousness (the way she ties her scarf), and 4) a-sexuality (seeing as she is separated from her husband and demonstrates having no romantic desires of her own). This reading of Fatima is especially revealing when put in contrast with her daughters who wear more contemporary and form fitting clothing that demonstrate both their youth, and their cultural ties to western society rather than that of their ethnic heritage. Both the darker color of Nesrine and Souad's clothes, and the fact that their dark hair is uncovered add to the contrast between mother and daughters. The style of the clothing used for all three characters in this cover is maintained throughout the film and offers us insight into how these characters choose to appear in society. Simply due to their clothing choices, we recognize that Souad and Nesrine's characters' appearance are accentuated in the image because their clothes offer a bigger contrast with the background compared to their mother's clothing. Both her daughters are wearing lower necklines, and they are unveiled. Nesrine, the eldest, wears her hair up and away from her face, signaling that she is more serious and studious than her younger sister. Souad's hair is loose, and her posture slumped compared to both her sister and her mother. Both Fatima and Nesrine's backs are straight and their hands clasped in front of them. Souad's posture hints at her being a less obedient and well-mannered character. Souad and Nesrine's clothes are more modern and reflect that they are part of a younger generation and that therefore their values differ from that of the previous generation (sometimes causing conflicts between Fatima and her younger daughter, Souad). From an analysis of the film's cover, we already have a glimpse into these character's personalities: Fatima as quiet and traditionalist, reminiscent of her cultural identity; Souad as the rebellious youth living in unfavorable living conditions and struggling to find her place within an unforgiving French context (as demonstrated in her hair and posture), and Nesrine in the middle, exemplifying an idealistic possibility for second-generation Maghrebi women.

3.1.1. Wearing Intergenerational Friction

In an early scene where Souad is getting ready for school (13:45), Fatima enters the room and criticizes her daughter's clothing choice. Souad is wearing a pale pink tank top and a skirt. Fatima says in Arabic[9]: "[*cover your chest, it's showing*]" (13:55). Fatima then puts on a scarf to cover her own hair. The juxtaposition between mother and daughter's clothing choices in this scene demonstrates that their values do not align. While Souad argues that her spaghetti-strap tank-top and skirt are not too revealing – "nothing's showing […] it's stifling. I can't wear a collar." (13:58) – and valuing comfort over modesty, Fatima values modesty over comfort. Interestingly, as Souad explains that it is hot out and that she will suffocate with a higher neckline, we see Fatima firmly fastening her headscarf around her neck (14:00). This scene could not offer a clearer image of characters' values being at odds, with their values manifesting in their clothing choices. Fatima states in Arabic "[*Never mind the warmth. People gossip!*]" (14:04), and "[…] [*you can't go out like that. You need to watch every step. And every word*]" (14:27). This scene shows how Fatima is accustomed to dressing modestly because she is aware that people will form judgements based on her choice of clothing: "She still holds traditional notions for women and their public demeanor, which clash with the way Souad wants to live her life" (Erensoy, 2018, p.78). Because her values come from her culture and traditions as a Muslim woman, she dresses in a way that would not be deemed inappropriate by other members of her community. The way Fatima dresses parallels with her restraint in French verbal communication. We see within the dialogue that Fatima associates dressing with restraint with speaking with restraint and she urges Souad to follow suit. She warns Souad to watch her every step and to mind what she says in public because people gossip, whereas Souad's cultural values are rooted within French culture, one that is perhaps less restrained. For that reason, Souad finds both Fatima and her cultural values stifling: Souad speaks, acts, and dresses in a way that conforms to a modern Western context which in turn does not align with Fatima's somewhat old-fashioned beliefs.

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[9] In order to best signal which portions of the dialogue are spoken by Fatima in Arabic it will be written between brackets and in italics.

3.1.2. The Symbolic Fabric of Servitude

The previous analysis of the characters' clothing has established that there are both generational and cultural distinctions between Fatima and her daughters. Further than just distinction in cultural values, the veil holds additional meaning. Because Fatima is the primary veiled figure in their lives, and no other veiled character provides any counterargument, the veil becomes symbolic of a life of servitude. This is an undesirable position for both Souad and Nesrine. Souad is particularly vocal in her criticism of both her mother, and the veil. The character of Souad best represents the commonly accepted stereotype of the second generation of North-African origin living in the French Banlieue (Planchenault, 2020). Through her louder personality and complete scholastic disinterest, Souad is the picture of teenage rebellion. Collins (2016) notes that as Souad assimilates to French culture, she creates a division between herself and her Algerian origins. This facilitates her challenging both her mother's authority and her traditions. Her traditions are symbolized through her veil; consequently, for Souad the veil becomes the object that best summarizes old traditional values that Souad wishes to escape. Following an argument with Fatima, Souad cries in the passenger seat with her father [50:39-50-55]. When he asks her why she called Fatima a sucker and an old mule « une cave » and « une ânesse », she responds that it is because she cleans up other people's shit. Her father asks her, "are you going to do anything better?" To which Souad says "anything but that! I'd rather go to jail than do what she does. She slaves morning till night. She leaves by night, she returns by night. My mother's a living rag". This statement about her mother illustrates how important it is for Souad that she does not follow in her mother's footsteps, while simultaneously highlighting her anxiety that it is a possibility for her. Interestingly, her choice of insult is to call her mother a *torchon,* or in English, a rag. A rag is a piece of cloth. This insult of calling her mother a 'rag' serves the purpose of illustrating her view that her mother is only good for cleaning. The hijab also can be characterized as a simple piece of cloth. It is a possibility that, by calling Fatima a rag, while fully aware that she wears the hijab, film viewers receive a subtle glimpse towards some of the negative associations Souad has with the hijab. Fatima, herself, reaffirms this perception that women like her (although she associates it to her non-mastery of French) are devalued in contemporary French culture (1:02:27). Women who wear the hijab are perceived in the French urban landscape as second-class citizens, such as cleaners (Mozafari, 2020). In this context, the hijab transforms into an

object that is reminiscent of old cultural values that not only have no significance to Souad but also embody the possible reality in this French context if she does not reject it as much as possible. For Souad, the hijab symbolizes a future spent cleaning other people's houses and taking care of other people's kids.

3.1.3. The Unveiled Second-Generation Symbolizing Hope

Alternatively to Fatima, Nesrine represents an ideal future that is achievable for the second generation – both because she is pursuing higher education and because she is unveiled. She puts great amounts of stress on herself, since Fatima made many sacrifices to send her to medical school, failure is not an option. In a scene that follows a confrontation with one of her mother's (veiled) neighbors, Nesrine cries in the car, exhausted and stressed from her studies. She says to her roommate "[…] but I have to carry on. I can't imagine dropping out. I couldn't break it to them. It'd be too hard on them. I can't tell my mother I failed. I can't afford to say that" (52 :08). We recognize that the characters of Fatima and Nesrine share a tendency to overwork themselves to the point of physical exhaustion, as later seen in a visit to the doctor for a physical checkup where the doctor actually comments on that similarity. However, in the film, Nesrine represents future possibility, while Fatima represents what a Western perspective on her homeland would believe to be an archaic past – in the West, the Middle East is often considered antiquated and the veil a "potent symbol for the progress or regress of a nation" (Bullock, 2002, p.4). The distinction between the characters is that Fatima's position is an undesirable one, and this is symbolized by the hijab, while Nesrine's hard work unveils a prestigious and respectable future in the heart of the community as a doctor. Even Nesrine regards her mother's societal position with some degree of shame. She explains to her roommate that the reason she does not wish to attend a party with her is because "I don't want to explain myself. I don't want to explain that my mother cleans for a living and that she cannot read French" (30:22). With these words, Nesrine admits that she is reluctant to join social functions with her peers because she doesn't want to "explain herself" and admit that her mother is an uneducated cleaning woman who cannot read in French. The fact that Fatima is veiled, is employed as a cleaning woman, and does not speak or read in French is a source of shame for both her daughters (even to Nesrine, who is depicted as the more mature and hard-working sibling).

Through sleepless nights spent toiling over her schoolwork, Nesrine ensures a successful completion of her first year in medical school. After receiving her test scores, the following scene shows Souad sitting outside with her friends (1:12:23). They are seen talking and laughing together when Souad gets a phone call from Nesrine (1:13:08). In this scene, Souad is visibly the happiest and the most excited she has been in the entire film. Her sister's success is something to be celebrated as she becomes a trailblazer of possibility for the next generation. Even after the phone call has ended, she repeats to her friends "let's celebrate!" (1:13:35). Suddenly, Souad's demeanor changes from shame, over her mother's profession, to pride over her sister's success. The film ends with Fatima as she returns to the wall where the test results are posted. As she stands in front of them and reads Nesrine's name on the list she smiles (1:14 :37) and holds her finger up to it. This solidifies our understanding of Nesrine as the beacon of hope for the next generation, while the last generation remains quiet and submissive in the background, their values and cultural heritage left behind by the next generation.

3.2. Highlighting Linguistic Difference: Veiling Cultural and Religious Practices

In this section of our analysis, we will discuss how characterizing veiled Muslim women as having limited linguistic competences in French projects a very specific understanding of the veil and those who wear it, whereby the veil becomes a symbolic object through which we tie certain characteristics often associated with people who work as cleaning ladies, caretakers, cashiers, or other such low paying jobs. The film highlights Fatima's linguistic difficulties as a central theme, but comparatively offers very little insight into the protagonist's cultural and religious differences. This is common amongst films depicting the narratives of Muslim women as these films are reluctant to portray the veil in a straight-forward manner (Durmelat & Swamy, 2015); however, by analyzing Fatima's linguistic differences in relation to the ethnic majority, we recognize workplace exploitation, alienation within the educational system, and lastly, permanence of societal isolation. The mastery of the host-country language is considered an important tool without which migrant women are at the mercy of various social injustices. In his study (2017), Leroy demonstrates that when migrant women were posed questions concerning their relationship to writing in French, they systematically went on to describe situations in which the outcome was unfavorable, due largely to both their

gender and their linguistic difficulties (Leroy, 2017, p.29). Consequently, Fatima's struggle with the French language leaves her the victim of social interactions where she is unable to assert herself linguistically. Fatima struggles to assert herself in the public sphere both at her workplace and within the premise of the school system. Consequently, we understand that Fatima's linguistic difficulties leave her at the mercy of her employers and essentially bar her from having a good job, and a fair income. The school system only reinforces this negative self-perception that Fatima is failing because she is unable to participate to any meaningful extent in parent-teacher meetings (23:09), and because her linguistic difficulties make her unable to assist Souad in her schoolwork (5:07). As seen in the previous section, this leads to her continually being disrespected by her youngest daughter Souad as she constantly refers to her mother as a "human rag" and a "mule".

3.2.1. Language Barriers Maintaining Inferiority in the Workplace

Fatima gains employment as a maid for a well-off woman whose son is also a student in medical school. Throughout the film, the dynamic between both women changes as Fatima's ability to speak French increases. At first, Fatima is seen as timid, and quiet. She is limited to agreeing with the woman and only using single word responses in agreement, as she is both dependent on the job, and limited in her capacity to form more complicated sentences. On her first day on the job (7:52 – 11:25), outside of the one sentence Fatima uses to explain she found some money crumpled up in a pair of jeans, Fatima only utters the following words: "oui", "d'accord", "de rien", and "au revoir". These one-word answers solidify the idea that Fatima is inferior to her employer, and this is showcased on a linguistic level. Not only does her employer use more complicated vocabulary (vocabulary that Fatima is not necessarily at a sufficient linguistic/social level to understand), but Fatima is limited to using words of submission. At the end of the day, when her employer pays Fatima in cash and says she can only declare two hours of work for Fatima, Fatima's low linguistic abilities force her to simply agree to these illegal working conditions. The woman responds by saying "I just know we'll get on" (11:20). The English translation loses added meaning however. In French the employer says : « Je suis persuadée qu'on va bien s'entendre » (11:21). I will draw attention to the usage of the double entendre « bien s'entendre » which means to get along well, but also signifies to hear one another well. This is ironic because as we've

seen Fatima doesn't speak much. This statement expresses how comfortable the woman is in the power dynamics between herself and Fatima. Fatima's employer recognizes that the value in employing Fatima, and women like Fatima, is based on the perception that these women are unable to verbally advocate for themselves in the workplace, due to both linguistic difficulties and workplace discrimination (Condon & Régnard, 2016; Mozafari, 2020).

However, their relationship changes as Fatima becomes more confident in French. A shift occurs during a conversation between Fatima and her employer which contributes to altering their relationship [36 :05 – 37 :08]. While Fatima tidies up a room in the house, we hear her employer yelling on the phone at her son, who is also attending medical school. We learn from her outburst on the phone that he has already failed his first year of medical school and that he isn't working hard enough even though this is already his second attempt in the program. She finally hangs up the phone after telling him that she has had enough and that she is "sick of it" (36:16). During this exchange, we see Fatima's reflection in a window that she sprays with glass cleaner and washes. Following the phone call, the employer complains to Fatima about her son. Fatima shares that her daughter is also in medical school. As Fatima says this, she is not in the frame, and we are able to judge her employers' surprised reaction at Fatima's words. See following transcription of their conversation [36 :30 – 37 :05].

Table 3-1 Fatima speaks to her employer*, Fatima* (Faucon, 2015) [0:36:30 – 0:37:05]
Fatima and her employer are referred to as F for Fatima, and E for employer.

L1 E : Elle est en médecine votre fille ?
L2 F : Oui, c'est la première année.
L3 E : Elle a pu s'en rendre compte, alors, c'est très, très difficile. Il faut énormément travailler.
L4 F : Oui, elle aussi, elle dit : « c'est très difficile ». Elle travaille toute la nuit. Elle ne dort plus, elle ne mange pas et moi, je suis inquiète pour elle.
L5 E : Elle est courageuse votre fille. C'est bien. Il y a beaucoup de jeunes qui renoncent. Ils se lancent là-dedans et ils n'y arrivent pas. Alors que pour certains, il y a les parents médecins derrière qui les aident.
L6 F : Moi aussi, je l'aide ma fille. Je ne suis pas médecin, mais je lave son linge, je prépare à manger, je fais beaucoup de choses pour elle.

Table 3-2 Fatima speaks to her employer*, Fatima* (Faucon, 2015) [0:36:30 – 0:37:05] *English subtitles.*

L1 E : A medical student ?
L2 F : Yes, it's her first year.
L3 E : She must know then. It's a huge amount of work.
L4 F : She does say it's very hard She works all night. No sleep. No food. I'm worried about her.

L5 E : She's very brave. Well done her. Lots of them give up. They start out and don't last. And some have parents to help them.
L6 F : I help my daughter too. I'm not a doctor, but I do her washing, I make food. I do a lot.

During L6, Fatima meets her employers' gaze in silent confrontation. This scene is the last in the film where Fatima is shown working for this woman. It is left unclear whether Fatima is let go following this scene. Through showing her ability to speak back, Fatima becomes a less appealing employee. The employer benefits from the one-sidedness of the dialogue. As Fatima challenges this vision, she also challenges her societal station. Effectively we understand how language is an important tool for first-generation Maghrebi women, one without which they are left vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace (Leroy, 2017). Additionally, non-mastery of the French language marks veiled Muslim women as societal aliens, especially when they must interact with their children's teachers and school environment.

3.2.2. Language as an Added Layer of Alienation

Fatima's linguistic difficulties affect her outside of work and is one of the main sources of Fatima's struggle to maintain parental authority over Souad. The rift between mother and daughter leads to a vision of Fatima as powerless in the role of mother. Early in the film, Faucon establishes that Fatima's linguistic difficulties are causing frictions between Fatima and her teenage daughter. As Fatima serves dinner for her two daughters [4:30 – 5:30], both of whom are already seated at the kitchen table, she asks her youngest when she intends to do her homework. She does this in Arabic (see line 1). The dialogue between mother and daughter quickly escalates as Souad uses French to blow off her mother's query (L2). Tired of her daughter's attitude, Fatima says that she ought to be grateful for their living condition (L7), and that she always finds excuses not to do her homework (L9). Souad then uses her mother's difficulties with French against her and says: "you don't speak French" (5:07). With this simple statement, Souad indicates that she refutes Fatima's parental authority (L10).

Table 3-3 Fatima, Souad, and Nesrine speaking in the kitchen during dinner*, Fatima* (Faucon 2015) [0:04]. *Text between brackets and in Italics are spoken in Arabic and subtitled.*

L1 F : [*Et tes devoirs c'est quand ?*]
L2 S : Tout à l'heure.
L3 F : [*Quand*] tout à l'heure ?
L4 S : Tout à l'heure.

L5 F : [*Qu'est-ce que t'as ?*]
L6 S : J'en ai marre de cette vie de rien !
L7 F : [*Toujours*] « j'en ai marre » [*tu es bien ici. Logée, nourrie, habillée, et propre. Remercie plutôt dieu. Vous êtes bien, là !*]
L8 S : Arrête maman, arrête de dire qu'on est bien, on vit dans une cage. Où tu vois qu'on est bien ? Tu fais des ménages. Où on est bien ? Arrête de délirer un peu.
L9 F : [*Toujours tu trouves quelque chose pour ne pas faire tes*] devoirs.
L10 S : Je ne peux pas travailler ici comment tu veux que je travaille ? il n'y a pas internet, tu ne peux pas m'aider à comprendre. Tu ne parles même pas français. Donc, je peux pas faire mes devoirs. Je peux pas. Je peux pas travailler.
L11 N : Oh, ça va, tu te calmes. Tu te baisse d'un ton s'il te plait.
L12 F : [*Y a que moi qui parle mal le*] français ? [*Tes copines, leur mère leur explique ? Quand j'étais à l'école personne ne m'aidait.*]
L13 S : Tu nous l'as raconté je ne sais pas combien de fois. Cette histoire. C'est bon, on a compris. Mais ta génération et maintenant ce n'est pas la même chose. C'est différent.
L14 F : [*Assez ! maintenant, débrouillez-vous, j'ai fait ce que je pouvais.*]
L15 S : De toute façon on n'a pas le choix, hein.

Table 3-4 Fatima, Souad, and Nesrine speaking in the kitchen during dinner*, Fatima* (Faucon 2015) [0:04]. *Text between brackets and in Italics are spoken in Arabic and subtitled. English subtitles.*

L1 F : What about homework?
L2 S : Later.
L3 F : Later [*when?*]
L4 S : Later.
L5 F : [*What's wrong with you?*]
L6 S : I'm sick of this stupid life !
L7 F : [*When are you*] "not sick of it"? [*Life is easy! You have a roof, food, clothes. You're clean. You should thank God. You both have it easy.*]
L8 S : Stop saying things are fine! This is a hole. You're a cleaner, what's fine? Stop imagining things!
L9 F : [*You always have a reason not to do your*] homework.
L10 S : I can't work. There's no internet! You can't help! You don't speak French! I can't do my homework!
L11 N : That's enough. Calm down.
L12 F : [*Is it just me that can't speak French? Your friends, do their mothers help them? No one helped me at school!*]
L13 S : So you keep saying! We got the message! We're a different generation. Things have changed.
L14 F : [*Enough! Well it's your problem. I did what I could.*]
L15 S : It's not like we can choose.

Fatima's struggles as a migrant mother contrast with those of the ethnic majority French parents when she participates in parent-teacher meetings which leave her feeling hopeless and helpless as the teaching faculty do not attempt to help her regarding Souad's educational upbringing (23:09 – 24:19). At the beginning of the meeting, the teacher addresses the parents and says: "bonsoir messieurs, dames" (23:12). Fatima follows these social cues and mimics the teacher in addressing both the teacher and the

other parents by saying “bonsoir”. This act demonstrates Fatima’s willingness and desire to show through her linguistic capabilities her ability to support her daughter through her scholastic challenges. However, when the teacher delves into some of Souad’s difficulties at school, Fatima becomes limited to passive participation in the conversation and simply nods along as the educator speaks off-camera. The creative choice to focus the camera on Fatima’s expression, even as we hear the voice of the teacher who continues speaking, is a powerful reminder that in the school setting veiled women are rarely seen, and when present they are verbally unable to make themselves heard, or when they do, they do so at the risk of being insulted (Berrod, 2019).

By framing a muted Fatima in the frame, we are forced to consider how due to Fatima’s linguistic difficulties, she is essentially barred from ensuring additional help for Souad, as Souad’s teacher quickly highlights Souad’s scholastic difficulties but does not go further in highlighting possible avenues for additional help. Fatima’s linguistic difficulties keep her from successfully requesting additional help. Fatima’s experience in the parent-teacher meeting is contrasted by that of the set of non-racialized parents whose daughter has her sights set on getting into a prestigious university. The teacher outlines various ways to help their daughter achieve success, while Fatima is largely ignored. In the context of the school, a combination of Fatima’s linguistic inabilities and the veil alienate her (and mark her as a parent because the veil is usually banned from such an environment) and cause her to struggle in being a source of support for her daughter. Her daughters must either achieve academic success on their own (Nesrine), or possibly not at all (Souad).

3.2.3. Characteristics of the Veil: Submissive and Isolated

When Fatima works at her other job cleaning offices, she is predominantly around other veiled women, while unveiled women are the employers. This situates veiled women in a position of submissiveness. Even her doctor, who speaks Arabic, is unveiled. This narrative choice draws ties between the act of veiling and occupying more submissive and marginalized roles in western society. Throughout the film, veiled Muslim women are represented as being little more than willing martyrs, conveniently present to ensure the comfort and success of those around them. Of all the themes in the film, this one is perhaps the most relevant, as it seems to embody the supposed desire Faucon had in his creation of the film. Faucon explains that his aim was not to

idealize or romanticize Fatima, but rather to establish a better understanding, consideration, esteem, and fraternity for the character (Faucon in Strauss, 2015, n.p). However, the film falls short, as it fails to go further into exploring the lives and the possibilities for veiled Muslim women. Fatima never once voices her personal desires; rather, she communicates how her existence is to benefit others, from her employers to her daughters.

In the following scene, Fatima is shown trying to have a conversation with a woman at the supermarket, whose daughter goes to school with Souad (1:04:21). In the store, Fatima recognizes the woman and starts talking to her. We notice that since the beginning of the film, Fatima's level of French has increased and that she is now comfortable making full sentences whereas before she was limited to one-word answers. However, even though Fatima's linguistic abilities have improved drastically, the woman at the grocery store makes an excuse not to continue the discussion, stating that she is in a rush (1:04:43). When the woman further ignores Fatima in the parking lot (1:04:50), it becomes clear that she is unable to view Fatima as akin to herself (mothers of children who belong to the same class), perhaps seeing Fatima's veil as a barrier. While Fatima's linguistic ability will not bar her from socializing with the woman, her veil maintains a barrier between them both because the veil symbolizes a set of values and beliefs that are not valued – according to the film – by a part of the contemporary French society. It is important to note that the separation between both women happens even as Fatima tries to the best of her abilities to decrease the differences by highlighting what they have in common (their daughters) rather than what separates them (the veil and their cultural origins). Fatima is aware of this, as in the scene directly following this one she is seen in her room, writing in her journal (1:05:05). She shares what she wrote to the female physician who has been put in charge of her health following her fall down the stairs (1:05 :51). Out loud she reads in Arabic:

> ["*Ce jour-là, j'ai eu peur, car j'ai vu le respect que je t'ai enseignée tomber d'un coup. Tu vois, ta maman a 44 ans. Elle s'habille au marché de Givors : 5 euros la pièce. Elle ne gagne pas assez pour dépenser plus. Son parfum vient du Monoprix. Elle porte le foulard. Mais, elle n'est pas gênée si quelqu'un veut lui parler. Cette femme et d'autres comme elle, avaient besoin de Fatima quand Fatima allait bien. Cette femme ne peut pas aller travailler, sans une Fatima.*"]

> ["*That day fear entered into me because I saw the respect I had instilled collapse. Your mum is 44, you see. She dresses at a market-stall: 5 euros per item. She does not earn enough to spend more. Her scent is from a super supermarket. She wears a headscarf. But she doesn't mind people asking why. That woman and others like her needed Fatima when Fatima was well. That woman could not go to work without some Fatima.*"]

Notably, this is only the third time that Fatima mentions her veil, the first time being at the beginning of the film after meeting the landlady (02:23), and the second to illustrate the fact that Souad is driving her mental as she threatens to run through the streets unveiled (50:31). Indeed, it is startling that in a film featuring a veiled protagonist there are not more references to the veil as a symbol to both a cultural and religious background. But other than these three instances, Islam is but seldomly referenced in the film. Here the veil is linked with her cheap clothes and inexpensive perfumes. It is put in contrast with her employers, who needed Fatima to clean their homes, but who did not value her presence. Fatima maintains that she is unbothered when speaking to other women, therefore highlighting the fact that she feels at ease with her station, even proud. The film concludes with this message: "[*be proud of all the Fatimas who clean working women's homes*]" (1:07 :55). By choosing to represent veiled women as it does, and by failing to offer a greater variety of perspectives and characterizations of veiled characters, the film contributes to the pre-existing narrow vision western society has of first-generation veiled Muslim women as oppressed and archaic and upholds a stereotyped reading of veiled characters as submissive. Ultimately, the film reveals little about this social group that has been forced into silent submission due to their social context, but ends by unveiling the pride and resiliency that exists in these women.

In summary, by characterizing Muslim women as it does Fatima and her experiences, the film contributes to the maintenance of a narrative where veiled women appear to live in isolation from the rest of society. By telling the stories of this silenced demographic, little is accomplished, and little insight is gained into the lives of Muslim women. Rather, it solidifies a pre-existing vision of this minority group: one which focuses on a character archetype that is both familiar and readily accepted. In the Western media, Muslim women are represented as powerless, voiceless, and invisible in contrast to the next generation, the louder second generation of Maghrebi-French youths living in France. Concretely, when the *hijab* is worn by such a character, the *hijab* becomes non-threatening because the character archetype of the wearer is non-threatening: however, the film's tone would be altered if one, or both, of her daughters

chose to don the veil. Nesrine takes on an important role as she represents for French society the model second-generation Maghrebi- French girl (assimilated, integrated), while Souad represents the possible failure brought by both Fatima's absentee parenting and social determinism. This role puts Nesrine in a position where failure is not an option because her failure would be a failure for both Fatima and Souad as well. She embodies the promise of possibility to rise above their current stations; the ranks that Fatima herself will occupy forever. In a sense, this puts veiled Muslim women as the lowest social denominator and encapsulates an identity that future generations aim to elevate themselves from.

Chapter 4.

Le ciel attendra: Representations of the Veiled Radicalized Girl

Of the three films I selected for my study, Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar's film *Le ciel attendra* (2016) is the one whose depiction of the veil and Islam is perhaps most in line with that image found in French news media. As discussed in chapter one, French news media tends to depict veiled Muslim women as a threat to the French republic's values, and their image is also associated to recent terrorist attacks. I was first drawn to examine Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar's work as it was one of her previous films (*Les héritiers* 2014) that offered a small glimpse towards the issues veiled Muslim women faced in French public schools in its opening scene. The film starts by centering an argument between three women; two of whom were veiled Muslim women. The source of the turmoil lay in the fact that one of the veiled women (who we learn is a recent high school graduate) requests her diploma without attending the graduation ceremony. Meanwhile, the unveiled woman whom we assume is of the school's administrative staff, explains that she was unable to satisfy the young girl's request because she must remove her headscarf and attend the graduation to receive her diploma like everybody else. Ultimately, the scene comes to an end with neither party making accommodations for the other. The rest of the film does not engage with the issue but follows the story of a history teacher working with at-risk youth while they combine their efforts to win a national essay-writing competition. However, I was left pondering the significance of the opening scene and I set out to explore how this ethnic majority French filmmaker would engage with the theme of Islam and the veil. To my satisfaction, I found that her next film, *Le ciel attendra* (2016), did just that, and is just one amongst several in a recent wave of films depicting the recruitment of French Jihadi fighters among the French young population. According to Kealhofer-Kemp, films exploring the theme of Islamic fundamentalism have become somewhat of a 'hot topic' "in light of attacks carried out in France by self-styled jihadists, which have attracted huge media coverage" (Kealhofer-Kemp, 2015, p.2). These films include: *Made in France* (Nicolas Boukhrief, 2015), *Les Cowboys* (Thomas Bidegain, 2015), *Road to Istanbul* (Rachid Bouchareb, 2016) and *La désintégration* (Philippe Faucon, 2011). In an interview, Mention-Schaar remarks that contrarily to the films previously listed – which are for the most part told from the point of

view of the parents whose children had gone to Syria – her film aimed at depicting the perspectives of those who had been radicalized in an effort to better understand how French youths had been convinced to join ISIS (Ouassat, 2016). *Le ciel attendra* follows two young female protagonists whose paths mirror each other's. The first is Sonia (Noémie Merlant), a young girl whose father is of Algerian descent, who is recruited by ISIS to attempt a terrorist attack which she fails. The second character is Mélanie (Naomi Amarger), a 16-year-old studious high-schooler and humanitarian who enjoys playing the cello in her free time. After the loss of her grandmother, Mélanie is left emotionally vulnerable. When she is contacted by Mehdi who offers her his condolences for her loss (24 :06 – 26 :56), her need for attention and validation is fulfilled by the young man. Soon their relationship is solidified through countless and daily ongoing messages. The film's focus extends past the radicalization of the young girls but also encompasses the experienced hardships for the parents. The secondary character of French anthropologist and activist, Dounia Bouzar (played by herself in the film), whose work focuses primarily on deradicalizing French youths (Beardsley, 2016) is an important on-screen presence. Her primary role in the film is facilitating conversations between parents and radicalized youths.

While researching for the film, Mention-Schaar met with several young women who had been de-radicalized with the help of Dounia Bouzar (Baronnet, 2016). Mention-Schaar shared that her personal belief prior to meeting with the young women was that one had to feel extremely socially excluded and/or very fragile to feel even remotely tempted to join Daesh, and while such profiles certainly exist, she was surprised to note that they are far from representing the majority (De Sèze, 2016, para. 8.). She explains that in France, over half of the young women recruited by Daesh come from upper middle-class families and converted to Islam as young adults (De Sèze, 2016, para. 8.). Mention-Schaar describes how despite coming from comfortable socio-economic backgrounds many French youths still struggle with feeling accepted and validated by French society. She remarks that socio-economic or ethnic background does not play as major a role as one would expect (Baronnet, 2016).

I find it interesting that contrarily to her previous film (*Les héritiers,* 2014), *Le ciel attendra* appears to offer a far less supportive and understanding depiction of the veil but rather represents it in the way one would expect it (as seen in certain conservative French journals and magazines) paired with religious extremism and Islamic

fundamentalist movements. Even so, *Le ciel attendra* still proves a valuable resource for our analysis of the various forms of representation of the veiled Muslim woman in contemporary French films because unlike the other films of the corpus, *Le ciel attendra* is both the only one to truly focus on young, veiled female characters and the only story where a Franco-French girl is represented as converting to Islam and, as a result, dons the veil. *Le ciel attendra* was probably destined to a mixed reception, not only for the difficult topic it bases its narrative on, but also due to a controversial character: Dounia Bouzar, the founder of the *Centre de Prevention des dérives sectaires liées à l'Islam* (CPDSI). Bouzar's methods for a so-called deradicalization have been the subject of scrutiny in the past (Vincent, 2017; Grimmer, 2017). Mention-Schaar spent three months working on the scenario with Bouzar. Romain Caillet (a specialist and consultant regarding jihadist movements)'s main issue with Bouzar is that she says that jihadist converts are oftentimes native-born French youth, whereas, according to him (Beunas, 2019, p.6) this isn't reflective of reality. While the film's depiction of radicalized youths lead film-viewers to believe that any individual could fall into radicalism, some studies disagree with this vision and would argue that those who are the most at risk typically are from low-income neighborhoods, and of immigrant descent (Zegnani, 2018) thus maintaining the more widely accepted and stereotyped belief concerning French jihadist converts. However, in the film, the process of radicalization undergone by French youth relies on an individual's feelings of vulnerability, rendering them more readily manipulated and at risk of falling under the influence of a group membership.

It is to be noted that the film represents the Islamic veil as a sign of conversion to radical Islam, to such an extent that the image of the veiled young non-ethnically marked French girl Mélanie is used for its shock value (specifically in the powerful imagery of the long shots where we witness Mélanie's shrouded figure walking through deserted neighborhoods, alone and ghost-like – see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Mélanie (Naomi Amarger) walks through the town (Le ciel attendra, 2016)

In the next two sections I will first outline which aspects of adolescence Mention-Schaar chooses to bring to the forefront in the film to demonstrate how the characters of Mélanie and Sonia are prone to radicalization. Secondly, I will analyze how veiling affects both young girls by first creating a barrier between the wearer and those around her, then by seducing the wearer with the idea that she is superior to non-wearers, and last, I will show how the film uses the veil as a symbol of the characters' full and complete brainwashing into radical Islam.

4.1. Portraits of Radicalized Youth Through Two Character Archetypes

In *Le ciel attendra*, radicalized youths demonstrate an evolving sense of self which lead them to seek approval from their peers. For example, Mélanie on the phone asks her friend if dying her hair blonde would suit her (7:15) or if a certain shade of lipstick would look good on her (9:50), showing that she is actively searching for approbation from a member of her peer group. Following their radicalization, both characters will share an acquired addiction for the support provided by the group. This support, as well as the fear of losing it, will play a central role in the ways in which both girls are manipulated by radical Islamists.This behaviour is not unusual for teenage youths as they go through these formative years (McNeely & Blanchard, 2010). During this time, youths tend to challenge prominent authority figures in their lives and question their place in the world (Tuma & Livson, 1960; Thin, 2002). Mention-Schaar shows youthful rebellion within the very first minutes of the film. In an interview, Mention-Schaar explains her desire to capture the theme of adolescence in the film as a time of volatility

and uncertainty (in her own words, this is a period similar to “quicksand”) where just one negative influence is enough to completely derail fragile and impressionable youths (Mention-Schaar in Ouassat, 2016). The director’s metaphor successfully evokes how teenaged characters in the film go through feelings of extreme instability. A good example of such unpredictability is to be found in the opening scene in which Dounia is speaking with concerned parents of teenagers who have been recruited by Daesh. One mother explains her daughter’s adolescent crisis with the following words: “it’s just a phase but it will pass. She’s only acting out to piss us off” (1:32). Another parent compares it to her own situation growing up: “I went through something similar; I died my hair red, dressed in a bit of a punk grunge style… it’s not a big deal, she’s just searching for herself” (1:43). The mother’s explanation of teens “searching for themselves” as being normal behavior for individuals in this age group is important because it is generally what people think of adolescents. This reinforces the idea that what happened to radicalized youths in the film could have happened to a number of youths during their formative years. As shown in these two lines, a major explanation for French youths joining Extremist terrorist groups offered by the film is based on a combination of young age, and spiritual questioning but always in relation to an identity crisis that is caused by teenagerhood: “she’s searching for a spiritual path, it’s common at that age” (2:01). I observe that this specific form of teenage rebellion is enacted by the character of Sonia in the film and is facilitated by her deconstruction of parental authority.

For example, let us consider one of the many arguments between Sonia and her father when the latter tells her: “[…] I make the rules here, this is my house, and I am your father!”. In this case, she demonstrates her desire to fight traditional authority figures by exchanging it for a more spiritual one: “Allah comes before you […] I obey only Allah…” (11:27 – 12:02). Demonstrating to her father that his control over her is inexistent as she obeys only Allah, allows Sonia to rid herself of her father’s parental authority over her, however in doing so she also accepts a new set of rules and values (veiling being amongst them) which she will stand by to justify subverting her father’s control of her life. The film depicts such aspects of youthful rebellion against authority as an important part in the recruitment of French youths by extremist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh. In this case, the film represents the veil as an outcome of an extreme form of teenaged rebellion.

In this section we will analyze how the main characters of Sonia and Mélanie are depicted as vulnerable to radicalism by conforming to two distinctive character archetypes that lead them towards joining radicalized Islamic groups. The first is the 'martyr' archetype, and the second is the 'victim-of-seduction' archetype. We will discuss both in the following sections, basing our analysis on the study of five scenes.

4.1.1. The Martyr Archetype: Saving Through Veiling

Daesh recruiters take advantage of youth's desire to gain control of their narratives by offering them purpose (de la Corte, 2007). Religious fundamentalist organizations are most appealing to those individuals experiencing frustration on account of their unstable sense of identity, so when terrorist organizations demonstrate how individuals can affect change over the situation that causes them grief, they find this extremely appealing (Rosenfeld, 2011). This is also what Dounia explains about recruiters: "…they talk to her about making herself useful […] to act in a way fitting of her rebellion, they tell these teens, you have better judgment, the others are all delusional…" (47 :17). Youths become engrained with a newly found sense of responsibility where their mission is to sacrifice themselves for the advancement of Daesh's mission. Dounia continues (In the same scene as above) her explanation concerning the dialogue used by radicals to recruit French youths. As an example of some of the possible statements used by recruiters, she says: "…you are more sensible that the others, you have better judgement so you have the mission of fixing this rotten world, you cannot stay blind to all this misery" (47:40). This given 'mission' grants characters with a sense of purpose, importance, and direction. A character may be identified as conforming to the martyr archetype when the motivations to their actions are based in self-sacrifice to benefit those around them, no matter the personal cost.

Dounia's words in the film are reflected by Sonia's actions. In this section, we will analyze how Sonia's recruitment into Daesh is fuelled by her feeling of responsibility to save her family, and this is the main reason why her character follows a Martyr archetype. From the very first minutes of the film, her character demonstrates her ability to do what must be done to achieve her mission. This is immediately apparent in the film's opening scene. In the scene, Sonia is looking at the ocean, in a quiet and contemplative state, when a young man comes up behind her to offer her a sandwich. Upon learning both sandwich options, she selects the one with ham (3:27) and eats it in

front of the young man. Immediately afterwards, we find Sonia making herself throw-up in the washroom (3:38). These are the character's very first actions in the film, and I argue that they are revealing that Sonia is someone who readily acts in accordance with what she deems necessary, without second thought for her own personal comfort. Or, in other words, she is a martyr sacrificing herself to fulfil the needs of a so called 'greater good'.

After a first failed attempt to go to Syria, Sonia is put under house arrest for plotting a terrorist attack in France. In one scene where Sonia tries to leave her home, she begs her mother to allow her to leave (15 :25 – 17 :31): "…I'm begging you, please let me go […] if you don't, we will all be lost" because she believes that it will be "the end of the world" if she is not permitted to leave. When her mother tells Sonia she is acting crazy, that she is acting like a "fanatic", Sonia screams back to her mother "you're the one who's crazy" and shakes her mother's shoulders violently (17:20). This perfectly illustrates Dounia's previous statement on recruiters' tactic of telling youths they are the only ones who have judgement and everyone else is delusional. By portraying Sonia as frantic and delusional like in this scene, an understanding whereby Sonia is both crazy and a fanatic is encouraged. Sonia's indoctrination by Daesh leads her to believe that if she does not sacrifice herself, her loved ones will go to hell. Sonia's recruitment by the terrorist group was made possible through the responsibility she feels to save her family from the perceived threat of eternal hell, as well as the martyr archetype her character follows. The audience understands that Daesh's control over Sonia comes through pressuring and guilting her to perform terrorist actions. When she later uses a blanket as a veil replacement her emotional discomfort is suggestive of Daesh's brainwashing and the feeling of paranoia that is overwhelming her. This impression is confirmed in a scene near the end of the film (1:23:40 – 1:26:40) when Sonia explains that Daesh's control over her was so strong that she felt completely out of touch with the teachings of her grandfather. She reveals that what initially drew her to Islam were her discussions with her paternal grandfather who always told her the importance of "being kind to others, helping others. Like helping your neighbour when they are struggling. That's what Islam is. And I had forgotten this…" so it becomes clear that even before Daesh recruiters reached out to Sonia, she had pre-existing values which dictated that she should do her utmost to help others before herself. This explains how, with some manipulation from Daesh recruiters, Sonia's belief system was altered, and she forgot herself. She goes on

and explains her frame of mind when she was “indoctrinated […] [she] felt completely empty. [She] had the impression that there was no more love around [her] and that [she] was heartless” (1:25:20). By characterizing Sonia in this light, as a young and impressionable girl who values kindness to others, Mention-Schaar illustrates that the danger of radicalization can affect anyone, not just those who are corrupt and who are immoral. This is clearly not the case for Sonia’s character, as what drew her to Islam in the first place was the moral code of helping and being kind to others.

4.1.2. The Victim of Seduction Archetype

The development of Mélanie’s character follows a more traditional view of the women who join extremist Islamic groups. While Sonia’s recruitment was largely brought about by rebellion, Mélanie’s is fuelled much more by a sense of protestation as she is highly aware of the injustices of the world (as is demonstrated by her involvement in various social and global movements). Her sense of injustice is what marks her as susceptible to the recruitment of Daesh, and so her character is far less rebellious against adult authority figures than Sonia. Mélanie is largely represented as the victim of both mental and emotional manipulation as her desire for attention and validation brought about by her own sense of insecurity and grief over the death of her grandmother leads her to fall in love with her would-be recruiter. Mehdi first seduces her by complimenting her physical appearance. He says to her via text message[10] : “… you’re beautiful, I’m sure your skin is soft, and I like how pale it is. I want it to be just for me, and that no other man may touch it or look at it. You’re beautiful like a queen […] I want you to be mine” (39 :03- 39 :57). By complimenting her in this way, Mehdi is validating her in a way that she is not by peer group. She jokes, for example about being able to pull off blonde hair (7:10) which points to an interest in beauty and aesthetic, common amongst teenage girls. Her friend replies that blonde hair would not suit her complexion. The juxtaposition between her friend (who invalidates her based of her pale skin tone) and Mehdi (who praises her for how pale she is) could not be more apparent. During the first conversation between Abou Hussein and Mélanie, he compliments her hair colour through SMS: “I like the colour of your hair” (26:40). Because Abou Hussein

10 It should be noted that while some of Mehdi’s text messages appear on the screen, others are heard in the voice of the male protagonist. Transcription choices were made to indicate the spoken dialogue whereby a coma represents a pause.

hides his attempts at controlling her behind compliments and validation, his controlling nature goes unnoticed by her. She can justify his words as a desire to protect her, rather than an act of control. In her efforts to make film viewers understand how young girls become radicalized Mention-Schaar depicts the act of wearing the veil as something these girls are seduced into doing. In other words: Abou Hussein doesn't control Mélanie, he loves her. And because he loves her, she is seduced into wearing the veil.

This vision of the radicalization of young non-Muslim women as a 'seduction', or a 'brainwashing' is one in which the choice to wear the veil can only be interpreted as something one is tricked into and not as a valid choice one may make for themselves. From there onward, Mélanie views Abou Hussein as a protector, a Prince Charming. This is a role he himself plays. Film viewers learn from Dounia that the lion in Islam is symbolic of protection. She explains to the parents of youths that "the lion in Islam symbolizes the protector. They say that the prophet is the lion who protects his cubs" (1:12:15). Film viewers then reflect on Abou Hussein's own usage of a picture of a lion as his Facebook profile picture, as symbolic of an implied promise of protection (24:10). Later in the film, both Mélanie and Abou Hussein are talking via Skype (1:15:02 – 1:16:11 – see table 4-1). Mélanie has since begun to wear the *niqab*. In this scene he alludes to being her protector, and he calls her "his future little wife". Regarding his future plans for them, he says: "you'll see, we'll live for god […] I will make you happy". Based on their conversation, film viewers are led to intimately understand Mélanie's seduction is based in the fact that she believes Abou Hussein cares for her and will do anything to protect her. We are reminded that Mélanie is a very isolated character as she has a small social group, and her mother is often absent. So when Abou Hussein tells her "[he] will always be there for [her]" and that "[she] will never need to worry", we understand the extents of his manipulation is reliant on the fact that she is largely isolated from others who actively communicate their affection for her.

Table 4-1 Mélanie and Abou Hussein's Skype conversation*, Le Ciel Attendra* (Mention-Schaar, 2016) [1:15:02 – 1:16:11].

L1	A.H :	J'aime ton sourire. Tes yeux brillent quand tu souris.
L2	M :	Merci, c'est gentil.
L3	A.H :	C'est la vérité, ma future petite femme. Pourquoi tu bouges partout ?
L4	M :	Bah, je vais dans ma chambre.
L5	A.H :	Pourquoi ?
L6	M :	Bah, parce-que si ma mère rentre, elle comprendrait pas.
L7	A.H :	Ta mère c'est une mécréante, elle comprendra pas. Elle comprendra jamais. Dis que tu seras ma femme.

L8 M : Je serai ta femme, Abou Hussein.

L9 A.H : Dis *inch'allah*.

L10 M : *Inch'allah*

L11 A.H : Tu vas être à moi.

L12 M : Oui.

L13 A.H : Tu verras, on vivra pour dieu, et on sera heureux par sa grâce. **Je te rendrais heureuse.**

L14 M : J'ai tellement hâte.

L15 A.H : **Je serai toujours là pour toi.** Tu n'as pas à t'inquiéter.

L16 M : Je m'inquiète pas. Déjà rien que te parler je me sens mieux.

L17 A.H : Moi aussi, et mieux quand on sera marié.

L18 M : Tu sais j'ai envie de t'embrasser, mais je sais pas si je peux te le dire.

L19 A.H : Moi aussi j'ai envie de t'embrasser. Te prendre dans mes bras. Ne laissons pas le diable entrer entre nous.

L20 M : Oui.

L21 A.H : Attendons qu'on soit marié si Dieu le veut.

L22 M : Ouais.

L23 A.H : T'es belle *Hou Awa*.

Table 4-2 Mélanie and Abou Hussein's Skype conversation*, Le Ciel Attendra* (Mention-Schaar 2016) [1:15:02 – 1:16:11]. *English translation.*

L1 A.H : I really like your smile. Your eyes sparkle when you smile.

L2 M : Thanks, that's nice of you to say.

L3 A.H : But it's true, my future little wife. Why are you moving around so much?

L4 M : Well, I'm going to my room.

L5 A.H : Why?

L6 M : Well, because if my mom comes home, she wouldn't understand.

L7 A.H : Well, your mother is an infidel, she wouldn't understand anyways. She'll never understand. Say you'll be my wife.

L8 M : I will be your wife, Abou Hussein.

L9 A.H : Say *inch'allah*.

L10 M : *Inch'allah*

L11 A.H : You will be mine.

L12 M : Yes.

L13 A.H : You'll see, we'll live for God, and by his grace we'll be happy. **I will make you happy.**

L14 M : I can't wait.

L15 A.H : **I will always be there for you.** You won't have to worry.

L16 M : I'm not worries. I feel better just talking to.

L17 A.H : Me too, and even more so when we are married.

L18 M : You know I want to kiss you, but I don't know if I can even tell you this.

L19 A.H : I want to kiss you too. To hold you in my arms. But let's not allow the devil to come between us.

L20 M : Yes.

L21 A.H : Let's wait till we're married, if God intends it.

L22 M : Yeah.

L23 A.H : You are beautiful *Hou Awa*.

The important parental absence show-cased throughout the film leads the audience to understand Mélanie as a vulnerable, lonely, insecure character who became the target of Daesh recruitment through seduction. This dialogue is rich with examples concerning

the power dynamics in their relationship, where Abou Hussein holds much (if not all) the control in the situation by dictating what they may and may not do, and Mélanie appears as a willing participant who looks to Abou Hussein to receive direction – as shown in L18 ("… I want to kiss you, but I don't know if I can even tell you"). Admitting this to Abou Hussein conveys that she has given him control over her actions and that she will follow his lead. She goes as far as admitting that she would need his permission to even communicate her desire for him. Such a statement paints her as both vulnerable and submissive.

4.2. The Veil as a Symbol of Total Control over the Wearer

In this section, I demonstrate that the veil is presented in the film first as a protective and simultaneously an isolating barrier between the wearer and those around, second, as a sign of the wearer's felt superiority over non-veiled characters, and finally as a symbol of successful brainwashing into radical Islam. The three uses will be shown in the following analysis of various scenes in which the characters wear the Islamic veil (the *niqab*) or a piece of clothing or fabric used as a veil replacement.

4.2.1. Veil as a Barrier Between Protection and Isolation

In the film, the Islamic veil is sometimes represented as a barrier between the wearer and the outside world. During the selected scenes, we see that the act of veiling is used by the characters to demonstrate their feeling of alienation from those around them. Mélanie falls further into radicalism as she experiences increasing moments of isolation away from members of her peer social group. The veil is symbolically worn in situations where she is either isolated, or in the presence of Abou Hussein. From the beginning, we understand that Mélanie is an introverted character. This is showcased in the film by the long shots where Mélanie is shown walking alone, either to or from school. This filming technique is meant to illustrate her solitude. Through analysis of the relationship between Mélanie and the veil, the veil acts as a wall, a form of self-imposed segregation. At the beginning of the film. Mélanie is occasionally shown walking with friends, unveiled, however and in clear contradiction, she is always alone when she is veiled (save for the remote presence of Abou Hussein).

The isolation that Mélanie experiences is shown as the result of her newly formed extremist ideas as well as her adoption of the *niqab.* Inspired to share her developing opinions to members or her social group, Mélanie tries to show her friends some conspiracy theory videos (43:30). Their reactions to the video cause her to feel unaccepted and she ends up telling them sarcastically "ok ok, I'm being crazy, and we aren't at all being manipulated!". This outburst shows us that she views her friends as unable to grasp the reality she has been seduced to believe, and their lack of receptiveness acts as a further separation between herself and them. Following this scene, Mélanie distances herself from her friends and her relationship with her mother is also affected. Instead of confiding in her mother, she becomes more secretive around her because she feels like her mother will also misunderstand her. When a veiled Mélanie is on the phone with Abou Hussein, he asks her why she is moving from room to room (1:15:10) She responds that it is "because if [her] mom comes home, she wouldn't understand". Abou Hussein plays an important role in maintaining that distance between mother and daughter. He says to Mélanie that "[her] mother is an infidel, she will never understand". The fact that Abou Hussein is actively driving a wedge between Mélanie and her mother fuels Mélanie's mistrust of her, while aiding Abou Hussein to secure his manipulative hold on Mélanie. He also ensures that his is the only influential voice she listens to.

Throughout most of the film, Sonia is unable to veil, as she spends the greater part of the story under house arrest and her parents, who see the hijab as a symbol of their daughter's radicalization have confiscated them as well as the Coran and have forbidden her to pray (11:30). Sonia's father asserts it is both "his right, and his obligation to protect [Sonia's] sister" (11:34). However, throughout the film Sonia employs various objects to replace the veil that has been taken away from her: a long dark blue scarf, a hoodie, and her blanket. In the film, her character can be primarily recognized by thick scarf she wears around her neck; she frequently uses the scarf to conceal her face. For example, directly following a scene in which Sonia begs her mother to be allowed to leave, she goes to her room where she is hysteric from the argument (17 :13). Sonia is shown, crying, and shaking on her bed, with her blanket wrapped tightly around her like a cocoon. She prays in Arabic, with her face turned upwards. A close-up (17 :29) of her face surrounded by the heavy fabric is reminiscent of a veil. The room is dark, and the walls are grey. Her blankets are a dark grey as well.

The monochromatic setting establishes a visual cue to mirror the impact the veil has on Sonia's sense of self. From this scene, we understand that Sonia is driven to veil herself when she is upset. And that the veil, acts as a barrier shielding her from the outside world. However, a second reading of this scene leads us to understand that the veil is a tool of oppression, isolation: a heavy object that weighs on the wearer's head. We understand that Sonia is being drowned by the symbolic heaviness of veil and is struggling to find herself within it. In the following scene (35:20) during her first meeting with Dounia, when she enters the room wearing her big scarf, this is even more apparent. Upon entering the room Dounia greets her by saying: "*Sallome halleikoum* beautiful". Interestingly, Dounia calls Sonia beautiful even though she conceals half her face in the scarf. Sonia responds by burrowing her chin further into her scarf demonstrating her unwillingness to speak to Dounia, and in a confrontational tone, Sonia responds: "I know very well who you are. Everyone knows. I don't speak to *koufar*[11] . You're just trying to trick me into saying something that'll get me even more in trouble". Through her words, we understand that Sonia is agitated by her current situation and consequently she lashes out at those she perceives are against her. The act of pulling her scarf in front of the bottom half of her face is clearly a habit reminiscent of when she wore the *niqab* and one she returns to in situations that cause her stress and discomfort.

We notice that stress and discomfort often trigger Sonia's urge to veil. This is particularly obvious during a scene (21:51) in which Sonia is awakened by noises she hears outside, afraid, she covers herself under the blanket and proceeds to pray in Arabic. This furthers my argument that the veil (or in Sonia's case her blankets, scarves, or even hoodies) acts as a wall between the wearer and the outside world. Sonia veils herself in situations that she finds uncomfortable. For example, when she is in the presence of a Muslim man on the bus, Sonia uses her hooded sweatshirt as a veil replacement to create a barrier between herself and the object of her fear or discomfort (1:04:15). By viewing the film's interpretation of radicalized young women, we are meant to believe that the young girls who fall into extremist Islam employ the veil as a form of self-segregation, and self-imposed isolation.

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[11] A Koufar is a derogatory Arabic term usually used to designate non-Muslims, or people who reject Allah (Urban dictionary, Kuffar. N.d.).

4.2.2. Veil Providing a Falsified Sense of Superiority

Both girls are convinced that they have been chosen by Islam because they are unlike their peers, and they alone can recognize the corruption in the world around them. This idea gives them both a sense of importance and superiority. Keeping this in mind, we understand that from the girls' perspective, veiling is linked to notions of purity, superiority and concretely, *difference*. The desire to conserve their perceived purity and superiority, encourages these young women to isolate themselves from the rest of society through the act of veiling. When Mélanie dons the veil, she does so for Abou Hussein, to prove that he is right about her being pure (also indicated by her status as a virgin, (1:01:30)), and therefore deserving of his love. The veil is meant to act as proof of her willingness to conserve herself for him. He often calls her a diamond, or a pearl, and his queen. For example, he says to her: "you are my pearl *Inch'allah*, you're precious to me. You understand? I want to preserve you" (48:20). These make her feel superior to her peers, and so by extension, veiling can also be associated with a sign of *difference*. To an external observer, one can note that by comparing her to a pearl, Abou Hussein essentially strips Mélanie of her agency because he treats her as an object (a pearl) and she accepts this comparison. However, it is essential to recognize that Mélanie's understanding of the veil is different than that of the external observer because she views her veil as the signifier of her purity and superiority. At two back-to-back points in the film, she criticizes both her mother (for her lack of chastity or self-restraint in how she chooses to dress), and her hijab wearing friend from school, Djamina. Following the scene where Djamina and Mélanie pray together, Mélanie refers to her as a "*Koufar*" (1 :19 :40). This is in reaction to a small disagreement the two had over the proper form of prayer to Allah. By referring to her *hijabi* friend in this derogatory term designating non-Muslims (when obviously her friend is a practicing Muslim as she is both veiled and prays) demonstrates that Mélanie is affirming herself and her new belief system, so when Djamina showed the slightest of oppositions this caused discomfort within Mélanie which caused her to then put down Djamina in order to rid herself of her own discomfort. She does this by calling Djamina a *Koufar* essentially saying her friend is an imperfect Muslim and therefore is inferior to Mélanie. In doing so, Mélanie is demonstrating her internal superiority complex. In the next scene this is more or less confirmed, when Mélanie and her mother (Sylvie) are speaking, and exasperated with her daughter's behavior, Sylvie begins expressing her frustration. She says "I don't know, maybe it's

me? Maybe I'm not intelligent enough for you? So, my lady is superior… my lady thinks herself above everyone else. I don't know Mélanie, maybe you should come back down to earth, no?" (1:21:10). I would like to note that the nature of their relationship between mother and daughter is not a top-down relationship, but more closely resembles a relationship of equals (for example when her mother walks around near naked and Mélanie tells her off (6:36) effectively illustrates the nature of their relationship. Even in this argument, Sylvie takes a very non-superior approach and even says that she may be the problem and she is the one who is mentally inferior to her daughter. This makes it all the more shocking that Mélanie responds so cruelly by saying "You're right, you're really too stupid" (1:21:30). This new sense of superiority and contempt Mélanie feels towards those around her is only possible because she has been conditioned by Abou Hussein to feel justifiably superior to those around her, and it is reinforced by the new support system she has found amongst her new 'sisters'.

4.2.3. Wearing the Veil as a Symbol of Religious Indoctrination

In *Le ciel attendra,* the veil symbolizes a complete and successful religious indoctrination. In the film, Dounia explains that the *niqab*[12] is significantly different than the *hijab* (as a reminder: the *niqab* conceals the wearers' entire face with the exception of the eyes, while the *hijab* covers only the hair and neck), because the latter is more traditional of the Islamic faith and far less limiting than the *niqab* worn by the young, radicalized girls in the film (57:00). In this section we will analyze how the decision to don or not the veil is symbolic of an individuals' state of mind, as it varies from their knowledge and control over themselves and their actions to the conformity of group identity and group action. We will explore two key moments that give its significance to the veil in the film. The first is the fact that veiling in the film is representative of an individual's effacement of the self through giving up artistic expression (playing cello), and the second is that when the veil is worn by the female protagonists it demonstrates their willingness to act within the collective mindset rather than the individual mindset. Although the importance of artistic expression isn't as obvious for both characters

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[12] In the scene (57:00) where Dounia explains to the young radicalized women the key differences between the *niqab* and the *hijab* and encourages them to consider unveiling, it is important to note that the term *jilbab* is used by Dounia. However, throughout the film the term *niqab* is used when referencing the veil, so in maintaining a continuity between the dialogue in the film and this text I choose to use the word *niqab* in designation of the Islamic veil.

(Mélanie plays the cello, while Sonia enjoys painting), as music has more prominence in Mélanie's life than painting in Sonia's, it is interesting to note that they are both creative individuals. Mention-Schaar deliberately depicts Mélanie's and Sonia's contrasting trajectories (one further into radicalism, and one away from it) to better illustrate how Islamic militants control all aspects of these young girls' lives. By depicting the girls' character arcs as contrastive to each other, film-viewers can infer that veiling comes with the sacrifice of characters' individuality. This is symbolized on screen by both characters turning away from their respective mediums of artistic expressions. When Mélanie adopts the practice of donning the *niqab*, she soon after quits playing the cello. We are meant to understand that the reason behind this is that for some Muslims it is *Haram* to use instruments to produce music (Shiloah, 1997). "Some authorities, […] tolerated a rudimentary form of cantillation and functional song, but banned any instrumental accompaniment; others allowed the use of a frame drum but without discs, forbidding all other instruments, particularly those belonging to the chordophone family" (Shiloah, 1997, p.144). The cello is part of the chordophone family.

The first time we see Mélanie in a *niqab* coincides with the last time we see Mélanie play her instrument. She leaves it behind later when she goes to Syria. In the scene where Mélanie first puts on the *niqab* (1 :07 :35 – 1 :09 :16) she receives a text from Abou Hussein, in which he says: "when I tell you to call me, you call. I want you to be pious, and to submissive to Allah, and to me. I am so excited to see your little eyes beneath the *niqab*" (1:07:57). In just one statement it is made apparent that the veil, within the context of this film, is symbolic of women's submission to first Allah, and then man. Following Abou Hussein's text message, Mélanie enters her bedroom and proceeds to take a selfie and send it to Abou Hussein (1:08:12). Based on her actions we understand that the *niqab* for her, is a means to gaining his approbation because by this point in their relationship she feels extremely co-dependent on him, and will therefore actively do things for his approbation. His next texts in this scene explain her giving up the cello. He warns her that his love, protection, and approbation are dependent on her actions. The text reads as follows: "don't forget, if you touch the hand of another man, I will not marry you, I want you pure. Did you honour your promise? Did you quit playing music?" (1:08:30). At this point, the powerful image of Mélanie playing the cello for the last time while wearing the *niqab* (1 :08 :26) signifies an important crossroad for the young girl. The image is provocative both because it is rather

frightening to see Mélanie so transformed and unrecognizable compared to the beginning of the film, and because the tone in this scene – evoked by the sad music played by Mélanie on the cello – seemingly indicates her mourning the instrument as she gives it up in favor of becoming one amongst the many, faceless, bodiless, voices of extremist Islam.

Meanwhile, as Sonia successfully undergoes the process of deradicalization with the guidance of Dounia's support group we witness important changes to the character including opting to wear lighter, more revealing items of clothing, and forgoing the big scarf she wears throughout most of the film (see Figure 4.2).

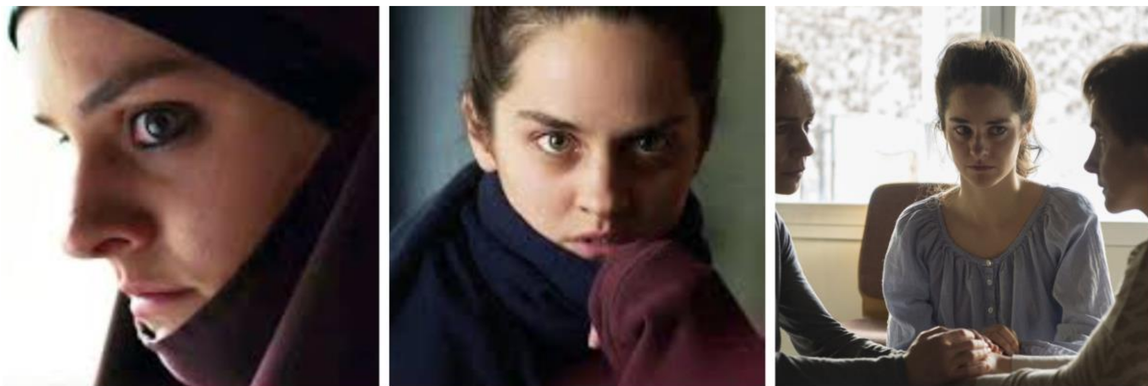

Figure 4.2 Sonia's (Noémie Merlant) changing appearance as she undergoes deradicalization (Le ciel attendra, 2016)

Under the pressure of the Islamic militants, Sonia gave up her artistic passion because many extremist Islamic groups forbid artistic expressions depicting the human form as it is viewed as blasphemous (Alyami, 2015). In his research of groups of ex-jihadists in Saudi Arabia, Alyami (2015) found that "art therapy [is] a useful approach to rehabilitation in counterterrorism" (Alyami, 2015, p.9). As Sonia begins to regain a sense of self, she is shown bringing her old acrylic painting set out of storage (1:08:33). Not incidentally, this takes place directly after the scene in which Mélanie plays the cello for the last time. It also demonstrates that she has gone through a successful and complete deradicalization. The absence of the veil is symbolic of the fact that she is regaining a sense of identity and individuality which she will express through art. The characters of Mélanie and Sonia have both gone through a process of conditioning, whereby adopting the veil, they are both ready to sacrifice their own identity in favor of the collective identity, and collective thinking. In other words, through a lengthy process between both recruiter and recruited, it is clear to the ones being recruited (Sonia and Mélanie) that

they must be obedient to the group to benefit from group membership. In one scene, Dounia explains how radical Islamists encourage the girls to erase their own identities to better control them (57:00). With this added information, we understand the following scenes to demonstrate how, by wearing the veil, characters become more and more dependent on the group, even going so far as losing sight of their own desires and placing group obligations above their personal comfort. We know from the character of Sonia, that she would turn to her 'sisters' in situations of doubt because she would be afraid of doing something that was *haram.* The character of Mélanie also surrounds herself with these 'sisters', and soon they begin to consume her time. Even in class (1:21:40), Mélanie is distracted by incoming text messages coming from the 'sisters'. These messages are taxing, both of her time and energy, and ultimately, they represent a distraction keeping her from fully participating in social events, and by extension connecting with individuals around her. Sonia verbalizes what effect this had on her (1:24:20 – 1:26:40):

> "I didn't know anymore. And I couldn't do anything anymore without asking if what I was doing was haram or not […] before I left, we would send each other hundreds of messaged per day. And when they (the sisters) didn't know, they would ask another sister, or the Emir. I felt that I was like an insect […] stuck in a spider's web. But I felt good too. Like I had a force within me that pushed me and told me what I had to do. If you do all this well, all will go well. I didn't realize […] I wasn't actually myself anymore."

The above passage perfectly explains how Sonia lost herself within the group and how what started off as a source of comfort and connection became a drain on her individuality. By illustrating the effect this had on Sonia, we are led to better understand how the process of radicalization is affecting Mélanie. By shedding the veil, Sonia demonstrates how she can shed herself from the extremist ideas, and the pressures she succumbed to in the group. This provokes me to believe that the veil in the film acts as a tool to oppress and seclude young girls away from their friends and families.

By understanding how factors such as character's youth, and unstable sense of identity, shapes their relationship with radical Islam, we can form an idea of what the veil represents in the film. After isolating characters away from their families and social groups, the veil symbolizes a second degree of separation between the young girls and their surroundings. Because Mélanie and Sonia are dependent on the group, they are willing to sacrifice the 'self' for the good of the group, and one way of demonstrating this

is by donning the veil, as a symbol of prioritizing group ideologies, even if this means taking on a new, faceless identity—one that is willing to give up any individuality and personal desires. Seemingly in films depicting the radicalization of young French women, the veil symbolizes the wearers' full engagement on radical Islamic causes while depriving them from an identity outside of Islam. It simultaneously creates a disconnect between the wearer and their home-countries' culture. Lastly, the veil is a simple yet effective object undoubtedly provoking discomfort for film viewers, and in films having the main object of framing radical Islam, creating discomfort is surely the main objective.

Chapter 5.

Cherchez la Femme: The Veiled Muslim Woman as a Subaltern

In her seminal article *Can the subaltern speak?*, Spivak conceptualizes the subaltern (a term coined for the context of colonial and postcolonial studies) as individuals, or groups of people whose status is defined and understood as inferior to the rest of the population. Spivak (1988) argues that racialized groups often find it challenging to express their lived experiences and when they manage to articulate their voice, it is done by accepting and conforming to the dominant group's terms and conditions, and consequently those established by imperialism. In her article, "Spivak, […] shifts to reconsider the issues of the subaltern groups by dealing with the problems of gender and particularly Indian women during colonial times" (Louai, 2012, p.7). Under the context of British colonial rule, Spivak categorizes Sati women (Sati is an ancient Hindu tradition referring to the self-immolation of widows, which is a traditionally voluntary act after the death of their husbands) as subaltern because the conflict faced by Sati women lies between two opposite positions (Spivak, 1988). The first is the "British humanist discourse calling for individual freedom of Sati women" and the second is the "Hindu native policy calling for voluntary participation in [self-immolation of widows]" (Louai, 2012, p.7). Under such conditions, some would interpret that "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988, p.93). Between these two polarized positions (that of tradition and that of modernization) Sati women live a subaltern experience, lacking in agency and personal autonomy largely because of the dominant colonial subject (Spivak, 1988). I argue that this representation of Sati women is also applicable to the situation of veiled Muslim women in France.

Sorbonne professor, Nelly Quemener (2014), explains how people of Arabic descent occupy a subaltern position in French comedy. According to Quemener, comedy never fully escapes dominant narratives; however, "*subaltern* comedians" manage to question normative narratives about the minoritized subject through their performance (Quemener, 2014). Quemener argues that borrowing from a bank of stereotypes, ranging from vocabulary, accents, words, movements and gestures, in order to create a distance between themselves and the notion of *francité*, keeps the

minority subject *subaltern* (Quemener, 2014). When comedians recreate and perform this internalized hegemonic narrative, the power dynamic acts in favour of the dominant group and benefits the white colonial subject to the detriment of the *subaltern* subject (Izrar, 2020). The recreation of subaltern experiences in performances reinforces the power structures that benefit members of the dominant group, while simultaneously keeping *subaltern* subjects in a position where they perform in accordance with the expectations established by societal hierarchy. This societal hierarchy is found in *Cherchez la femme* with the veiled woman as the *subaltern*, while creating a distance between audience members and the veiled character and making other non-veiled characters much more sympathetic and relatable to film-viewers.

Basing my argument on the work of both Spivak and Quemener, I will demonstrate how, even in a film where veiling is a central subject, veiled Muslim women are subaltern. Their voices remain unheard; and their existences erased. I argue that films made by, and telling stories of, racialized Muslim characters are somewhat pressured to conform to the pre-existing conditions set by the dominant group, and that these conditions keep the subaltern subject in a voiceless position. In this chapter I will illustrate this point with the comedic film *Cherchez la femme* (2017); however, I would signal that it applies to all the films in my corpus. For example, in *Le ciel attendra* (2015) the topic of the film conforms with pervasive concerns in which the figure of the Arab is often linked to religious issues, among which include the potential risk of fundamentalism and radicalization. I argue that the film's conformity to standard views and opinions concerning Muslim women places the latter in the position of voiceless subaltern subjects.

The film *Cherchez la Femme*, directed by Franco-Iranian Sou Abadi, tells the love story of political science students, Armand (Félix Moati) and Leila (Camélia Jordana). When Leila's older brother, Mahmoud (William Lebghil), returns from a recent voyage as a radical Islamist, he prevents Leila from seeing Armand. Armand decides to cross-dress and veils himself with a *Niqab* to keep seeing his beloved. The comedy ensues when Mahmoud begins to fall for the mysterious Schéhérazade.

Since "comedy can be remarkably insular, basing its humour totally on customs, attitudes, or news events with which only certain initiates are familiar" (Weis et al., 1977, p.259), the analysis of a comedic French film that focuses on a veiled character provides

us with a unique understanding of French cultural ideologies regarding Muslim veiling practices. In *Cherchez la Femme,* the image of the Muslim woman is layered with multiple meanings, as the character of Armand constructs what it means to be a veiled Muslim woman through his performance of the character of Schéhérazade. His construction of this subaltern figure relies on both performative and visual elements that make other characters accept his characterization of the Muslim woman. The visual elements used to create the image of Schéhérazade are accomplished by Armand putting on the *Niqab*, plucking his eyebrows and putting on some eyeliner (see Figure 5.1). While the performative elements Armand incorporates into his performance include altering his voice, exaggerating both hand gestures, and prolonged eye contact during conversations with Mahmoud. As Schéhérazade, Armand embodies an oriental seductress.

Figure 5.1 Armand as Schéhérazade (Félix Moati) is invited to tea (Cherchez la femme, 2017)

In terms of his performative actions as a Muslim woman, Armand disguises his voice (badly), and acts conservative and pious. He stereotypically portrays Schéhérazade as having a total lack of personal agency (for example, in a scene when she expresses that the main reason of her rejection of Mahmoud's romantic advances is her father's forbiddance of her choosing her own romantic partner). Through an analysis of these elements, one can recognize clichés working on multiple axes. First, we recognize clichés that work towards creating a vision of what it is to be a woman from a man's

perspective and secondly, what it means to be a racialized Muslim woman. Other elements used by Armand include family-related dynamics that serve to reinforce the image of Muslim women as pious and subjugated individuals at the mercy of patriarchal authority figures within their family structure. Armand's cross-dressing performance of Schéhérazade reveals the political undercurrent of the film. The rational is that "masking and unmasking" somehow "lends itself to a double bluff, wherein the masks worn reveal rather than conceal the politics of the performance" (Evans, 1998, p.199). With this in mind, Armand's act of veiling and unveiling divulges the political messages attached to the figure of the veiled Muslim woman in the film.

In this chapter, I will argue that the film *Cherchez la femme* depicts the Muslim woman as a subaltern figure whose existence is limited to the veil. Due to the veil, she neither exists nor speaks, as it is what the veil embodies that speaks for her. Since characters interacting with the veil assume specific qualities over the veiled character (such as subservience, religious piety, modesty, etc.), it becomes clear that the identity of the wearer is limited to a specific hegemonic and westernized image of her. This image is fabricated (by Armand), and it works towards maintaining western ideological views of the other. Each of the three main un-veiled characters in the film serve a specific role which functions in dehumanizing the single representative of the veil. Between the trio of Armand, Mahmoud, and Leila, we see three important characterizations that serve to contrast with the veiled character. Armand is the sympathetic, male, westernized protagonist through whom we experience the events of the film, Mahmoud is the laughable Muslim antagonist who is easily mislead by Armand's masquerade as Schéhérazade, and lastly Leila represents the idyllic, non-veiled woman in need of liberation from the Muslim male's yoke. Through a process of juxtaposition, all three characters maintain the veiled Muslim woman's status as subaltern. In the first section, I analyze how Armand's performance reinforces dominant views of veiled Muslim women by making veiling a spectacle and the object of ridicule for the enjoyment of film viewers. In the second section, I argue that both the film's depiction of Mahmoud (as a violent and uneducated Muslim man) and Leila (as the sexy unveiled *beurette* character archetype) serve to keep the veiled Muslim subject as subaltern and illegitimate in the public sphere.

5.1. A Veiled Comedy: Acting out the Subaltern

Similar to the films *Tootsie* (Pollack, 1982), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993), and *Some like it hot* (Wilder, 1959), this film bases much of its humor on male characters' performance of femininity by recreating and reconstructing a fictional female character in both a cross-cultural and cross-gendered performance. With such performance comes a construction of what it means to perform femininity. This film adds the intersection of race and religion to create a form of racial and religious crossdressing in which the character of Armand communicates to the audience of the film what it means to be a racialized Muslim female figure (Planchenault & Perriard-Abdoh, 2021). Unlike the characters of the previously mentioned films, where male characters achieve a female appearance by wearing women's clothing, makeup, wigs, and other such items to construct an image of femininity, the character of Armand's transformation is achieved by simply donning the *Niqab.* The *Niqab* is a simplistic yet effective way of communicating the wearer's gender, as well as their religious belonging, and it fully dissimulates the bearer's identity. This suits Armand's purpose well, as his objective is simply to meet Leila without rousing suspicion from Mahmoud. His usage, however, of the *Niqab* rather than the *Burqua* is problematic as Schéhérazade has told Leila that she is from Afghanistan (18:23) and in Afghanistan, it is the *Burqua* that is worn*,* not the *Niqab* (Sirrs, 2001). Schéhérazade's *Niqab* is numerously misnamed the *Tchador* (worn in Iran) by a few characters in the film. For example, Armand's mother, Mitra, after fainting from the shock of seeing Armand in the *Niqab,* says "I imagined you would become a diplomat, consul of France, or a minister! After everything I have overcome, all the sacrifices I've made, this is how you repay me? a *Tchador*!" (1:03:08). Or again, while escaping her wedding with Mahmoud, his friends recognize Schéhérazade by her *Tchador*: "Of course! It's her *Tchador,* it's torn" (1:11:40). The fact that even an Iranian born, female film director such as Abadi fails to clarify the difference between various types of veils points to a conglomeration of veiling practices where cultural distinctions are erased, in favour of an overly simple and easily stereotyped view of Muslim women as other. By representing such a character with little regard to both the cultural and religious significance associated with the veil mutates the piece of fabric to the point that the deeper meaning is lost and it becomes little more than a costume/disguise. Since we now understand that Armand's costume bears little regard to the actual religious and cultural elements tied to the *Niqab,* we can start analyzing what his performance reveals

about the subaltern Muslim woman from his westernized subject perspective. His physical actions as Schéhérazade conform to the hegemonic narrative. All these elements remind us how, even in a film where veiling is the central element, it continually occupies an illegitimate and subaltern space.

5.1.1. Ridiculing the Subaltern Through Hegemonic Performance

In the film, Armand's experiences are shaped by the *Niqab* as well as by how Armand himself shapes the narrative discourse about the Islamic veil. Since, as much as the fabric does in many ways influence him (e.g., his movement, his interactions, and the difficulty in maintaining his disguise), he also has the capacity to influence perceptions of the veil. These perceptions are altered through his actions while he is veiled. Initially, the film depicts the veil as an encumbering object that hinders Armand's ability to move adequately through his surroundings. In the first scene in which we see Armand in disguise as Schéhérazade (16:00), the audience sees Schéhérazade walking down the street dressed entirely in a flowing, black *Niqab.* In this scene Schéhérazade interacts with three different people. First, Schéhérazade is insulted by a man in his car, when he yells at him "if you wanted to die, you should have stayed in Syria" (16:37), highlighting the stereotypical relationship between the ethnic French majority and the postcolonial migrant subject in a light of an important recent history fraught with terrorist attacks (Bathoum et al., 2018). His second interaction takes place a mere couple of seconds after, when a man walking down the street catcalls him, saying "hey blondie" (16:41). Futher, his last interaction is with an elderly woman who mistakes him for somebody else. When Schéhérazade explains to the lady that she is mistaken, she accuses him "you look just like her" (16:52). These three consecutive interactions reveal in a comedic fashion the ways in which certain unveiled characters interact with the veiled body (by evaluating it either as dangerous or alien, or by dehumanizing it by reducing the wearer as the punchline of an unkind joke); however, I would like to point out that it does this by making light of the situation. Miller (2015) proposes that cross-dressing is used in cinema to represent societies' desire to ridicule members of minoritized societal groups (Miller, 2015, p.127). Throughout the film, the *Niqab* is a continual source of ridicule as audience members gain enjoyment from witnessing Armand's frequent struggle while wearing the *Niqab.* For example, while going up the staircase of the building where Mahmoud and Leila live, he trips (16:58). Or later, when he awkwardly attempts to drink

from a cup of tea beneath his veil and burns himself (26:04). These are but a few instances where Armand's struggles provoke laughter from film viewers. In his analysis of Hollywood films like *Tootsie* (Pollack, 1982) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1983), Miller (2015) suggests that it is because audience members' own lived experiences are so distant from the struggles experienced by cross-dressed characters that they are able to laugh at the character (Miller, 2015, p.129). I propose that since most film's viewers have not experienced being a cross-dressed Muslim woman, Miller's suggestion applies to *Cherchez la femme* (2017) as well.

Miller's analysis (2015) focused on the cross-dressing of ethnic majority men, and their performances of ethnic majority women, while in this film there exist the important elements of religious expression. In France, the wearing of the full-face Islamic veil is illegal in public spaces (LOI N° 2010-1192 Du 11 Octobre 2010 Interdisant La Dissimulation Du Visage Dans l'espace Public (1), 2010), and it is certainly the subject of much public and political debate concerning freedom of religious expression and national safety (Robine, 2010). What can audience laughter achieve when it is directed at an object that is commonly the source of societal fear? Douglas (2010) explains that what is feared "must be made fun of to exorcise fear," and that laughter provides the possibility of "asserting power over terrible threats" (Douglas, 2010, p.65). Consequently, one can assert that transforming the full Islamic veil from symbolizing a potential threat, to one that provokes laughter from an audience, points to a collective hegemonic view that the full Islamic veil is a source of cultural anxiety and fear, and laughing and ridiculing it is a source of pleasure for film viewers. One may argue however, that the film contains some subversive elements as we witness for the first-time certain actions being performed by a veiled figure where one would not expect it. For example, during a montage (see Figure 5.2) where Armand sets out to create the character of Schéhérazade.

Figure 5.2 A montage of Armand's transformation into Schéhérazade (Félix Moati) (Cherchez la femme, 2017)

We see Schéhérazade performing the following actions while wearing the Niqab: racing his friends (23:35); trying on a pair of sexy red high heels[13] (24:28); and finally, a small clip where we see a veiled Armand executing a trick jump on his skateboard (25:00). This montage hints that Armand undergoes an apprenticeship and an eventual mastery in his ability to transform into a Muslim. This transition is represented in this scene through his initial struggle to run a race against his friends and later his victory to the finish line, all the while wearing the *Niqab.* While these actions would be considered subversive due to the veiled body never being represented in such a way, I would like to point out that because the viewer is aware that the person performing those actions is Armand and not a Muslim woman, these actions are no longer subversive and that the element of contradiction is gone. Suddenly, the performance becomes normative, as it maintains that these actions may only be successfully performed if comedically executed by a man. Furthermore, the fact that Armand, the protagonist of the film, is not ethnically

[13] I would argue that this could be read as an intertextual image referring to the American comedies that inspired Abadi's creation of this film. This scene effectively brings to mind the performances of both Jack Lemon and Tony Curtis is *Some like it hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959).

marked is important to note, as it suggests the idea that non-ethnic minority actors have the ability to play and voice ethnic, religious, and minority status women, in a way that the audience will find appealing. Whereas the roles of both Leila and Mahmoud are filled by racialized actors. This illustrates how actors from minority groups are continually marginalized because, even in a story that focalizes on ethnic characters – and the racialized and symbolic object that is the veil – the narrative is still told from the perspective of the white majority (Armand), while characters who are played by ethnically marked actors occupy secondary and supporting roles. The fact that the character of Schéhérazade is a fictitious invention created by Armand to serve his personal agenda and is accordingly little more than a costume born out of convenience and necessity, and yet she is the only representative of that minority group in a film whose main theme is veiling, is also an important aspect to consider. How can a film effectively talk about a minority group that wears the veil when such a character is not present on screen?

5.1.2. A Western Seduction

Since the character of Armand is white-passing, this facilitates identifying him as the dominant subject in the film. From this, we understand that he represents the white majority. By having his character play and voice the *subaltern* Muslim woman, we are essentially witnessing the imagined discourse of the *subaltern,* from the westernized subject perspective. Armand's discourse often relies on western texts, and ultimately it is when Schéhérazade recites passages from these texts that characters around him are seduced by his "wisdom". This is exemplified during moments when Schéhérazade repeatedly links passages from the Quran to Western literary works by authors such as Victor Hugo (28:25), and Shakespeare (1:05:50). When Schéhérazade cites such passages, he seduces Mahmoud. He is enchanted and learns to respect Schéhérazade through her knowledge and interpretations of these written texts. Ultimately, by focusing so much on Western texts and not taking the opportunity to showcase authors from the MENA (Middle East and North African) world to the same degree, Abadi sends the message that the Western world's culture and western scholars are more relevant than those from the Middle East, and that those from the Middle East (like Mahmoud) can be seduced by the beauty, depth, and truth of Western literature.

The character of Schéhérazade – as created by Armand – is not explicitly tied to a cultural belonging, although Schéhérazade does mention that she is from Afghanistan (18:28); however, outside of this she does not discuss her culture of origin in the film. Stereotypes are then used to put forward the idea of a Muslim woman creating a *hybrid* between various countries where Islam is a common practice. The stereotype of the Muslim woman is of a woman with a traditional outlook and whose submissiveness to a patriarchal figure is symbolized by the veil (Fernando, 2013; Izrar, 2020). As performed by Armand, Schéhérazade's character conforms to this stereotype. When Mahmoud first asks for her hand in marriage, Schéhérazade responds by stating that she does not have the authorization to speak with a man on the subject of marriage (27:50). According to Bullock – who is a Canadian lecturer in Islamic Politics – such a mainstream view of veiled Muslim women as "completely and utterly subjugated by men" provides us with "the most simplistic and unsophisticated view of the veil" (Bullock, 2002, p.XV). Bullock states that such representations are ignorant of actual Muslim practices, and create the image most often found in pop culture and mainstream media. This is exactly what is being highlighted in the film, as Schéhérazade's main reason behind not wanting to marry Mahmoud is formulated by her as her father, the patriarchal figure in her household, having expressly forbidden her from choosing her own romantic partner. As Leila puts it "she is telling you no because, like me, there is someone else who chooses for her…" (29:19). It is surprising that, even here, Leila does not encourage Mahmoud to question patriarchal structures but instead reinforces his belief that he is legitimate in his roles as the head of the household, since she asserts that the same applies to Schéhérazade "…here, maybe you're the one in charge, but for her, it's her father…" (29 :21). Such discourse concurs with dominant Western views, whereby Muslim women are oppressed and Muslim men are oppressors.

5.1.3. The Veiled Muslim Woman as a "Scary" Figure

In this section, I analyze how the portrayal of the *Niqab* in the film contributes to an understanding of the religious garb as inherently untrustworthy and frightening. Phillips (2006) defines transvestism in cinema as including those characters who live a portion of their lives on screen cross-dressing as a gender other than their own. He argues that "[c]omedy […] helps to ridicule and hence domesticate a transvestism that might otherwise prove threatening" (Phillips, 2006, p.81). This is exactly what happens

throughout the film as members of the audience laugh at Armand's absurd performance as Schéhérazade. His performance serves to ridicule the veiled body. There is a discrepancy, however, between film viewers' reactions to seeing Armand's transvestism and the reactions of non-veiled characters when confronted by the veiled figure. This is because film viewers are privy to information (such as the true identity of the person wearing the *Niqab*) that fictional characters do not have. In the studied case, the confrontation between such characters results in fear. For example, Armand reacts with unease when he first encounters a veiled figure. He withdraws from the figure (15:52). As the veiled figure sits between himself and his colleague, both men edge further away from her. The act of diverting their eyes and not verbally acknowledging the presence of the individual between them points out to a form of de-humanization. When the person beneath the veil reveals himself to be one of the refugees from the association where Armand works, both Armand and his colleague are first startled but also noticeably relieved. I argue that, in this scenario, the veil stands for an object of fear, as well as the source of laughter when it is revealed or when film viewers are made aware of the wearer's identity, while the veil is a symbol of fear when film viewers are not made privy to what exists underneath. The juxtaposition between both can be best described by Clough and Eades (2005), as they explain that laughter is experienced when the human body becomes an artefact, de-naturalized through a process of transformation. I propose that the body of the protagonist in *Cherchez la femme* is de-naturalized through the act of veiling to incarnate a Muslim woman.

Another example that shows such de-naturalization is a scene in which Armand runs into a police officer after leaving Leila and Mahmoud's apartment. The officer is about to give him a parking ticket (23:00) and when he sees Armand (still dressed in the *Niqab*), he says, "you know that this is also illegal?" while gesturing to the garment (23:11). Stripping from the garment immediately, Armand regains his identity as a non-*subaltern* subject and responds: "I completely agree with you, officer, it's a costume. It's the carnival at my nephews' school" (23:13). This shows that those who wear the *Niqab* as an expression of their religious beliefs are illegitimate in doing so. Secondly, this scene encapsulates how quickly Armand regains his humanity and legitimacy in occupying the public sphere as soon as he takes off the *Niqab*; therefore, his experience goes from being de-naturalized (when he is veiled) to naturalized (when he is unveiled). Armand's comedic performance of the veiled character of Schéhérazade leads us to

understand veiled women as de-naturalized. Furthermore, the important absence of other veiled women throughout most of the film lends to an understanding that to veil is unnatural, and that natural – and by extension – legitimate women do not veil (i.e., women like Leila). Abadi reveals this by placing other women who are familiar with both Muslim culture and the veil in direct opposition with the body of the Muslim woman. An understanding that the veil is an unnatural phenomenon, and one that is inherently terrifying, is demonstrated throughout the film. The study of two additional scenes will concur with this preliminary conclusion that characters' interactions with Schéhérazade legitimize treating veiled bodies as agents of terror. This analysis will demonstrate how one-sided the film's depiction of veiled bodies is, as it does not offer a more complete vision of veiled women because the latter are denied a place on screen.

To those who are unfamiliar with Muslim culture, the shrouded veiled figure is one that is enlaced with both mystery and fear. This air of mystery is successfully demonstrated in the film by Abadi's creative choices of adding mysterious instrumental music when we first encounter a veiled figure (15:52). However, this mystery is interconnected with suspicion for characters who do not know what exists beneath the veil, leading them to make their imaginary monsters come to life. For example, in the scene where Schéhérazade is seen running away from Mahmoud's friends. Schéhérazade dashes into a carriage on the Metro; passengers are seen recoiling in fear and film viewers hear a young girl screaming: "Maman, un Fantôme!" (31:30). Her mother shields her daughter behind her. This adds to the illusion that there is indeed something to be afraid of and that that something is the veiled body. Quemener (2014) explains that laughter is provoked through visual/knowledge-based discrepancies. She proposes that the discrepancy between what is known about a character versus what is seen creates a tension for the viewer which, in turn, results in laughter (Quemener, 2014, p.83). Since the film's viewers know that the person beneath the veil is Armand and we see how others fear his veiled figure, the discrepancy between what we know and what we see results in laughter. Armand only reclaims his humanity (in relation to the surrounding and unveiled characters) by stripping from the *Niqab* at the end of the scene; therefore, reclaiming a humane, non-frightening identity.

Even characters with implicit knowledge of Islamic and Muslim culture, such as Armand's parents, Mitra (Anne Alvaro) and Darius (Predrag Manojlovic), who both left their home country of Iran during the Iranian revolution, react with fear and mistrust

when they come face to face with veiled figures. Their first encounter happens in the scene (41:20–42:33) in which Schéhérazade is being followed by Mahmoud's friends upon his request. They follow Schéhérazade to the apartment building where Armand lives with his parents. Schéhérazade quickly enters the building just as Darius and Mitra are exiting it. They look in awe and worry as Armand's disguised figure enters the building and Mahmoud's Muslim brotherhood stand outside taking pictures of the building with their cellphones. As they continue walking down the street, Mitra says to Darius, "are you thinking what I'm thinking?" and Darius responds, "how could I not think it? They're photographers of the regime". Based on their response, it becomes evident to film viewers that veiled characters are unworthy of sympathy since even those who have intimate and extensive knowledge of Islam as both a religion and culture (Darius and Mitra) have negative reactions when faced with the veiled figure. It is important to note that there are various kinds of veils used by Muslim women, and that the *Niqab* and the *Burqa* are the ones most associated with religious extremism, as seen in Darius and Mitras's reception of the veiled figure. However, the film does not offer any alternatives to veiled Muslim characters with whom non-veiled characters might sympathize with.

I argue that the figure of the political and westernized Muslim woman is one which best suits the character of Mitra, since she is strong minded, opiniated, and a political activist. This is demonstrated throughout the film when film viewers witness Mitra attending an Iranian feminist manifestation (31:45) and filming a video about women's rights and freedoms in Iran (33:10). Mitra reveals she has particularly negative views towards the veiled figure, due to events in her life that lead to her best friend being disfigured by sulphuric acid thrown by a radicalized Muslim woman (59:00). Accordingly, she has a very strong reaction when she comes face to face with Schéhérazade. As the westernized Muslim woman, Mitra also plays an important role in maintaining the place of the veiled Muslim woman as *subaltern*. This is particularly apparent in the following scene: Mitra is seated across from Schéhérazade in a bus (44:30–46:00) because Schéhérazade is forced to take the bus to escape being followed once again by one of Mahmoud's friends, where he comes face to face with his own mother sitting directly across from him. She looks at him, shaking her head in disagreement, clearly expressing her disapprobation over the veil. Other passengers readily agree with Mitra and urge Schéhérazade to take off the *Niqab.* This is a fantastic example of how veiled figures in the film are treated as *subaltern* when one analyzes the vocabulary used by the other

passengers of the bus. They describe the *Niqab* using words that are rather pejorative. Having characters refer to the *Niqab* as “un truc” (45:46) or “un torchon” (45:50) is revealing of the director’s point of view, as this scene provokes a reaction from film viewers and demands that the audience take a side. Do we, the members of the audience, feel sorry for the character of Schéhérazade as she is placed in this rather uncomfortable social position? Or do we, to a certain degree, reveal our own biases against veiled characters, by both finding this scene humorous (since the audience is more than aware that it is Armand hiding beneath the *Niqab*) and agreeing that one should go unveiled in public spaces like the bus or the city hall for example. Flustered, Schéhérazade rushes to exit the bus. This scene is perhaps the most emblematic in its demonstration of how veiled Muslim women are *subaltern* to the rest of the population because she is cornered between her values, faith, and integrating into French society. Consequently, in the hegemonic French imaginary, the veiled figure is illegitimate in occupying the public sphere, as it cannot conceptualize how one may be both French and Muslim. The film’s limitation in representing veiled figures consequently upholds a very narrow vision of veiled Muslim women as scary ghost-like figures but also as a threat to the French republican values of secularism. As Darius puts it, the veil is “a threat to French secularism” (57:57). Muslim women are not offered a solution in how to be both French and Muslim. They must choose one: conforming to French values or being treated as a societal outcast—ultimately, losing either way. To conclude, Armand’s choice to achieve the characterization of the Muslim woman simply by donning the *Niqab* regardless of the accuracy of the garment in reflecting Schéhérazade’s nationality, paired with the reception of his transformation from A to S, points out that the main takeaway of what it means to be a veiled Muslim woman is to be mistrusted, feared, and to have one’s identity reduced to the garment; in other words, the individual does not exist past the veil.

5.2. Leila: The Character Foil of Schéhérazade

The first section focused on Armand’s performance as Schéhérazade and how the veiled figure is the object of ridicule for film viewers with internalized hegemonic views of the Islamic veil. In this section, I will discuss how the character of Leila is used throughout the film to contrast with the character of Schéhérazade. The representation of both these characters helps viewers to construct a vision of veiled Muslim women

through the process of highlighting differences between themselves and their unveiled counterparts. A common idea concerning representation is one where we may gain insight on one group by studying their representations of outgroup(s) (Planchenault, 2015). I argue in this section that, in the process of defining the character of the unveiled sexy beurette, we also create a reading of the Muslim woman – one that has been created through a westernized lens. Bullock (2002) proposes that, in the western world, the object that symbolizes women's oppression is the veil. She argues that this constructed image of women's oppression inadequately represents the experiences of those who wear it, and that this narrative has historically served a western political agenda and continues to do so even today (Bullock, 2002, p.XV). I maintain that, when discourse surrounding veiled Muslim women upholds an image of them as oppressed, it villainizes Muslim men and encourages a very narrow view as to which type of woman may legitimately occupy the public space.

Throughout *Cherchez la femme*, Abadi reveals her motivations and ideologies regarding the Islamic veil. She does so through both Armand's performance as Schéhérazade and by constructing Leila as the character foil for Schéhérazade. A foil is a literary device used to contrast with a main character to reinforce key characteristics by placing them opposite from the character foil (Longley, 2019); in this scenario, the character foil to Schéhérazade is Leila. In all the ways in which the character of Schéhérazade is *subaltern* (she is veiled, uneducated, unwelcome in the public sphere, and cannot choose a husband for herself), Leila represents a preferable and more privileged societal position. The character of Leila is a representative of a successful integration for women issued from traditionally Muslim backgrounds. Leila embodies the exemplary figure for young women of Muslim backgrounds because she is both successful on an academic level and chooses not to veil. In her book, Guénif-Souilamas (2000) explores the various societal pressures lived by the daughters of immigrants as they are perceived under opposing, binary lenses. If they choose to veil, it is automatically assumed that they conform to family pressure—most notably, they relinquish their autonomy to a male member of the family (father, brother, or husband). When they do not veil, they are viewed as submissive to colonialism because it is assumed that they are unveiled to better conform to hegemonic cultural norms (Guénif-Souilamas, 2000). I argue that, in the film, Leila represents an appropriate main character that is both relatable and approachable to the French audience. I propose that

this relatability comes in part from familiarity as film viewers have been conditioned to see certain characteristics from the leading women in the romantic comedy subgenre (Scharaga, 2017). Leila is an educated, feminist, attractive, and modern-day woman aspiring for a future in political science. This encourages film viewers to consider Leila – and women who similarly choose not to veil – as justifiably occupying the public space, while women who look like Schéhérazade are consequently the opposite.

The characters of Leila and Schéhérazade represent the dichotomy between both narratives. Guénif-Souilamas (2000) highlights that in the French imaginary concerning the second generation of migrants from the Maghreb, women represent a greater hope for integration. While the dominant narrative concerning male *beur* youth is highly stereotypical, tied back to the banlieue and linked to disruptive behavior (theft and rape) (Bathoum et al., 2018), their sisters, the *beurettes*, are spared from being stereotyped in the same manner. They are perceived as the best hope for integration (Geesey, 1995; Guénif-Souilamas, 2000). However, the term *beurette* is also pejorative and designates one who is available to be possessed sexually and more easily controlled (the suffix "ette" is degrading and marks the object as one to be possessed (Ahmadi, 2020)). The term *beurette* is used only once in the film, by Mahmoud in designation of Leila, during an important and heated moment in the film. Viewers are offered an explanation to Mahmoud's character and his internal frustrations. The scene takes place right after Leila receives the news that she is going to New York for an important internship (8:45). Hey joyous news triggers Mahmoud's anger and the two subsequently argue. During the argument with his sister, Mahmoud implores for Leila to take a serious look at their living conditions in their small apartment in the French banlieue. He says to her: "they leave us here to rot so that we won't come bother them in their nice neighborhoods" (9:36). When she expresses that this is why it is all the more important for her to elevate herself through educational opportunities, he retorts "why? So that they may say: look at her, the little *beurette,* look at how successful she is" (9:42). Mahmoud's bitterness is reflective of his frustrations as a *subaltern* subject living in a society that has not embraced their immigrant subjects (Bathoum et al., 2018). Youths from the banlieue have repeatedly been treated, both in media and in political debate, as France's *ennemi intime*, thus contributing to the feelings of frustration experienced by these youths living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, secluded from the same opportunities as the rest of the French population who live outside the Banlieue

(Guibet Lafaye, 2017). Alternatively, Leila represents the integrated and accepted immigrant subject. Guénif-Souilamas (2000) explains 2nd generation Maghrebi-French women are supposedly more successful agents of integration than their male counterparts because when the girls are successful it is because they want it, while the boys do not. This perspective encourages a process of villainizing the males of that minority group along with victimization of the females. Leila and Mahmoud are examples of such a procedure; Mahmoud is represented as the evil, uneducated sibling, while Leila is represented as a social ideal. Although Mahmoud's situation is understandably frustrating, audience members are not encouraged to feel much empathy for him as he is repeatedly shown to have severe anger management issues resulting in him burning Leila's passport (10:48) and striking a hole into her bedroom door with an axe (37:17). These acts are undeniably extreme and result in furthering audience sympathy for Leila, while solidifying Mahmoud as the film's antagonist. Abadi's portrayal of Mahmoud's extreme anger issues as being a result of his radicalization reinforce negative perceptions of Islam through hegemonic views concerning women from Muslim backgrounds that need saving from the men of their families.

Leila's character fails to bring a more nuanced portrayal of Islam to the film, as she herself shows a surprising bias against veiled Muslim women. Through her actions, Leila conveys her intolerance regarding Muslim women who wear the *Niqab.* From the moment Leila first meets Schéhérazade (18:00) she makes her disdain obvious, by rudely saying "that's not a woman, it's a tent" (18:07) straight to Schéhérazade's face. Not only is this a rude comment to make towards a perfect stranger, but it also dehumanizes those who wear the *Niqab* by erasing their status as "woman" and comparing them to an inanimate and lifeless object. When Schéhérazade tells Leila that he is here because Schéhérazade needs her help to improve her French and pass a contest to become a beautician, Leila says that someone else may be better suited to assist her. When Schéhérazade insists that it must be Leila, she turns her down and insinuates that some people are "helpless cases" (20:23) while looking over the *Niqab*. This treatment of Schéhérazade seems to be rather uncharacteristic of Leila, considering Leila has already demonstrated she is involved with an organization that assists Arabic migrants seeking asylum in France. For her to then treat Schéhérazade in such a fashion, simply because she is veiled, seems paradoxical to me. Later in the same scene, Leila learns that Schéhérazade is actually Armand in disguise, and as

such, the rude comments that point to an anti-veil ideology cease. However, the analysis of an additional scene from the film will help us understand how, with Leila acting as Schéhérazade's foil, Abadi promotes a narrative in the film whereby only unveiled women are deemed legitimate in occupying the public space, at the expense of the *subaltern* veiled subject.

Film viewers witness two contrasting reactions of both characters in the scene in which Schéhérazade goes to the city hall to pick up Leila's new passport while taking on her identity (34:00–36:50). In this scene, Schéhérazade walks up to the counter where a woman looks disapprovingly at him, while looking over the paperwork. She says to Schéhérazade that he must unveil to confirm to her his identity; meanwhile, a second woman comes to the counter as well. The second woman is concerned because she has previously interacted with Leila and therefore, she knows that Leila is usually unveiled. Schéhérazade is barely audible as he whispers that he cannot unveil, and the first woman interrupts him and says impatiently: "it's enough that we cannot see you face, the least you could do is articulate" (34:20). The second woman looks over the paperwork and asks Schéhérazade if things are well at home or if it is Leila's brother who forced her to veil. Armand has no choice but to refuse, in order to maintain his disguise and his masquerade as Leila. An elderly gentleman comes up to the counter and angrily demands Schéhérazade take off the *Niqab* (34:33). Unable to explain the situation to them, Armand has no choice but to run out of the building. Schéhérazade runs back to Leila's apartment building so that they may switch places and Leila can go herself to the city hall while wearing the *Niqab* so that Mahmoud is unaware of her escape. Entering the city hall, with the *Niqab* bundled in her arms, Leila walks up to the counter and requests her passport. Both the female city hall workers are struck by the transformation to her current unveiled attire. The contrast between both Schéhérazade and Leila could not be more obvious. While Schéhérazade's figure is dark, veiled, and formless beneath the *Niqab*, Leila is wearing short denim cut-off shorts, a pink low-cut shirt, and high heels. Where Schéhérazade's feminine form is obsolete beneath the *Niqab*, Leila's femininity is exaggerated through her form-fitting and feminine clothing. Even her ability to interact with the women at the counter is opposite to Schéhérazade. While Schéhérazade is muted and unable to communicate with the ladies at the counter (lest they discover his real identity), Leila is able to articulate clearly what she wants and even shoot back a humoristic retort when the receptionist comments on her change of

outfit. Leila responds “yes, [the niqab] didn’t go well with my heels” (36:45). As Leila exits the building, the second receptionist says she’s never been happier to see a woman in short shorts (36:49). This comment from the government worker concerning Leila’s shorts points to an ideological view that women of Maghrebi descent are better viewed when they conform to the image of the sexy *beurette*, as it is indicative of a total integration to western feminist values and goes against the usual image of the more traditional, subjugated woman of Maghrebi descent. Consequently, the scene concludes by highlighting how members of the ethnic French majority find unveiled young women approachable and acceptable while their veiled counterparts are unwelcome and undeserving of basic courtesy.

In a film whose central character wears the *Niqab,* the absence of the Muslim woman subject and voice is remarkable. It illustrates how little dominant society concerns itself with the lived experiences of *subaltern* communities. Even when the dialogue pertains to the minority subject, it still does so by conforming to dominant societal ideologies which are more palatable to the white majority. As bell hooks (1990) eloquently explains it:

> [There is] no need to hear your [native] voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still [the] colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.
>
> — bell hooks *"Marginality as a Site of Resistance" (1990 p.343)*

Conclusively, with Abadi’s portrayal of Leila, the main female protagonist of the film, reinforces a narrow vision whereby women originating from Muslim countries are only legitimate in occupying the public space when they are unveiled. The fact that all the women (Leila and Mitra) in the film who come from Muslim countries are unveiled, and that the film culminates in Armand revealing to Mahmoud his deception as Schéhérazade strips the film of any portrayal of the *subaltern* figure of the veiled Muslim woman and, as other characters go on to their happy endings, Schéhérazade is left in the background, as an invalid, voiceless and *subaltern* subject. Such an ending for a comedy centering on a veiled figure is remarkably sad. To put it into perspective, one could argue that the treatment of Schéhérazade is comparable to the treatment of some

LGBTQ+ characters in film, who are often killed or punished to serve the purpose of advancing the plotline for the surrounding characters' growth (Hulan, 2017). In a way, Schéhérazade is an accessory and she is a product of necessity (i.e., Armand created her to see Leila). However, after inspiring significant character growth for Mahmoud, her character ceased to exist as she had served her purpose.

Chapter 6.

Conclusion

Through the study of these three films, I have discovered that French directors who aspire to showcase a more nuanced and accepting space for veiled Muslim women, may unfortunately limit the characterization of this demographic to a few specific character archetypes which are readily accepted by French film viewers. Three prevalent archetypes I examined over the course of this study were: the familiar and conventional figure of the subservient Muslim mother—who is represented as a silenced demographic shaded as noble for leading a quiet life of servitude; the victims of religious extremism and online terrorist recruitment (in the shape of young and impressionable girls). Lastly, I analyzed the subaltern figure of the Muslim woman who is much more a fictitious ghost, than an actual person having any corporeal substance.

Bearing in mind the diversity existing within the population of veiled women in France, I struggle to understand why French cinema's representation of veiled Muslim women was limited to conform to just a few character archetypes. Furthermore, actresses of Maghrebi descent are increasingly present in French cinema. As we discussed in chapter two, the past decade saw a growth in representation of this population, however when we examine the roles played by these Maghrebi-French actresses, we notice that they are – for the most part – unveiled. Actresses such as Camélia Jordana, Sofia Boutella, and Sabrina Ouazani either play the role of the westernized sexy beurette, or they obtain roles for non-ethnically marked characters such as is the case for Camélia Jordana in her role as Daphné in *Les Choses qu'on dit, les choses qu'on fait* (by Emmanuel Mouret, 2020). This reluctance to showcase young, empowered, educated, and veiled Maghrebi-French women, indicates an ongoing societal rejection surrounding the choice for Muslim women to veil.

6.1. Summary of the study

Throughout my research I have found that a few recurring characteristics have been continually associated to the veiled characters of the films of my corpus. Through the analysis of the dialogue, the film's narrative, and the key visual elements of the films

I was able to distinguish the following recurring traits which veiled characters shared. Veiled characters are depicted as being subservient, and more pious than other characters. They are also represented as vulnerable and less capable than unveiled characters. Outside of religious fundamentalism, the choice to veil is not represented as a valid choice for younger Muslim women. In *Fatima*, neither Souad nor Nesrine wear the veil, and in *Cherchez la femme*, Leila only veils twice to dupe her brother. Concretely none of the films of my corpus depict a possibility for young women to veil out of choice; they only veil due to religious extremism.

In all three films, the veil embodies a disconnection between the wearer and the rest of society. Veiled characters are depicted as isolated from others, for example in *Fatima* (Faucon, 2015), Fatima's isolated state is depicted as a result of her low linguistic competences. However, it is worthwhile to note that she does not at any point form meaningful connections with any other veiled women in the film. *In Le ciel attendra* (Mention-Schaar, 2016) radicalized girls undergo a process of radicalization via the internet, and are increasingly cut off from their friends, families, and society, with the veil acting as the final element marking their full radicalization. Finally, *in Cherchez la femme* (Abadi, 2017), connection between the subaltern veiled character and the rest of society is an impossibility simply because the subaltern figure is never granted a permanent place on screen; rather, what film viewers observe is the male, white-passing, and westernized character of Armand switching back and forth between veiled and unveiled appearances in order to fulfil his own personal motives. As soon as the necessity to disguise her identity ceases, the subaltern figure is discarded.

6.2. Limitations of the Study

Although this study adds a worthwhile perspective to a field of research that had previously been engaged with but sparingly, it is important to note a few significant limitations of the study. Considering the vast area of possible study linked to my research, I felt it was necessary to set limiting parameters to my resources in order to better focus the course of my study. I chose to only study three films, each of which fulfilling a different cinematic genre. Due to the limitations of the thesis it is important to note that I was unable to fulfill a comprehensive study of all the films created in the past decade having a veiled character on screen. I also chose to examine films created for larger audiences, and so I excluded lower budget films, short films, documentaries, and

films made for television. A study and analysis of such films may prove to contain a greater diversity of characterizations of the veiled Muslim woman archetype than those films outlined in my study, considering these films may not be as concerned with pleasing large audiences. One could for example consider the films: *A voix haute* (by de Freitas, 2016), or *Soumaya* (Abu-Usayid & Khan, 2019) as worthy subjects for future analysis.

At the beginning of my study, I outlined the manner in which both political and public debate engaged with the Islamic veil, and I described how French news media cast a more or less negative light on the population of veiled Muslim women, which ultimately revealed an uncertainty on the possibility that one could identify as both Muslim and French since the veil is depicted as going against French secular values. This led me to turn to film with the hopes that they would offer some insight regarding societal perceptions of this controversial demographic. The main question I asked myself was whether or not film would offer a more accepting representation of the veiled Muslim woman or if it would recreate, maintain, and disseminate the same limited vision as seen in French news media about the veiled French population. I turned to cinema as I believe that it is a valuable medium with the ability to both influence social perspectives, as well as illustrate current cultural values. While I maintain this to be true, the complexity of the actual relationship between film and television media and the real-world current realities surrounding this demographic cannot be proven. My study is therefore limited to Film and cannot for all purposes illustrate any concrete facts concerning societal ideologies about Muslim women. I am limited simply to stating the depiction of this demographic as seen in the three films of my corpus.

6.3. Areas for Future Research

As one of the first studies specifically analyzing cinematic depictions of veiled Muslim women rather than simply Maghrebi women, this experience could open up opportunities for areas of further exploration. Firstly, it would be interesting to consider the differences and similarities as seen in French television shows. I would be curious to see whether this medium provides us with yet another set of character archetypes or if it would showcase the same limitations which affected the veiled characters which informed this research. How does the differences between film and television show-

viewership inform the types of representation we can recognize within representations of French Muslim women population? Will there ever be a more diverse representation?

Next, I would be curious to understand the sentiments felt by the very same members of the community in question. How do veiled Muslim women feel about the ways in which they are represented and how does this affect their feelings of belonging or non-belonging within contemporary French society?

And lastly, I wonder why there is marking absence of a more diverse representation of young, strong, feminist, veiled Muslim characters, and what sort of reception would such a character receive amongst French film viewers?

6.4. Concluding Statements

I take my leave with these final remarks: I first undertook this study in 2018 when I observed that current political and social debates centralizing on the place of the veil vis-à-vis French republican values and French secularism were largely indicative of societal concerns regarding the possibility of integrating the Franco-Muslim population. Since then, the situation has grown even more concerning with terms such as "Islamo-gauchisme" and the threat of an Islamic "communautarisme" overtaking French media articles and television. Recently, Frédérique Vidal, the French minister for higher education made a statement which sparked backlash from university academics as she warned against the proliferation of Islamo-leftism in French academic institutions (Dumont, 2021). The current of study of "Identity Politics" has become an important point of conversation as a diversity of populations demand to be recognized.

The past year alone has seen a surge of social movements all of which focusing on identity politics and demanding systemic change. Protests supporting the "Black Lives Matter" movement occurred globally following a chain of violent deaths of the African-American population in the United States at the hands of police brutality. Such tensions can be felt in France also; for example: French-Algerian singer and actress Camélia Jordana (who played Leila in *Cherchez la femme*, 2017) recently faced backlash after expressing how she also felt anxious around police officers as a racialized person living in France (Aliot, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has also played an important role, sparking a rise of anti-Asian sentiments and violence targeting this

racialized community (“Enquête ouverte pour des appels à la violence contre les Asiatiques,” 2020). All this to say, I believe recent events have been eye opening and the field of Identity politics and conversations surrounding the themes of author-ship, diversity, inclusivity, and representation are just starting. It is my belief that a world with more diverse representation will lead to a brighter future—a future where individuals can co-exist and celebrate all the ways in which they share similarities and revel in our cultural *différence*.

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