FEMINISM AS A DOUBLE AGENT?
THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF FEMINISM AND THE INFLUENCE OF EUROCENTRISM ON THE VIEW ON MUSLIM WOMEN

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Abstract

Gedurende de afgelopen jaren is de Islam berucht geworden als de ‘ultieme ander’. De Islam wordt gezien als een godsdienst die waarden promoot die haaks staan op alles waar het Westen voor staat. De grootste reden voor dit anders-zijn is de vermeende tegenstand van Moslims tegenover vrouwenrechten en de onverenigbaarheid van Islam en feminisme. In Europa en de Verenigde Staten worden feminisme en vrouwenrechten erg vaak gezien als puur Westerse concepten die ontstonden aan het unieke Westerse recept van democratie en secularisme. Er zou een nieuwe *clash of civilizations* zijn, alleen zou gender deze keer de scheidingslijn tussen beide beschavingen vormen. Ik beargumenteer dat deze visie het resultaat is van de invloed van verschillende soorten van eurocentrisme. Na al deze jaren wordt het Westen nog steeds beschouwd als het centrum van de wereld en bijgevolg worden alle andere culturen afgemeten met het Westen als maatstaf. Het feminisme speelt hierin een dubbele rol: Het is iets dat tegelijk onderdrukkend en bevrijdend kan werken voor Moslimvrouwen. Wanneer het feminisme gebruikt wordt in zijn blanke, neokoloniaal facet, wordt het een puur Westerse kracht die Moslimvrouwen dwingt een deel van hun identiteit achter te laten en zich te onderwerpen aan een cultuur die hen niet eigen is. Wanneer intersectionaliteit in acht wordt genomen en het feminisme wordt gebruikt als een inclusieve beweging, kan het daarentegen een manier zijn voor Moslimvrouwen om tegen onderdrukking te vechten die zowel van binnen hun eigen religieuze gemeenschap als daarbuiten komt.
Abstract

Over the course of the last few years, Islam has regained new infamy as the ‘ultimate other’. It is thought to be a religion that advocates values completely contrary to anything the West stands for. The main reason for this ‘otherness’ is Islam’s supposed opposition to women’s rights and its incompatibleness with feminism. In Europe and the United States feminism and women’s emancipation are often represented as purely Western concepts that originated from the unique Western recipe of democracy and secularism. There is thought to be a new clash of civilizations, only this time with gender as the dividing line. I argue that this view is the result of the influence of different kinds of eurocentrism. After all these years, the West is still considered the centre of the world and by consequence all other cultures are consistently measured by Western standards. Feminism plays a double role in this: It is a movement that can work both repressive and liberating. When feminism is used in its whitestream, neo-colonial form, it becomes a purely Western power that forces Muslim women to abandon a part of their identity and submit to a culture that is not their own. However, where intersectionality is taken into consideration and feminism is used as an inclusive movement it can become a way for Muslim women to fight against repression both from within their own community as from outside of it.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Foreword

When I left for a fieldwork trip to Palestine in March last year, many friends and family members expressed their concern upon my leaving. Many questioned the safety of this trip, which is not surprising given the conflict that has been raging on for decades now and the fact that there had been several instances of violence in the region right before my departure. However, when people expressed their concerns an extra remark was often added, one that appears to be typical for the way we Westerners look at the Islamic world: “I expect it will be dangerous there… especially for a girl”. I was confronted with this well meant and seemingly innocent comment several times and it reveals a lot about the way people think about the region and culture. Not a single person had made the same comment when I left for countries such as Sweden, the United Kingdom or Russia. It is a comment that betrays a certain image of the Middle East and the Islamic world in general. The fact that not one but several people made this comment tells me that there is more at play here than the view of a single individual. Indeed, the idea that a certain region would be especially unsafe for women implies notions of frequent sexual violence, or at least more frequent than in our own area of the world. It would appear that these comments were propelled by the image Western people have of Islam, which appears to most to be a religion that conceives women as inferior beings.

It would be unfair to claim that I did not have any cultural prejudices myself. I, too, noticed how many ill-conceived notions I still carried with me once I ended up in the field. This was a painful realisation, especially so because it seems to me that as a woman fortunate enough to have received an extensive education and as someone with a keen interest in gender studies, I should have known better. The contrast between the image of highly oppressed Muslim women that I grew up with clashed with the complex reality I found during my short time in the field. Moreover, there appeared to be a difference between what I rationally knew to be true and the view that I had internalised as a consequence of growing up in a small Western village vastly untouched by the general tendency to multiculturalism.

Once aware of the problem it became harder and harder to look away from it. Suddenly I found this image everywhere, where I hadn’t always noticed it before. The image of Muslim communities where the women are passive beings without the ability to influence their own destiny and where the men hold all the power in an oppressively religious community is interwoven in our consciousness and this image has
been there for far longer than we realise. It influences the way we think about Muslims, about the several conflicts in the Middle East and about globalisation. It is omnipresent in political and social debates and will inevitably influence the way we look at the world and not only the way we organise our own society but also the way in which we interact with others. For the past few months I have asked myself questions about the origins of this image, the way it has evolved throughout the last few years and how it affects our interaction with Muslim women. All these questions sparked a fascination that eventually culminated into this dissertation.

1.2 Problem and research questions

In Europe and the United States feminism and women’s emancipation are often presented as purely Western concepts that originated from the unique Western recipe of democracy and secularism. Women from the Global South generally and Muslim women more specifically are often seen as groups that need to be educated in the ethos of Western feminism (Amos en Parmar, 1984 : 7; Abu-Lughod, 2013 : 8; Mahmood 2008 : 81). Without the adoption of this ethos they are presumed to be unable to ever be completely free of oppression. In this story, Western values are seen as the only possible path to freedom, the ultimate solution to the many and varied problems non-Western women face throughout their lives. Muslim women especially are seen as a victim of their own culture, who can only be saved by adopting Western, secular values (Bracke, 2012 : 242). A neo-colonial undertone is often not far off in these discourses.

A lot of research has already been carried out on the prevalence on what Grande called “whitestream feminism” (Grande, 2003). The influence of the colonial heritage, the lack of attention for minority women and the way feminism is used to justify intervention in other countries has already been looked into extensively. Part of the power of the feminist movement has been its ability to look inward at its own deficiencies (Scott, 2008 : 7). Nonetheless the prevalence of whitestream feminism is still a problem. This problem is closely related to a lingering eurocentrism. For centuries, the West has been seen as the centre of the world, a view that still has its influences to the present day. The combination of these two elements – lingering eurocentrism and whitestream feminism - can be very discerned in the view the Western world has on Muslim women. Islam in general is considered the new ‘ultimate other’, a religion and culture that represents the exact opposite of our own Western and secular values. I wish to look deeper into the ways eurocentrism is still interwoven with Western feminism and how this manifests itself clearly
in the way Western societies deal with Muslim women. I will look at the broader frame of this problem, but also intend to look at how this manifests itself specifically in Belgium.

Geographically speaking most research on the Western outlook on Islam and the plight of Muslim women has been conducted with the United States as the main protagonist. Belgium has only very rarely been the subject of any deeper inquiry. Besides the research done by Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil, the most extensive look into the Belgian or Flemish situation has been written by fellow master students in their dissertations. An example of this is a thesis done by Eline Huygens on Islamic feminism in Belgium, or Stijn Heyvaert who wrote about feminism and multiculturalism in a context of neo-colonialism and islamophobia. I wish to add on to this existing research by looking deeper into the different forms of eurocentrism that are still present in our society today and how this influences our view on Muslim women. I argue that feminism has a compelling place in this debate and that it is caught in the middle between the two, making it an interesting topic to look deeper into.

The situation in Belgium will be my main focus in this research, but I also mean to place the Belgian situation within the broader geographical and historical context. My argument is that feminism is caught in the middle between the influence of a Eurocentric tradition that has been going on for centuries and its tendency to attempt to remain relevant to all women, regardless of their race, class or religion. In what follows I will attempt to ascertain the truth of this assumption and explore the impact of this on the Belgian political debate and its policy making. In short, I will attempt to find the answer to these research questions: How has eurocentrism influenced the way the Western world looks at Muslim women? More specifically, how has it influenced the way Belgian society looks at Muslim women? What does this image tell us about the way we see the world? What impact does eurocentrism have on the way we think about our own society in relation to the Islamic world? And what is the impact of this thinking on Muslim citizens in Western countries, or on the attitude towards Muslim newcomers? Lastly, how is feminism as a movement and as a way of thinking involved in this debate? Can feminism be seen as an accomplice to the situation, or rather a solution to the problem? Or is it both?

1.3 Research position

This is first and foremost a literature-based study that will generally remain on a more theoretical level. This means that I intend to analyse existing theories on this subject and discuss them. I furthermore intend to examine these from a Belgian perspective. This use of secondary literature will be
complemented by the use of more primary sources such as (recent) articles from major news outlets and interviews with policy makers that have been printed in national media. The combination of these two sources will allow me to fill in the gaps in existing literature by applying insights from secondary literature on to the Belgian case. In this way, I hope to accomplish for the Belgian case what has previously been achieved for countries such as the Netherlands and the United States. It is not my intention, in any way, shape or form, to speak for Muslim women. I am aware that my view on any subject is influenced by my background as a white, Western woman raised in a secular environment. I will be making use of the tool of ‘transversal politics’ as described by Nira Yuval-Davis (1999). She uses the term to describe what many scholars had already been doing, but that was rarely given a name. Transversal politics seeks to be a midway between the universalistic politics and identity politics. The former limits research too much because of its ethnocentric and exclusionist nature, while the latter leaves little room for communication between different groups because of its tendency to raise walls and its tendency to allow every individual to be absorbed into homogenous groups (Yuval-Davis, 1999 : 94). Transversal politics is based on standpoint epistemology. This recognises that the world is seen differently from each standpoint and that knowledge will always remain unfinished (not invalid) as long as it is obtained from a single standpoint. Furthermore there is the ‘encompassment of difference by equality’, which means that difference should encompass, rather than replace, notions of equality. Lastly there should be an awareness that people who belong to the same category can still be positioned very differently because of other elements such as race, class, gender, age etc. (Yuval-Davis, 1999 : 94-95). For this research this means that although Muslim women all share the same gender and religion, they still cannot be seen as a homogenous group. Other aspects of their identity such as race, class and age are still to be taken into consideration and can alter the way they see and experience the world. This last component comes down to what has often been described as intersectionality: the awareness that the identity of any person is made up of a variety of elements such as the ones mentioned, which all contain their own privileges and influences. This paper discusses the category of Muslim women and the issues they may encounter on their way because of this part of their identity, in the understanding that despite of their categorisation in the same group, this does not mean they all have the same life experiences.
1.4 Research method

In an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism since 1450* (2007), Antoon De Baets maps out five layers of eurocentrism and discusses the way in which these have impacted the view on non-Western cultures and the agency attributed to non-European historical actors. It is a principle that divides the world into two categories: the active peoples who operate within the core and the passive peoples of non-Western cultures who are considered to be in the periphery. Although the eurocentrism De Baets described is mainly focused on historiography, I argue that at least some of the levels of eurocentrism that De Baets described for historiography, can also be found in the Western discourse on Islam and the Western view on Muslim women. The five layers of eurocentrism as described by De Baets are as follows:

On the first level De Baets uncovers ontological eurocentrism. This means that according to a long tradition of historians, non-Western history does not exist. The people at the periphery are only considered when they come in contact with Europe by either threatening Europe, are discovered by Europe, or modernize with Europe as a model (De Baets, 2007: 1). On the second level, there is epistemological eurocentrism. On a historical level this means that non-Western history cannot be known because there are no written sources to guide us through its history (De Baets, 2007: 5). This means that it is impossible to talk or write about non-Western history because there are no sources to draw from. This level is very historiographical in nature, therefore it is the only level that will not be discussed in this paper. Thirdly there is ethical eurocentrism, which is marked by evaluating non-Western history by Western concepts and criteria. Such an evaluation always ends with a conclusion that states that non-Western societies are behind on a linear scale of development which is headed by the West. Other societies are considered to be ‘stuck in the Middle Ages’ (De Baets, 2007: 6). On the fourth level we find utilitarian eurocentrism, which contends that non-Western history is neither relevant nor useful, so there is no point in doing further research into it. There is an estimation of non-Western achievements and of the many non-Western contributions to Western culture. Culture is seen as the exclusive result of Western genius (De Baets, 2007: 6). On the last level there is didactic eurocentrism which concerns the way non-Western history is thought to be too difficult and too embarrassing (De Baets, 2007: 7). The stories of the non-Western world are thought to contain nothing but misery, poverty and injustice and are therefore considered too difficult to speak of.

The levels of eurocentrism described by De Baets are based on a look into historiography. Having studied history myself, I believe that the way we think and speak about history has a real impact on our outlook
on the world today. Therefore I contend that the way we speak about Muslim women today is a consequence of the several levels of eurocentrism that are woven into our education and way of thinking. Furthermore I am convinced all these levels of eurocentrism can be found in the mainstream discourse on Muslim women in Belgium and that this narrative is not only problematic, but also has real consequences for the women in question. In what follows, I will discuss the different forms of eurocentrism and will illustrate how these manifest themselves in Belgium by analyzing statements made by Belgian politicians and policy makers. In the first chapter I will discuss how Islam has come to be known as the ‘ultimate other’, a polar opposite to the Western world, not in the least when it comes to gender equality. From there I will go on to discuss the contradiction in terms that Islamic feminism is thought to be. Similarly to what De Baets described as ontological Eurocentrism in historiography, there is thought to be no such thing as Islamic feminism or a European Islam because each is considered to be irreconcilable with the other. In chapter three I intend to look deeper into the use of a linear time frame and the implications of using terms such as ‘the Dark Ages’ to describe Islam. From there onwards I will discuss the influence of utilitarian eurocentrism in Belgium and the Western world in general. Because feminism is thought to be so exclusively Western, any contributions by non-Western actors is thought to be irrelevant. In consequence, non-Western women have to be educated in the ethos of Western feminism in order to be ‘saved’ from their own culture. And finally, I will look deeper into the didactic eurocentrism that is used when the lives of Muslim women are described. They are thought to live lives full of misery, which, rather than resulting in silence, it has evoked an eager interest in the misery of said women to such an extent it becomes almost voyeuristic.

With this paper, I not only hope to fill in a gap in the existing literature, but also to invoke a critical reflection. There is a lot to be said about the way the Western world looks at others and even more about the consequences of these views. It seems to me there is a dire need for a regular questioning of why we think the way we think, a critical introspection to allow us to avoid repeating mistakes from the past. In short, I believe that the concerns Leila Ahmed voiced a quarter century ago, are still relevant today: “We need a feminism that is vigilantly self-critical and aware of its historical and political situatedness if we are to avoid becoming unwitting collaborators in racist ideologies whose costs to humanity have been no less brutal than those of sexism” (Ahmed, 1992: 247).
2. Islam as the ‘ultimate other’

For centuries, the Islamic world has been seen as the ultimate ‘Other’, a world that differs from the Western world in every way possible. This broader sense of division between the Islamic and the Western world is one that has existed for centuries, has fluctuated throughout the years and has taken many forms. Today this sense of division is marked by a Western world who sees itself as being further advanced than other regions in the world, not only economically but also socially and culturally (Fadil, 2011b: 13). The Enlightenment is supposed to have given us an advancement that places the West far and above any other region in the world, having introduced values and concepts such as democracy, personal liberty and equality. It is the supposed lack of these values that many believe to cause a fundamental divide between countries with an Islamic majority and Western nations. In later years women’s rights have moved up on the list of things that separates the West from the Islamic world. Where does this sense of division come from? And, more importantly, is there any truth to this claim?

2.1 Clash of Civilizations and the Muslim Rage

The Clash of Civilizations thesis of Samuel Huntington put the belief of a fundamental divide between two worlds into words. Although it leaves enough material for an extensive debate, it can be summarized in three core principles: Firstly Huntington believes that culture plays a central role in determining the values and standards that people uphold. Religion is an important part of this culture and it is the religion of a certain area that shapes the local culture, according to Huntington. Secondly, there are sharp cultural differences between the political values in Western countries, who are descended of a Christian culture, and Middle-Eastern and Asian countries descended from an Islamic culture. These differences in political values are mainly centered around the importance of democracy. Lastly, Huntington is convinced these differences in political values, especially those concerning the role and importance of democracy, will eventually lead to a conflict between two different ‘worlds’ that will be profoundly divided because of their cultural and religious identities. This conflict was coined the ‘Clash of Civilizations’.

Bernard Lewis had earlier posed a very similar hypothesis in an article called ‘The Roots of Muslim Rage’, that was published in The Atlantic Monthly in 1990. In this article he discusses a deeply rooted aversion in the Arab world towards the West. This aversion, Lewis poses, has been building up for centuries through a mixture of jealousy towards the successes of the West and an idea that Westerners are enemies of God.
The combination of these two factors has caused the Arab world to consider the West as their ultimate enemy. However, Lewis does recognize the rich history of Islamic empires and discusses their tradition of tolerance, but minutely describes how the West has beat the Arab world time after time. He describes a lingering desire in the Arab world to restore Islamic values to their former glory: “For a long time now there has been a rising rebellion against the Western paramountcy, and a desire to reassert Muslim values and restore Muslim greatness” (B. Lewis, 1990 : 49). This desire to restore greatness is what will cause these two worlds to drift further apart and what will cause the Arab world to further oppose secularism, which is considered to be a typically Western concept. All these elements will eventually culminate into a very similar clash of civilization that Huntington describes.

Bernard Lewis also briefly discusses the fate of women in the Western and Arab world in his article. He acknowledges that women have suffered inequality and oppression throughout history, but at the same time emphasises that no matter what kind of difficulties women face in the West today, or have faced in the past, it is infinitely harder to be a women in any other part of the world: “Even at its worst it was rather better than the rule of polygamy and concubinage that has otherwise been the almost Universal lot of womankind on this planet” (B. Lewis, 1990 : 53). The implication that polygamy and concubinage have been the fate of the majority of women outside of the Western world is to be severely doubted. The image of harems and concubinage is nonetheless something many think of when the fate of women in the Middle East or Far East throughout history is discussed. It is worth noting that Bernard Lewis uses examples that carry a sexual connotation to prove his point. He does not discuss elements of poverty, violence or political inequality to prove or discuss oppression but instead chooses two sexual examples. Lewis is not alone in his focus on the erotic imagery of the East, this fixation is very typical of an orientalist view of the East, as has been described by Reina Lewis (2002).

Concubines are an element generally associated with the Far East, so I will not discuss them any further in this paper. The Western connotations and imagery surrounding concubinage however, is very similar to that of the Middle Eastern harems. Bernard Lewis does not explicitly refer to harems in his article, but he does refer to polygamy and concubinage. From there, we can distinguish a direct link to the classic orientalist image of harems. The very sexualised picture that is painted here is typical of orientalism and has in the past been widely discussed by scholars. Reina lewis (2002), amongst others, discusses the way harems have been a part of the Western fantasies on the Orient for centuries. They formed an important part of the “otherness” that was discussed and depicted circumstantially in Western fantasies on the
Orient in arts and literature. This “otherness” manifests itself on a cultural, but also on a sexual level, and harems are a symptom of the latter.

2.2 Orientalism

Orientalism is a concept that was introduced and broadly discussed by Edward Saïd. It can be seen as both an alternate vision to the Clash of Civilizations theory that is supported by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington and as a way to describe the Western fascination with the East and the sense of “otherness” it produces. Said accuses Lewis of painting a picture of the East that can only be described as a caricature. He claims Lewis ignores the plurality and internal dynamic of civilizations outside of the West (Gettleman & Schaar, 2012: 350). As an answer to the generalizations that appeared in mainstream media, he published an article in 2001 named ‘The Clash of Ignorance’ (Said, 2001, October 4). With this article he wanted to address the ignorance he deems responsible for the stereotypical image that people in the United States and Europe have of the Middle East. After the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001 the media and public opinion appeared to have taken the idea of a clash of civilizations to heart and the war on terror that followed the attacks only strengthened the idea that the West and the Islamic world were doomed to forever consider each other polar opposites.

Initially Said paid little attention to the aspect of gender or the representation and contribution of women to the culture of colonialism, but Said soon addressed this hiatus. Other authors such as Spivak (1987) and Ahmed (1992) had already discussed the issue of gender in the orientalist view of the West towards the East. Nowadays the debate on orientalism can scarcely be imagined without the genderaspect. Throughout the years a lot of time and effort has been put into discussing the influence of Orientalism on Western feminism. The latter has had to endure a lot of criticism with regards to its dealings with women from the Middle East. Whether discussing the saviour narrative, as has been extensively discussed by Bracke (2012) and Abu-Lughod (2002, 2013) or the neo-colonial undertone as this was addressed by Grande (2003), Amos & Parmar (1984) and McEwan (2001), the way in which Western feminism has
conducted itself towards women from the Middle East, both in the past and today, has often been problematic and orientalist in nature. This problematic relationship between Western feminism and women from the Middle East is certainly not simply a problem of the past. Today feminism is still often reprimanded for its incorrect intercourse with non-western women. Joan Wallach Scott even accuses feminism of having lost its self-critic qualities and that this lack of introspection has led to a lack of reform and reorientation within the feminist movement (2008). This problem is not something that only occurs within women- and gender studies, or that it only limits itself to academic circles. In the daily political and social debate orientalist elements are often to be found, particularly when the validity of the clash of civilizations thesis is discussed. Words like Muslim fundamentalism and Islamic terrorism are hot on everyone’s tongue today, the escalating war in Syria brings about many a debate on morality and the refugee crisis in Europe made many people consider the place of Muslims in a Western society. Media speculated on the compatibleness of Muslim refugees from the Middle East and the secular West. Bernard Lewis’ image of an extreme that wishes to restore “Muslim greatness” at any cost, is one that many consider a reality.

A first, essential question we must all ask ourselves if we wish to talk about the current conflicts and the integration of Muslims in Europe seems obvious: Is there really a clash of civilizations? Do people in the Middle East, or countries with a Muslim majority in general, look differently upon concepts like democracy, suffrage or religious leadership? Is the fight for gender equality something the West can claim a monopoly on, or is it a social battle that is fought everywhere in the world? Many criticisms have been formulated on the ideas of Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis. The conviction that the Islamic and Western world are polar opposites is so embedded into many people’s consciousness that political parties such as Vlaams Belang in Belgium or Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands are founded upon this belief. But is there any truth in it? And more importantly, is there any way to measure the truth of these claims?

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1 The works cited here are but randomly selected examples of authors who have criticised the orientalist aspect of Western feminism. A more exhaustive list of all works that concern themselves with this matter would be infinitely longer.
2.3 Testing the hypotheses

Although many articles have been published that debate the truth or illusion behind the theories on ‘clash of civilizations’ and ‘Muslim rage’, many of these are based on a more theoretical and philosophical level. Norris and Inglehart on the other hand, attempted in their article (2002) to test the claims of Bernard Lewis’ and Samuel Huntington’s claims by using quantitative research. It most certainly is not easy to put something as abstract as democratic values into numbers, but Norris and Inglehart seem to have succeeded in doing exactly this up to a certain point. Their quantitative research manages to distinguish itself from the many other papers written on the subject because of their rather positivist methodology.

Norris and Inglehart formulated several fundamental criticisms on the idea of a clash of civilizations, but in many ways also confirm it. Using the data they acquired via the World Values Survey they set out to measure whether there was really a clash of civilizations to be noticed when the data of the World Values Survey in the Islamic World were compared with this of the Western world. The World Values Survey questions people from different countries from all over the world on their opinion on concepts such as democracy and gender equality. This survey has data going back all the way to 1981, which even offers the opportunity to compare evolutions through time. It can be a very valuable source for anyone who would like to measure what many would consider immeasurable, namely social and political values. It is a source of considerable authority, as it is used by many official institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank. However, it must be remembered that the World Values Survey is but one source and that using data from a different source might have resulted in a different outcome.

The main conclusion of the research carried out by Norris and Inglehart denied that there is a foundation to any sort of claim of a clash of civilizations as far as democratic values are concerned. People in countries with a Muslim majority such as Turkey, Jordan and Egypt believed just as much in democratic values as their Western counterparts. However, this does not mean that their paper disproves the concept of a clash of civilizations entirely, on the contrary. The real clash between the Western and Islamic world is to be found in terms of gender equality and sexual freedom. This contains such issues as divorce, homosexuality, abortion and equality between men and women. This means that Norris and Inglehart do see a division between the West and the Islamic world, though they consider this divide to take place on the cultural front rather than on a political front. This disproved the theory of Samuel Huntington, as he saw the clash on a political level, but at the same time it confirms that there is a clash, it simply takes place on a different level. Norris and Inglehart concluded that: “any deep-seated cultural
divisions between Islam and the West will revolve far more strongly around social rather than political values, especially concerning the issues of sexual liberalization and gender equality” (Norris and Inglehart, 2002).

The cultural divide between two worlds is an image that can often be found in the media. It is one of the major stakes in the debate around integration and multiculturalism. Whether the topic of discussion is the headscarf, the burkini or the perceived danger in the number of young men amongst refugees, the underlying assumption is always the same: people from the Middle East have a fundamentally different outlook on gender equality and women’s rights and the cause for this difference is to be found in the Islamic religion. Women in Muslim countries are assumed to be weighed down by conservative gender norms and a repression that is inherent to the culture in which they live. But is this really the case? Is it fair to stat that the Islamic and Western world are two monolithic blocks opposing each other, with irreconcilable norms and values? Are women in the West better off than elsewhere? Is the Islamic culture and religion fundamentally repressive towards women?

2.4 Gender as the dividing line

Belgian politicians have often defined women’s rights as the ultimate difference between our own secular society and the values and habits of Muslims. There is considered to be a huge opposition between ‘our’ sexual freedom and ‘their’ sexual repression (Bhattacharyya, 2008 : 16). In this sense, many policy makers would see their own views confirmed in the study carried out by Norris and Inglehart. This becomes clear in the way problems related to gender are discussed in the media. Problems like sexual intimidation and sexual violence can no longer be discussed in themselves without Islam making an appearance into the discussion. Sexual intimidation and sexual violence is often named as a side effect of an imported culture where women are inferior. Muslim men are considered to be more prone to sexual violence because they have been raised to believe women are fundamentally inferior to men. There is a neo-colonial demonization of the ‘other’ in the context of an imagined global cultural conflict (Bhattacharyya, 2008 : 16). This manner of thinking is problematic, because it creates the illusion that sexual violence is the exclusive trademark of Muslim men. Even more, problematic behaviour is discussed as if this was never a problem when white, Western men did it. Jean-Marie Dedecker, former senator and founder of the political party LDD, claimed in an opinion piece that catcalling was never an issue before it
was also done by Muslim men. He even goes as far as to claim that women used to enjoy the experience, but that this has been ruined by the arrival of Muslim men into Belgian society. He writes:

“[I] am from a time where a healthy construction worker was allowed to think about sex every two minutes and where voluptuous women could happily parade past a construction site. This would at most elicit a whistling concert and tended to stroke the ego of the [women in question] as much as it made the testosterone of the men drop. (...) The denigrating hissing of immigrant macho’s, peacocks with a long tail and a short fuse, raised in the religious thought that the task of women is limited to being a factory for sons, has made the clock of tolerance turn backwards”² (Dedecker, 2014, November 16).

Dedecker denies that catcalling and sexual intimidation used to be a problem at all. He talks about the issue with a nostalgic yearning for times where it was still okay to whistle at women on the street. However, it is problematic to claim that this is no longer considered acceptable simply because of an influx of Muslim immigrants. Given the many campaigns attempting to raise awareness for the issue, it is to be doubted that women liked this sort of behaviour in the past. Several campaigns and projects have been started up to make people aware of the problem of catcalling and sexual intimidation in the street. An example of this is the project femme de la rue, where a student named Sofie Peeters filmed herself while walking through the streets of Brussels and compiled all the denigrating and intimidating comments that came her away into a video. The responses to her project proved that sexual intimidation is a problem and that women most certainly do not like to be whistled at in the street. It stands to reason that if women find this behaviour problematic now, they did not enjoy it a few decades ago either. Although it is possible that this is an issue that did not receive much attention until recently, this does not mean it was not experienced as a problem.

Dedecker considers the indignant responses of women to be the consequence of macho-behaviour shown by men with an immigration background. He considers them to show behaviour that is much more extreme than this of Western men which not only causes problems for women, but also takes away the

² I have translated this quote from Dutch to English. The original, Dutch quote is as follows: “[Ik] kom uit een tijd dat een gezonde bouwvakker om de twee minuten nog aan seks mocht denken en dat onze wulpspe deermen nog in minirok en decolleté met gerust gemoed voorbij een bouwwerk konden paraderen. Dat ontkokte hoogstens een sporadisch fluitconcert en streelde meestal even sterk het ego van de gelegenheidsmannequin als dat het de testosteronspiegel van de mannen deed dalen. (...) Het denigrerend gesis en straatgedrag van allochtone macho’s, pauwen met een grote staart en een korte lont, opgevoed in een religiebeseif dat de taak van een vrouw zich beperkt tot zoontjesfabriek, heeft de tolerantieklok doen terugdraaien.” (Dedecker, 2014)
pleasure of whistling to women from autochthonous (white) Belgian men. Dedecker is not alone in his opinion. After the video of *femme de la rue* came out, several people suggested the problem was not the sexual intimidation in itself but the problematic gender views that have been imported along with Muslim immigrants. Sofie Peeters, who made the documentary, fundamentally disagrees with this. She argues that the cause of the problem is to be sought after in the socio-economic sphere and warns us about the dangers of reducing sexual intimidation to a cultural problem (Peeters, 2012 July 31). Nonetheless, gender relations are still used as a way to separate the West of the Muslim world (Thobani, 2007 : 170).

The same debate erupted again after a mass sexual assault had been carried out by young males during the 2015 New Year’s Eve celebrations in Cologne. About 100 complaints had been made to the police concerning the events of that night, two thirds of which were linked to sexual assault, including two instances of rape. According to police and witnesses, the perpetrators were of north African and Arab appearance. The horrific events of that night appeared to confirm the widely spread notion that there is a clear line of division between the West and the Islamic world where the treatment of women and gender equality is concerned. In Belgium too, the issue was eagerly discussed. On January 8th 2016, an opinion piece was published written by Darya Safai, an Iranian born activist for women’s rights who has been known for her sharp criticism concerning Islam. The article eventually reached the top ten of most read articles of 2016 (Deradactie, 2016, December 31) and was eagerly commented on and shared on social media. In her opinion piece, Darya Safai discusses the Islamic culture and the inferior position women uphold in it. She writes: “Whether the perpetrators were refugees or immigrants of Arabic and north African descent, their barbaric behaviour finds its origins in the gender inequality of the Islamic culture. They are themselves the victim of a religious world view that considers women to be inferior beings”

(Safai, 2016, January 8).

The popularity of this opinion piece and the positive responses it received on social media indicate that Safai’s view is widely shared by many people, or that people at least fear there is a core of truth in her statement. Dedecker and Safai come from completely different backgrounds. Dedecker is a white, autochthonous Belgian male, while Safai is a woman who emigrated from Iran as a young woman and

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3 I have translated this quote from Dutch to English. The original quote is as follows: “*Of de daders nu vluchtelingen waren dan wel migranten van Arabische en Noord-Afrikaanse afkomst, hun barbaarse gedrag vindt zijn oorsprong in de genderapartheid van de islamitische cultuur. Zij zijn zelf het slachtoffer van een religieus wereldbeeld dat vrouwen beschouwt als minderwaardige wezens.*”
grew up in an Islamic environment. A secular belief system seems to be their only common denominator. Despite their differences, both agree that Muslim males show problematic behaviour and that this behaviour stems from the fundamentally misogynistic religion in which they grew up. Furthermore, the fact that Darya Safai is of Iranian descent gives the piece an authority it would not have had, had it been written by a Western woman. Because of Safai’s background, the criticism is considered to come ‘from within’. A few important remarks should be made about a statement like the one of Safai. First, Safai remarks that it doesn’t matter where the perpetrators originated from. According to her, there is one common denominator that is the cause of all their violent behaviour: Islam. By stating this, she erases all political, social and even cultural frames any person grows up in. It cannot be doubted that Iran, the country where Safai grew up, has several discriminating laws towards women. The main question is whether that situation can be contributed to that state’s religion or whether it originates somewhere else. Moreover, the situation of women differs from country to country, a difference which she erases. Secondly, the use of the word ‘barbaric’ is far from innocent. The word implies a culture of backwardness, one that has fallen behind on a linear model of development. Finally, Safai considers the perpetrators of sexual violence to be the victims of their own culture. In this way, she implies that their behaviour is due to the world view they grew up with, one that considers women to be inferior beings and is inherent to Islam. By stating this, the fault is shifted from the individual to the religion they grew up with, which allows the perpetrators to escape the responsibility for their actions.

To conclude, it would be fair to state that in Belgium, Islam is still considered as the ‘ultimate other’. Many would agree that there is a ‘clash of civilizations’ between the Western world and the Islamic world, a clash that has reached our country through Muslim immigrants. It is important to note however, that this clash is no longer perceived to be on a democratic line like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington posed, but rather along the lines of gender equality, like Norris and Inglehart concluded in their work. Islam is considered as a religion devoid of women’s rights, where women are severely repressed and sexual violence is condoned. Feminism, on the other hand, is thought to be a Western invention, unique to the Western way of living. The representation of Western women as emancipated and free, is closely connected to the representation of Muslim women as the ‘ultimate other’, passive victims of patriarchal oppression (Mohanty, 2006a : 415). In other words, Muslim women are considered to be trapped in a culture of maltreatment and abuse, which forms a stark contrast against the liberated women of the West. Because of this, Muslim women are perceived as groups that need to be educated in the ethos of Western feminism (Amos en Parmar, 1984 : 7; Abu-Lughod, 2013 : 8; Mahmood 2008 : 81). Without
adopting these Western values, they can never be free of oppression (Bracke, 2012 : 242). This means the idea of a clash of civilizations is still considered relevant today and gender and sexual politics have received a central place in this mindset, even more so since the war on terror (Butler, 2009 : 5; Mahmood, 2008 : 81; Cooke, 2002 : 486). But does this view hold any truth? Or does it tell us more about ourselves than it does about the condition of Muslim women?
3. Feminism and Islam

3.1 A contradiction in terms?

For many people, feminism and Islam are two different worlds that simply cannot be reconciled with one another. The concept of a feminist Muslim is still widely considered an oxymoron. Generally Muslim women are seen as either fanatics or freedom fighters with no middle ground between the two (Najmabadi, 2008 : 77). Countries with a Muslim majority are generally considered to be places void of women’s rights where any kind of political participation is beyond women’s grasp. There are certainly countries in the Global South with a Muslim majority where many of the women are in problematic situations, but too often people immediately assume a causal connection between the two. The general assumption appears to be that the cause of any gendered problem must be found in the religious sphere.

Every country is marked by its own unique and complex economic, social and political situation. Despite countries such as Indonesia or Jordan both having a Muslim majority, it would be absurd to compare the situations of both as somehow comparable simply because of this religious factor. Islam is not a place where someone can live or come from, although it is often represented as though it is. Countries with a Muslim majority are spoken of in such general terms, that they all seem the same. Lila Abu-Lughod named this phenomenon ‘Islamland’ in her 2013 book “Do Muslim women need saving?”. In this narrative Muslims are all grouped in one single homogenous cluster without anything to distinguish one from the other. Countries and regions are rarely specifically named because this is not deemed necessary, there seems to be a consensus that ‘IslamLand’, is the place where things are most wrong today (Abu-Lughod, 2013 : 68). The underlying thought is that women from countries that are largely Islamic suffer from enormous inequality and oppression because feminism and Islam are represented as two complete opposites. However, culture is neither static nor homogenous, it is constantly in flux and the experience varies greatly depending on where the individual is situated within a particular community (Volpp, 2000 : 110). According to many secular feminists, a true feminist can never be a Muslim because the latter is considered to be the cause of all the trouble that overcomes women. In other words: religion must be completely abandoned if the women in the Middle East ever hope to be as free as Western women (Lazreg, 1988 : 85). It seems to me that this Western, secular form is damaging in many ways. It makes feminism as a movement less inclusive, which makes it lose part of its credibility. By allowing feminism to become a movement that is only useful to a minority of women, it eventually fights one kind of
oppression by creating another. While Western, secular feminism fights certain manifestations of a patriarchal society, it also becomes an oppressive movement in itself by allowing neo-colonial tendencies into its ranks. It ignores the plurality of women’s identity and enforces a Eurocentric way of thinking onto Muslim women.

This Eurocentric way of thinking is certainly not new. The same way Western historians didn’t believe non-Western history could exist, there is a belief among Western, secular feminists that any feminism outside of the secular one cannot exist. This is what De Baets called ontological eurocentrism in his paper on the influence of eurocentrism in historiography (De Baets, 2007 : 4). Similarly, there is a belief that the only right form of feminism is a Western, secular one and another, Islamic feminism can’t possibly exist because of the contradiction in terms it is considered to entail (Ahmad, 2015 : 8). Therefor I contend that what De Baets described for historiography, is also true for mainstream, secular feminism. For many feminists, women’s rights can only stem from secular, cross-cultural and universal premises that would only be undermined by placing it into a specific religious context (Ahmad, 2015 : 8). In other words, ontological eurocentrism also exists among women’s rights activists. Despite this assumption, it has been proven many times over that Islam and feminism do not have to be irreconcilable. In recent years more and more research has been done on the subject and Islamic feminist groups are receiving more and more attention. It is an interesting subject that deserves more attention than it is currently getting, not only because it shatters the stereotype of the passive Muslim woman, but also because it offers an alternative to secular feminism, which is still largely considered as the only way to female empowerment.

Islamic feminism employs a variety of tactics which can offer an insight into the nature of Islamic feminism (Ahmad, 2015 : 1). One of these is the re-interpretation of holy sources. Verses from the Quran that ascertain women of their rights are rediscovered and emphasised, which allows women to use a source of authority to verify their claims. The engagement with theological issues and the reinterpretation of texts also puts women in a position of knowledge and gives them the opportunity to challenge the legitimacy of patriarchal politics (Ahmad, 2015 : 8). Iran especially has been famous for this kind of feminist action (Najmabadi, 2008 : 73). There have been strong responses towards this strategy from conservative, Islamic groups who regard the reinterpretation of holy texts with suspicion but the well-informed position of the women in question allows them the power to enter into a discussion and to change their society from within. A second strategy is the recovery and enforcement of undisputed rights that women can claim within the frame of Islam (Ahmad, 2015 : 6; Abu-Lughod, 2013 : 179; Najmabadi, 2008 : 76). An example of this is reclaiming ancient rights that allow women to inherit property. Through
this recovery women manage to enforce their rights through the existing legal frame, which allows them to operate within their own culture. In other words, they actively seek reformation within their own culture instead of importing another (Western) culture. These women acknowledge the problems in their own society and realise there is a need for change, but clearly do not feel Islam itself is responsible. On the contrary, by reinterpreting religious sources they are using their religion as an authority to validate their grievances.

This does not mean that secular feminism can’t have a place outside of the Western world, on the contrary. Many countries with a Muslim majority have a long history of female activism. Egypt for example, has often been a forerunner with regard to political reform and women's rights (Ahmad, 1992 : 127). Today Egypt is still the home of many prominent and sometimes controversial feminists such as Aliaa Elmahdy, who attained notoriety after posting nude pictures of herself on the internet by way of protest (El Said, 2015 : 128). Although Elmahdy identifies herself as an atheist and is a fervent critic of the religious practises in her home country, she demonstrates the capability of Muslim women to undertake action and take up the fight for their rights in any way they deem best. Elmahdy is an example of a woman who chose to do this from a secular perspective, while many other women may choose to do this from a religious frame. The important factor is to recognise Muslim women as active agents who can take charge over their own destiny. Even when taking no action, this still has to be considered as a conscious choice that has its motivations.

Women are rarely the passive victims of their own story but actively make decisions to better their circumstances. Some, like Elmahdy, do this from a secular perspective, others from a religious one. Even in what from a Western perspective is often seen as the homogenous ‘IslamLand’, every woman remains a layered individual who cannot be reduced to her religious identity. Just like women’s identity, the causes of oppression are multiple and hard to reduce to a single cause. By pointing out religion as the single culprit, other causes are swept under the rug, which impairs the layered nature of an identity but also obstructs the fight against many different forms of oppression.

**3.2 The importance of intersectionality**

Around a quarter of a century ago there was a rising awareness of this complicated interplay between the different identities of women. The inadequacy of the assumption that feminism in itself can be all-encompassing slowly came to the surface. It is for this reason that intersectionality was first theorised
(Rose, 2010 : 59). Today it is seen as an indispensable part of genderstudies. Intersectionality breaks away from the binary categories that used to be in place and assumes that different forms of oppression and dominance can influence any individual at the same time. It takes a step away from the thought that feminism in itself can be transferred to any woman regardless of who they are or where they come from and instead strives to acknowledge all the layers that make up an identity. Universal feminism assumes the existence of what Aitemad Muhanna called “common gender interests” (Muhanna, 2015 : 207). The concept of common gender interests assumes that the female half of the global population can be seen as a homogenous group, which certainly is not the case. There are always other distinctions based on race, class, religion, etc. This means that the identity of women is always plural and can’t possibly be reduced to simply gender in itself.

Ontological eurocentrism in the context of feminism, this means the assumption that any feminism outside of the secular one cannot exist, also forms an obstruction to the notion of ‘global sisterhood’, which entails a notion of feminism that includes all women around the world. Global sisterhood assumes a connection between women all over the world in their fight for equal rights. However, the reality is much more complicated than that and factors such as class, ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation also have to be taken into account. In other words, it is unrealistic to assume that all women around the world face the same forms of oppression and envision the same goals when fighting for equal rights. What was long named ‘mainstream feminism’ has mostly been based on the experiences of white, middle class women. This way women who do not belong to this category have systematically been excluded and have had trouble identifying with the movement. For example, Sandy Grande opened her paper on the difficult relationship between feminism and colonialism with the words: “I feel compelled to begin by stating that I am not a feminist, I am indigena” (Grande, 2003 : 329). Because of the difficult relationship between feminism and it’s complicity to colonialism she feels her identity of indigena cannot be reconciled with an identity of feminist. She feels compelled to denounce the dominance of what she calls “whitestream feminism” (Grande, 2003 : 330). This dominant position must be linked to the influence eurocentrism still has in the mainstream. The challenge for academics and activists is therefore to put not only gender but also other factors such as race and class into account and to remain aware of the past it carries with it (Rose, 2010 : 58).
3.3 Islam and feminism in Belgium

Belgium is the home of several associations and organisations that strive to better the lives of women and do this from an Islamic perspective or at least with respect for the diverse (and religious) background women can come from. They prove that Islam and feminism can go hand in hand. Although it is impossible to present an exhaustive list of all organisations concerning themselves with Muslim women in Belgium, I will discuss three who are each diverse in their approach but have their concern for Muslim women and support for Islamic feminism in common.

First of all, there is Baas Over Eigen Hoofd, usually abbreviated to BOEH. This organisation is aimed at Muslim women and was founded ten years ago after the ban on headscarf was introduced in Antwerp. They see the ban as an obstruction to the rights and freedom of women and are actively opposing the ban. BOEH consists of women with and without an immigration background and firmly declares itself to be a feminist organisation. They feel that the ban on the headscarf “forces women to deny their true self” (BOEH, 2010). Organisations such as BOEH question the general assumption that the headscarf is an instrument of oppression and firmly state that Muslim women are capable of making their own decision. This is supported by the fact that Muslim women themselves are the driving force behind the organisation. In this way BOEH directly challenges the image of the passive Muslim woman who is forced to wear a headscarf by her husband or father. Their well-thought out arguments and publications undermine the argument of a false consciousness, the argument that is often given to doubt the support of women to Islam. A false consciousness implies a lack of critical thinking, something that is hard to accuse BOEH of, given their active participation in the public debate and the way they challenge the headscarf ban.

Besides BOEH there is also VZW Ella, an organisation that focuses on girls and women with a migration background. Ella focuses on issues surrounding both gender and ethnicity, and places special emphasis on the importance of intersectionality. Ella firmly believes that emancipation within Islam is perfectly possible (Bendadi, 2008 : 211). However, there is a need to recognise that Muslim women are often caught between their loyalty for their own culture and wanting their will to fight against female unfriendly practises. This means that they are forced to achieve both internal emancipation within their own community and external emancipation vis a vis the autochthonous population of the country they live in (Coene & Longman, 2005b : 29). Ella places specific attention on the tension between these two forms
and believes strongly in the importance of intersectionality when dealing with issues regarding women with an immigration background.

Lastly there is the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association-Belgium (AWSA-Be). This organisation is directed specifically towards people in the Arab world and people of Arab descent in Belgium. Although it is an organisation founded to promote women’s rights, it is directed at both men and women (AWSA-Be, s.d.). They aim to ameliorate the position of Arab women both in Belgium and in the Arab world, help ridding the world of clichés surrounding Arab women and start a debate about gender related issues. AWSA-Be has made the conscious decision to be secular in nature because of the multiconfessional nature of the Arab world. However, the secular nature of AWSA-Be does not mean there is no place for Islamic feminism. They expressively state to defend Islamic feminism, but only on the condition that female unfriendly passages from the Quran can be rejected (Huygens, 2014 : 36).

### 3.4 No such thing as a European Islam?

Eurocentrism influences Western way of thinking in such a way that a simplistic dichotomy arises, embedded in the values of the Enlightenment, which are considered to be a crucial part of Western identity (Chowdry, 1995 : 29-30). Part of the project of Western modernity includes the assumption of a fundamental difference between the secular, rational self and a religious, irrational other (Bracke & Fadil, 2008 : 2). Those two can never be reconciled, which means that Belgian Muslims are doomed to forever be outsiders in their own country. After all, as long as they uphold their religious beliefs, they are thought to be an irrational other whose beliefs cannot be reconciled with the values of the Enlightenment. This has as consequence that a European Islam is considered to be an utter oxymoron that could never exist.

This view is shared by policy makers and the leaders of this country. In an interview with the newspaper De Standaard Pieter De Crem, state secretary of foreign trade, worded his concern about the incompatibleness of Islam with European values: “It still seems incredibly difficult to me to let Islam coincide with Western values such as equality between men and women, freedom of religion, etc. I don’t believe in a European Islam.”\(^4\) (De Standaard, 22/04/2017). De Crem, as many people before him,

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\(^4\) I have translated this quote from Dutch to English. The original is as follows: “Het lijkt me nog altijd enorm moeilijk om de islam te laten sporen met de westerse waarden zoals de gelijkheid van mannen en vrouwen, de vrijheid van godsdienst, enzovoort. Ik geloof niet in een Europese islam"
considers equality between men and women to be a singularly Western value, which can never be reconciled with the implied gender inequality that is considered to be inherent to Islam. The thought that there can be no modern values outside of European ones, carries traces of ontological eurocentrism. The religious, irrational other is thought of as having no values beyond a religious belief, which is put in sharp contrast with the Western achievements of the Enlightenment. The hegemonic Western vision on modernity is Eurocentric in nature because it is the ideology that shapes Western identity, the foundation of the narrative of Western exceptionality (Sayyid, 1997: 102).

The belief that gender equality is something that belongs singularly to the West is problematic because it makes feminism a movement that is Western in nature and thus always foreign to anyone outside of Western culture. By allowing feminism to become a foreign power in this way, this approach becomes almost reminiscent of colonial times. Islamic feminism challenges the view that values such as gender equality are exclusively Western. It demonstrates the need for a broader view on feminism and what it entails. The belief that Islam can’t be compatible with Western values and the fact that this view is shared by the high ranking policy makers shows how deep rooted the problem of eurocentrism is.
4. The effects of a linear timeline

4.1 Ethical eurocentrism

On the third level of Eurocentrism De Baets discovers what he calls ethical eurocentrism. It is the more classical form of Eurocentrism (De Baets, 2007 : 6) and one that is often heard in the discourse of Westerners speaking about Muslims. Ethical eurocentrism is marked by the Western concepts and criteria that are used to evaluate and stereotype non-Western cultures (De Baets, 2007 : 6). This ethical eurocentrism can be noticed in the often uttered phrase “Muslims still live in the Middle Ages”. This phrase is used to stereotype Muslims as primitive others who can be characterised by their real or alleged deficiencies. In the case of Islam, this deficiency (or one of their alleged deficiencies) is boiled down to a lack of women’s rights. Muslim women are thought to live in harsh conditions, suffering from brutal inequality and even abuse because of the religious context in which they live. The “Medieval practises” of Islam are considered to be a danger to the enlightened values of Western societies. Behind this way of thinking is the idea of a linear timeline, where some countries or cultures have moved along further on this timeline than others. Behind this rhetoric we can find the image of a society that is constantly modernizing towards one ultimate enlightened model. The historical evolution of religion, where religious practises become mainstream and then disappear again, the diverse evolution of different cultures and the ever changing social dynamics, are not acknowledged. The lack of attention to the complex change of cultures and practises becomes apparent when for example honour killings are discussed. The phenomenon of honour killings is complex and diverse and can be reduced back to several causes. Instead of looking deeper into these causes, the subject is usually discussed in terms of “deep-seated cultural beliefs” or “ancient codes from the desert” (Abu-Lughod, 2013 : 140). By simplifying this and other issues the cause of these very real problems is reduced to an entity that is easy to identify and discuss, which makes tackling these issues even harder.

The thought of some societies lagging behind on others is also a central element in the debate on whether or not feminism and Islam can be compatible. Feminism is considered not to have reached Islamic societies yet because they are behind on the Western world in this teleological process of improvement (Mahmood, 2008 : 108). The Western woman is considered to be the ultimate model of freedom and empowerment where all other women have to measure up to. When claiming that the Muslim world has not yet gone through the same trajectory as Western countries, they have a temporal distance from us
which they can only make up by attempting to imitate the Western way of living. In this equation the
Western world can be seen as the external standard, which is considered perfect (Lazreg, 1988 : 81). The
daily struggle for gender equality that still goes on in all European and North-American countries is an
uncomfortable truth that is easily forgotten. Theoretically speaking men and women are considered to be
equal in Western societies. That this ideal only rarely manifests itself, is conveniently forgotten.

4.2 The Dark Ages

The term ‘Middle Ages’ is one that is most often mentioned when the temporal disparity between the
Islamic and Western world is implied. This is by no means an innocent term. After all, the Middle Ages are
considered to be Dark Ages; a time of plague, inequality and deep religiousness. Historiographically
speaking the Middle Ages is a very Western term: it refers to the centuries of obscurity between the
ancient glory of the Antiquity and the rise of the Enlightenment. For the Arab World or the Far East, the
period between the 6th and 16th century were by no means ‘Dark Ages’. During this time, the Arab World
was the centre of trade thanks to the commerce in spices and luxury items. Culturally speaking there were
also interesting developments: many antique texts have been preserved thanks to the translation
movement. Arab scholars studied and copied texts from the Antiquity and translated them from Ancient
Greek and Latin to Arabic. The use of the term ‘Middle Ages’ in itself thus already betrays a Eurocentric
way of thinking. European history and development is used as a way to evaluate and measure the rest of
the world, a test which the Muslim world is thought to fail miserably. According to this reasoning, the
values of the Enlightenment that have lifted Europe from the Dark Ages still have to reach the Muslim
community.

The references to the so called Medieval practises of Muslims regarding women’s rights and the
separation of church and state are a side effect of a desperate clinging to a slowly decaying Eurocentric
world view (Fadil, 2011b : 11). By creating an imagery of Muslims as a group of people who are less
developed and who are centuries behind on Europeans, the growing realisation that Europe can no longer
be considered as the centre of the world can be quietened. This narrative is certainly marked by an ‘us
versus them’ way of thinking, where one is considered superior to the other. The European story is the
norm where all other societies are to be measured against, an example that all others will inevitably
follow. In the thought that Europe is an illustrative example that must be followed, a fragment of our
colonial heritage can be noticed.
If we were to trace European history and place it on a timeline next to the history of other regions, it would immediately become apparent that they are different in very elementary ways. For example, the ‘Dark Ages’ that marked the 5th to 15th century, are by no means considered Dark in the history of the Middle East. These differences make it unfair to compare one to the other. Furthermore the concept of using European history as a measurement ignores the many setbacks women’s rights have faced in Europe throughout time. It is untrue to claim that the Western world has started at zero and has since steadily climbed to a maximum, there have been many changes and fluctuations in the rights and freedom that women had. For example, many historians have argued that women enjoyed many more freedoms in the Middle Ages than they did in the subsequent years of the Early Modern Age. This brings us to an additional problem caused by this ethical eurocentrism: The obtained women’s rights and gender equality becomes accepted as self-evident. In a linear timeframe there is no returning to a previous stadium, it is only possible to move forward. Nonetheless, it is of the utmost importance to realise that all rights that have been acquired through the struggle of several feminist waves could easily be turned back. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that many Muslim women throughout the world are struggling with a wide variety of problems. Poverty or occupation for example are a reality for many Muslim women. However, the simplistic and incorrect assumption that an archaic culture is the root of all these problems does nothing more than further aggravate the situation since it allows the real causes of these problems to remain unexplored. By doing this, we create a sense of superiority which does not help solving the very real problems at hand. Instead, it allows us to treat Muslim women as backward creatures who are in need of further development.

4.3 Superior to others

The sense of being further ahead on a linear scale of development, automatically creates a sense of superiority. This becomes evident in the way Western society is represented and viewed in relation to

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5 In her 1974 article “Did women have a Renaissance?” Joan Kelly questioned the classic way history is periodised. She argued that women were confronted with more restrictive social expectations in the Renaissance which drastically restricted their liberties. In her later work she would further explore the implications of this statement. Her criticism of traditional male historiography sparked a debate amongst those active in gender studies and women’s history. Although there have been many who disagree with her, the 1974 article remains an often cited work today.
others. Gwendolyn Rutten, president of the liberal party Open Vld, which is currently part of the Belgian government, has stated she is convinced Western society is superior to all others. After publishing a new book in April 2017 called ‘Nieuwe Vrijheid’ (New Freedom), she was quoted in an interview to promote this book saying: “Our way of living is without a doubt superior to all others in the world. [...] Today there are people and political parties who feel we should keep the uniqueness and sensitivity of the most conservative Muslims into account. “It used to be like that here too”, they say. Used to be, yes. But not anymore”6 (Heylen, 2017, April 22).

In the interview she states that the conservative values of Muslims used to be mainstream in Belgium too, but that our society has moved beyond that now. This implies that, while we have moved ahead on the scale of development, Muslims have stayed behind or at least developed at a slower pace. In her statement, we can again find the ethical eurocentrism that often marks the way Western societies look at Muslims. There is a reductionist representation of the West as a space of ever-increasing possibilities (Mahmood, 2008 : 99). By considering any fight for equal rights between men and women to be finished, the Western world allows itself a feeling of being further advanced than any other part of the world. This means that any Muslim newcomer poses a danger to this advancement, as they are thought to import their own “culture from the Dark Ages” with them. According to this logic, this makes them into a threat to Western society and the achieved women’s rights but also an easy scapegoat when any gender related problems occur. Furthermore, Rutten names the Muslims in Belgian society as the ‘other’, who is behind on the times and whose views and wishes need to be discarded if we intend to retain our full freedom and superiority. It is important to note however, that Belgian Muslims have as much right to have input in the way our society is organised as other secular or Christian Belgians. By specifically naming Muslims as the ‘ultimate other’ who is a danger to our acquired freedoms, she is placing them outside of our community, and naming their input as a citizen as less worthy because they have views that differ from our own secular and Western views, which she considers to be superior.

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6 I have translated this quote from Dutch to English. The original quote was as follows: “Vandaag zijn er mensen en partijen die vinden dat we rekening moeten houden met de eigenheid en de gevoeligheden van de meest conservatieve moslims. “Het was hier vroeger ook zo”, hoor je dan. Vroeger, inderdaad. Nu niet meer.”
5. The exceptional West

5.1 The uncomfortable inheritance that is colonialism

The past leaves its marks, this is true for individuals but also for nations and societies. The recent European history is one of dominance. Our imperial past has caused Europeans to be used to seeing themselves as the centre of the world. This eurocentrism lives on to this day and is still mirrored in our society in many ways. The idea that Europe is exceptional and morally ahead of the world still lingers. Feminism has also lived through the days of colonialism and still carries the traces of this past in some ways. Of course, there are many different branches and approaches to feminism and many feminist individuals and groups who work hard to keep a distance from this past. Nonetheless, in the past feminism has often been an accomplice to colonialism. Belgium has a past of colonial feminism (Bracke & De Mul, 2009 : 70) and Belgian feminists have been guilty of going along with the colonial logic in hopes of seeing their own goals realised (Heyvaert, 2013 : 5). They cooperated with the mission of civilizing colonies, which was marked by racism and a feeling of Western superiority. Belgium is certainly not alone in this, in several other countries feminists went along with the colonial logic. This leaves an uncomfortable inheritance to Belgian and Western feminism that still has its influence today.

Unfortunately, this inheritance does belong completely in the past. Today there are still remnants of this mission of civilization to be found in mainstream feminism, not in the least where Muslim women are concerned. The general assumption is still that women from the Global South in general and Muslim women in particular are to be educated in the ethos of Western feminism (Abu-Lughod, 2013 : 7; Amos en Parmar, 1984 : 8; Mahmood, 2008 : 81). Without taking over this feminism they are considered to be doomed to a life of repression. This narrative of the Western saviour, that is often used when the fate of Muslim women is discussed, still carries a colonial undertone. The capacity to self-criticism remains an important part of feminism and it is of vital importance if feminism wishes to remain relevant. Unfortunately the capacity of introspection that was once so important to feminism has been weakened in more recent years (Scott, 2008 : 7). This is especially true for the complicity of feminism to colonialism and neo-colonial thoughts. Today non-European women still feel left out because of the lack of acknowledgement for the complicity of feminism in the colonial project (Grande, 2003 : 330). Nonetheless it is of the utmost importance that the current generation of feminists remains aware of this inheritance.
so the influence it still has can be discovered and dealt with. Unfortunately, this is not always the case right now.

For instance, the way women’s rights are used in the debate on multiculturalism is reminiscent of the way feminism was used in colonial times. Islam is still considered as ‘the other’ in the broader debate going on in society, thought of as being the opposite of everything Westerners stand for. The voice of Muslim women often remains unheard in this debate and it generally is not consulted or published when integration is discussed. In this context, feminism is thought of as the main thing that separates the Western world from the Islamic world. The ghost of a colonial past can easily be found, given the fact that claiming to save someone from one culture, implies saving them to another (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 14). In consequence, Muslim women are in need of saving, not because they are one of us, but so they can become one of us (Cooke, 2002: 468).

As has been noted in chapter 2, it is considered impossible to reconcile Islam with Western values. This means that it is necessary for them to give up part of their identity to be able to become a part of another identity. In this case this means they have to give up their religion if they wish to see themselves validated as a Belgian citizen. It is made impossible for them to combine both. This impossibility can be linked back to the still existing eurocentrism. Islam is still thought to be irreconcilable with Western values because they have not caught up yet, they are ‘stuck in the Dark Ages’. Because Western culture is thought to be so much more advanced, it is considered to be an example to be followed, or rather, that Muslim women must be made to follow, for their own good. In consequence Islamophobia remains a part of our daily life, but also of the political debate. It is a debate that is conducted over the heads of the ones concerned often without much knowledge or insight of the culture from which Muslim women are to be saved.

Nadia Fadil sees this Islamophobia as a fear for the loss of Europe’s dominant position, rather than a fear of Muslims themselves. The oil crisis of 1974 has shown us our dependency on the rest of the world (Fadil, 2011b: 9). Fadil sees the idea that Islam is a religion with values that are contradictory to the Western, Enlightened values as a way for the West keep reassuring itself that it can still serve as an example to the rest of the world both culturally and politically (Fadil, 2011b: 11). In this way the old, Eurocentric values remain uppermost in our consciousness.

In short, the Western world is viewed as exceptional in every way, a view that is reminiscent of the colonial mission to ‘civilize’ other cultures. Today, this manifests itself especially when it comes to women’s rights. Non-Western forms of women’s empowerment are viewed as neither relevant nor useful, which means Western culture has to come to the rescue of Muslim women. This way of looking at
Muslim women is a manifestation of utilitarian eurocentrism. De Baets describes how culture was seen as the exclusive result of Western genius and non-Western culture was seen as irrelevant (De Baets, 2007: 6). This is also the case the contributions of Muslim women to any sort of female empowerment. In contrast, Western, secular feminism is considered to be the ultimate saving grace for Muslim women. Western culture must be appropriated by them or they are doomed to live a life of repression.

On an academic level, there has been a lot of criticism on the lack of inclusiveness in white, secular feminism. The complicity of feminism to colonialism has been broadly discussed and dealt with. Furthermore, tools such as intersectionality have helped feminism to become relevant to all women. Unfortunately, this is not the case on a more social and political level. Generally, outside of academic circles, feminism is still largely considered a Western force. We have seen this in the way gender equality is discussed by policy makers and in the media. It seems to me that the main issue is situated with the simplistic and misinformed view of feminism and the lives of Muslim women that is still mainstream outside of academic circles. This can have far-reaching consequences as can be seen in for example the rhetoric used in the war on terror.

### 5.2 Western culture to the rescue

In a 2001 radio speech given in response to the war in Afghanistan, former first lady Laura Bush recounted the joy Afghan women showed during the American intervention. In this speech, she claimed that: “Afghan women know, through hard experience, what the rest of the world is discovering: The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists. (…) Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror (…) because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us”. (Bush, November 17).

The war on terror is legitimized by the logic that women must be liberated from a cruel fate, because if they are not, their fight might soon become ours. Liberating Afghan women became the moral goal of that war (Wylie, 2003: 217). The rhetoric used in the war on terror was orientalistic and colonial in nature: The West played the part of the civilized world, while opposite this are the barbarians of extremist groups. The imperial rhetoric placed values like democracy, freedom and women’s emancipation opposite a barbaric and backwards culture (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 7). There is no attention for political, economic or historical causes that have led to the conflict in Afghanistan, instead it is represented as a simple clash between two opposing cultures, where the equality between men and women is at stake. A military
intervention is no longer a political decision but becomes nothing less than the moral duty of anyone who is even a little bit concerned about the situation of Afghan women. Suddenly, saving repressed women from their own culture becomes the ultimate goal.

The war on terror marked the return of the civilizational binary that constructs the logic of empire (Cooke, 2002: 486). This Eurocentric and colonial approach puts feminism in a difficult position. It depicts feminism as a purely Western movement that has to be imposed on other cultures, giving it a neo-colonial undertone that makes feminism fundamentally unattractive to non-Western women. Furthermore, the thought that Belgian – or broader Western – society can serve as an example to other cultures is not only problematic for women from other cultures but also for Western women themselves. It undermines the many practical inequalities that still dominate our society. By posing Western women as the ultimate goal that Muslim women must strive to achieve, the many inequalities that still live in Western society today are covered up. It is implied that in our society perfect equality has already been achieved, which is far from true. Western women still face problems caused by inequality which are diverse and vary from unequal pay to the gender stereotypical expectations that are being placed upon children. The image of the free fought Western woman who enjoys absolute equality to her male counterparts, obscures the inequalities that still exist. It would be absurd to pose that Western women are completely free to choose whether they wish to conform to unrealistic beauty standards while it is impossible for Muslim women to choose to wear a headscarf. This marks the essential difference in our dealings with our own culture in comparison to how we deal with other cultures. When we encounter injustices towards women in our own culture, the causes of these injustices will be looked into with far more nuance than when it concerns non-Western women (Volpp, 2000: 90).

5.3 False consciousness

In the narrative of the Western saviour, there is one voice that remains remarkably absent: the one of Muslim women themselves. Only rarely do we open a dialogue with the women we intend to save with Western culture or secular feminism. When Muslim women do raise their voice to defend their own religious or cultural practises, they are often considered to be indoctrinated. Rather than questioning the reasoning behind the support of Muslim women for Islamic movements, it is usually attributed to a false consciousness. By doing this, Muslim women are denied their agency and it is implied they are incapable of thinking critically about their decisions. Mahmood formulated this phenomenon as follows: “(...) there
is failure to understand Muslim women’s support for Islamic movements as anything other than false consciousness that can be overcome only through a secular education” (2008, p 103).

The issue of agency – or rather the lack thereof – is very clearly marked in Belgium by the debate surrounding the headscarf. When this debate is carried out in the press or in the political sphere, the opinion of the women wearing the headscarf remains systemically ignored. Countless of opinion pieces have been published regarding the presence of the headscarf in the public sphere. Politicians, organisations of all kinds and (Western) feminists have all had their say, but the voice of Muslim women remains remarkably unheard. The headscarf is represented as a clash between the freedom of religion and women’s rights, a paradox in our Enlightenment that tell us to value both. A women wearing a headscarf, is not free but oppressed. That is the foundation from which most debates concerning the headscarf are carried out. In consequence, these women are in need of secular protection, need to be educated in secular and feminist values because they are incapable of protecting themselves from the archaic values of their fathers or husbands, but even more so from their own culture.

More recently, the debate about the veil was given new life when several French cities decided to ban the burkini from their beaches. This triggered several politicians in Belgium raising the question of whether or not a similar ban should be enforced on Belgian beaches. Again, it was considered unnecessary to look deeper into the varied motivations Muslim women have for wearing a headscarf or burkini. The burkini was considered to be a violation of Western values and for this reason, it was deemed necessary that it would be banned. Several people and organisations voiced their concern on the ban, and even filed a complaint with the Interfederal Centre for Equality7. However, several policy makers seemed adamant on banning the burkini from public places. Although some raised the concern of hygiene in swimming pools, many more considered the burkini to be an attack on Western values. Fons Duchateau, head of diversity for the city of Antwerp was quoted saying: “I can’t accept that women have to hide themselves under a burkini as inferior beings. The demand to abolish the ban [on burkini’s] is a downright attack on our norms and values”8 (Deredactie, 23/09/2015).

7 Interfederaal Gelijkekansencentrum

8 I have translated this quote from Dutch to English. The original is as follows: “Ik zal niet accepteren dat vrouwen zich als minderwaardige wezens moeten wegsteken onder een boerkin. De eis om het verbod af te schaffen, is een regelrechte aanval op onze waarden en normen”
For Duchateau, the burkini is by definition repressive towards women. An assertion like this raises the question: whose definition are we talking about? (Bracke, 2004 : 112). The headscarf – and by extension the burkini - remains a difficult issue, because it is a visual manifestation of the Islamic belief. The veil has been a Western, orientalist obsession since colonial times and has in more recent year become omnipresent again in the media, but also academic and political debates (Bracke & Fadil, 2012 : 50). Those who oppose the headscarf claim it to be an attack on Western values, which advocate equal rights between men and women. Some (Western) feminists agree that the veil is an attack on women’s rights and consider the headscarf to be tool of oppression. Bronwyn Winter is an example of this. She considers the very nature of the veil to be oppressive. She considers religion as a whole to be damaging to women, the same way that capitalism or male violence is. Winter poses that, just because religion is something that will not easily disappear from the world, this doesn’t mean we should not oppose it (Winter, 2001b : 57). However, it is necessary to question whether the headscarf is really the instrument that is used to oppress women. It is true that some women are pressured into wearing a veil but it is also true that many choose to wear it themselves. The veil can be a sign of inequality or sexual repression as well as a symbol of autonomy, individuality or identity. In other words, the veil in itself is not necessarily oppressive nor emancipatory, but rather the way it is enforced or forbidden (Majid, 1998 : 338). In this sense it would be fair to say that it is no better to forbid women to wear a veil than it is to force them to wear one. Both are a form of coercion and social control and are contrary to the principles of liberty and freedom of religion (Fadil, 2011a : 2).

It is vital that we trust women’s ability to make their own decisions and provide support when they are met with force or coercion of any kind. A ban on the headscarf or burkini is just as much of an obstruction towards women’s freedom as an enforcement to wear them. Unfortunately, it is considered impossible for women to voluntarily wear a headscarf. When they do, they are thought to be indoctrinated and seen as in need of saving. In other words, their agency is not acknowledged where the headscarf is concerned. Ingrid Verbanck, who is co-founder of a feminist forum called ‘Niet In Mijn Pretpark’⁹ and regularly writes for the magazine Knack, worded this issue perfectly in the aforementioned magazine:

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⁹ Niet In Mijn Pretpark is a feminist forum that was founded to raise modern feminist questions in Belgian society. This ranges from sexual violence to the issue of gender-typed toys.
“Women cannot choose for the burkini. If they do, they don’t know what’s good for them, or they do it because they are pressured by their husband or culture. We don’t even need to speak to them, we are smart and we know this.” (Knack, 01/10/2015)\(^\text{10}\).

\(^{10}\) I translated this quote from Dutch to English. This is the original, Dutch quote: “Vrouwen kunnen niet kiezen voor een boerkini. Dan weten ze niet wat goed voor hen is, of dan doen ze het zeker onder druk van hun man of hun cultuur. Wij hoeven zelfs niet met hen te spreken, wij zijn slim en wij weten dat.” (Verbanck, 2015).
6. Stories of pain and anguish

6.1 ‘Pulp nonfiction’

There are Muslim women who did feel repressed by their own culture and religion and who decided to cast off the culture of their forefathers and embrace the Western way of living wholeheartedly. Many women have done this quietly, for their own personal reasons. Others have felt so repressed by their religion they left that they deemed it necessary to not only inform others of the cruelty of Islam but also encourage Muslim women everywhere to follow their example. Various women have come forward claiming Muslim women are in need of Western culture and secular values to liberate them from their own repressive culture. This often concerns women who have emigrated to the West and have explicitly distanced themselves from the Islamic faith. Several of these women claim to have lived through horrific lives of violence, repression and sexual abuse and have collected their life story in widely read books. Dohra Ahmad has named these books ‘pulp nonfiction’ (Abu-Lughod, 2013 : 87). They generally describe the life of women who were abused by their husband or father, forced into marriages at a young age or were abused by an imam\(^\text{11}\). These books are marked by the graphic depiction of everything that happens in the story: The horrors that are suffered by the female lead are described in the smallest detail. Whether the story involves forced marriage or abuse, the maltreatment is usually at least partially sexual in nature and the perpetrator is always a Muslim man who was raised in a deeply patriarchal and Islamic culture.

The sales records of these ‘pulp nonfiction’ novels are impressive, the most popular ones have gone through endless numbers of reprints and have been translated into dozens of languages. Especially in the Western world, these novels are eagerly bought and widely read (Mahmood, 2008 : 85). The attraction of those books can be found in the double position the main characters have: they are both the insider and the victim of these stories. This creates the idea that the reader is getting a privileged insight into another world (Mahmood, 2008 : 84). Contrary to old colonial eye witnesses, these testimonies are written by the repressed women themselves, which gives them extra power and authority. In other words, the reader is not only given the impression they are learning something about another culture, but also that they are

\(^{11}\) These storylines can be found in the book ‘Married by force’, by Leila (no surname is given), ‘Shame’ by Jasvinder Sanghera and ‘The Imam’s Daughter’ by Hannah Shah respectively
receiving this information from a reliable source. After all, the writer of the books is (or used to be) a member of the culture that is described and who would know better? Unfortunately, ‘pulp nonfiction’ paints the image of a culture that is marked by violence, misogyny and sexual abuse which people are less likely to put into question because of the authorised source it comes from.

It is important to realise that these stories do not only take place in distant lands in the Middle East or Asia. Some of them take place in Western countries such as the United Kingdom or France and features lead characters that were born and raised in Western Europe. The source of their trouble stems from the archaic or barbaric culture their parents are still faithful to, despite them living in the Western world. In this way, readers are alerted to the alleged danger that stems from badly integrated immigrants whose ideas are still rooted in these barbaric cultures and who are creating islands of injustice where Western values have not been introduced. The women from the books always have to fight against “the weight of family tradition” and have to attempt to “regain liberty and dignity” (Leila, 2006: cover). Regardless of whether these stories take place in Western countries or other parts of the world, the one common force tying together all of these abuses and cruel traditions is Islam. Generally, there is not even a need to read the book to realise that Islam will be the antagonist of the story. The summary of the book ‘Disgraced’ by Saira Ahmed even announces it in the first sentence of the short content on the cover: “Brought up in a violent Muslim household, where family honour is all, Saira is watched 24 hours a day” (Ahmed, 2009: cover).

Given the huge sales records for ‘pulp nonfiction’¹², these stories will be a source of information on Islamic culture for many people. This means that for those people, everything (or at least a lot) of what they have learned about this ‘ultimate other’ will be testimonies of abuse, pain and anguish. This is what De Baets described as didactic eurocentrism (De Baets, 2007: 7). For historiography, didactic eurocentrism concerns the focus on the difficult and embarrassing parts of non-Western history that are filled with stories of hunger, poverty and injustice (De Baets, 2007: 7). Similarly, whenever stories of Islamic cultures make it into the mainstream, they are often painful stories such as the ones described in ‘pulp nonfiction’ books.

¹² All of the books mentioned have had several reprints. ‘Shame’ by Jasvinder Sanghera was in the top 10 bestselling books listed by The Times.
And yet, these stories are not invaluable, or at least they do not have to be. There is a definite possibility to use the popularity of the genre to raise awareness of the difficult situations some people are forced to live in and start a debate on how to make sure there is help available for victims of sexual or domestic abuse. Of course, the question remains if the genre would still be as popular if it didn’t centre around the Islamic ‘other’. Personally, I take issue with the almost voyeuristic nature of these books. The graphic imagery and the minute detail that is used to describe the abuses assures a feeling of cheap sensation at the expense of an entire religious group, rather than a sense of being made aware of a problem that needs addressing. Furthermore, by placing Islam in the forefront of all stories, it is implied that culture and religion are the only source of these problems. The abusive behaviour displayed by the antagonists of the stories are considered to be reflective of Islamic culture. If the main characters were white and Western their behaviour would be explained using other, non-cultural explanations rather than blaming an entire culture for the bad behaviour of a few people (Volpp, 2000: 89). This way, the image of a barbaric ‘other’ with moral values fundamentally different to ours is perpetuated.

6.2 The Insider

Unfortunately, there have not been that many movements attempting to counter the image portrayed in pulp non-fiction beyond academic publications or the odd opinion piece here and there. In the more mediatised responses, the opposite is true (Bracke, 2004: 117). There have been several women who have confirmed the image portrayed in pulp non-fiction to be true and corroborated it with their own life story. The most famous example of this is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somalian born woman who, after staying in Kenia, Ethiopia and the US eventually ended up in the Netherlands. Hirsi Ali is a very vocal opponent of Islam and believes it plays an essential role in the repression of Muslim women. Although she states that she does not oppose religion in itself, she does name Islam as a religion where the dignity of women is not respected (Huygens, 2013: 31). She believes that Western civilization is not only a pioneer regarding women’s rights, but even has a monopoly on feminism. Her beliefs in the values of the Enlightenment are so strong that Halleh Ghorashi – an Iranian born anthropologist – called her a fundamentalist of the Enlightenment (Bracke, 2004: 118).

The view advocated by Hirsi Ali has been opposed by several Muslim women and feminist organisations (Bracke, 2004: 118). Nonetheless, she represents her version of Islam as ‘authentic’ because she was born and raised in an Islamic framework herself. Muslim women who think differently are accused of
having a ‘false consciousness’. Furthermore, it must be noted that the view of Hirsi Ali does not take place in a political vacuum. She aligns her view with the rhetoric on emancipation and the cultural dominance about immigrants (Bracke, 2004 : 118) and eagerly mingles into the political debate. For example, while she has been a fervent critic of the extreme right party Vlaams Belang, she has also defended president Donald Trump’s travel ban for Muslims. The same happens the other way around. The story of Hirsi Ali has been used to justify anti-Islamic sentiments or in the debate about the veil. Hirsi Ali is not the only author who has moved into more political spheres because of her anti-Islam stance. Authors of the ‘pulp nonfiction’ genre have been handsomely rewarded by conservative political parties and think tanks internationally and some, like Hirsi Ali, have been catapulted into positions of political power because of their polemic on Islam (Mahmood, 2008 : 83). This means that the influence of didactic eurocentrism must be considered in any debate on integration or multiculturalism. I do not wish to devalue the input of people like Hirsi Ali but do feel compelled to point out that their testimonies are but one side of a complex and intricate bigger picture. It is not problematic to use them to inform ourselves, but it is problematic to use only them. Unfortunately, right now this is too often the case, which means that the stories and testimonies we use to inform ourselves about the ‘other’ are one-sided, even Eurocentric in nature and do not reflect truthfully the culture or religion we wish to discuss.
7. Conclusion

The view of Islam as the ‘ultimate other’ is not new, on the contrary. It is rooted in centuries of history that is marked by colonisation and orientalism, a history that influences us to this day to a degree most are unaware of. European history and development has been named exceptional, with the Enlightenment as a clear manifestation of our supposed superiority. This eurocentrism has had a profound influence on our view on Muslim women in many different ways. On an ontological level, Islamic feminism is thought to be inexistent because of the contradiction in terms it is thought to entail. There is a deep-seated belief that Islam and feminism cannot be reconciled. This allows us to see feminism as a Western invention that is not only unique to Western culture, but also impossible to reconcile with any non-Western way of living or thinking. This way of thinking puts feminism in a neo-colonial role, as it becomes the tool that is used to enforce Western culture on Muslim women.

On an ethical level, Western society is thought to be more advanced, ahead on a scale of linear development. This can be seen in the rhetoric where Muslims are thought to be “stuck in the Dark Ages”. The implications of this much used phrase is not only problematic historically, but also betrays a sense of superiority. It allows us to view feminism as something that Islamic societies are yet to encounter as they move along the linear timeline. In consequence, the Western world is viewed as exceptional in every way, a view that is reminiscent of the colonial mission to ‘civilize’ other cultures. Non-Western forms of women’s empowerment is viewed as neither relevant nor useful, which means that Western culture has to come to the rescue of Muslim women. This utilitarian eurocentrism neglects the agency of Muslim women as it brushes off any defence of Muslim women for their own culture and religion as a false consciousness, one that can only be remedied by an education in Western, secular feminism. This allows us again to view Western society as superior to others and elicit a sense that Muslims must be ‘civilized’. Lastly, when there is an effort to hear testimonies of Muslim women, this seems to be limited only to stories that involve severe misery and abuse. This didactic eurocentrism is stimulated by the success of pulp non-fiction and only stimulates the conviction that Muslim women must be saved by a superior, Western culture. These different levels of eurocentrism all influence the view and narrative on Muslim women in their own way and impacts the way we think about ourselves in relation to the Islamic world and our attitude towards Muslims or Muslim newcomers in our own society. Newcomers are forced to either abandon their own culture completely and conform, or to remain an outsider forever.
Feminism takes a double role in this story. In my view, it is as much part of the problem as it is the key to the solution. Today, feminism is still, either explicitly or implicitly, seen as something the Western world has a monopoly on. The consequences of this view are severe. It allows feminism to take on a neo-colonial undertone and allows feminism to be appropriated to other ends. Too often feminism is used by politicians and policy makers as a way to validate their assertion that Islam is an ‘ultimate other’ that needs to be made to conform. The question remains however, whether this should be blamed on feminism in itself or rather the people who are using it to such ends. Again, the answer can be both. Feminism has a long tradition of being ‘whitestream’ and a history of complicity with colonialism that cannot be denied. And yet, this does not mean that feminism in itself has to be limited to its colonial or whitestream forms. Thanks to the development of tools like intersectionality or transversal politics, it can remain aware of its limitations but at the same time grow into a movement that can be relevant to women regardless of their background.

In this sense, feminism can be vital in the fight against lingering eurocentrism in our society. As Joan Scott noted, there has been a long history of introspection in feminism which has allowed it to grow into a movement that can be useful to all women, not just Western ones. I have realised however, that with regards to Muslim women this introspection has weakened somewhat. Women’s rights have been appropriated for dubious goals without receiving much protest beyond the academic level. Nonetheless, if feminism can recover this sense of self-criticism and uses the tools at its disposal, not in the least the awareness of intersectionality, it can become a vital part in the fight against the Eurocentric worldview that still dominates. An inclusive and self-critical feminism could actively fight the abuse of women’s rights and shift the focus to the many different forms of oppression women face, this includes the difficulties that Muslim women face as a consequence of the dominance of eurocentrism.
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