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SECULARISM, FEMINISM AND RACE IN REPRESENTATIONS OF AUSTRALIANNESSE

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Abstract

In 2005 and 2006 members of the John Howard led Coalition Government, including the Prime Minister and Federal Treasurer Peter Costello, questioned whether Muslim dress, such as the hijab, conformed with 'mainstream' Australian standards of secularism and gender equality. In doing so, Howard and Costello used a feminist-sounding language to critique aspects of Islam for purportedly restricting the freedom and autonomy of Muslim women. I argue that race is implicated in the construction of Islam as a "threat" to secularism and gender equality because an unnamed assumption of the Australian 'mainstream' as Anglo-Celtic and white informs the standards of normalcy the Government invokes and constructs Islam as a 'foreign' religion. Further, whilst the demand for Muslim women to conform with 'mainstream' norms potentially contradicts the Government's commitment to women's autonomy, such a contradiction is not peculiar to the Howard Government. Using the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Stewart Mocha, I place the 'hijab debates' within the tension in liberal democracies between fostering autonomy and requiring a universal civil law to guarantee (but exist above) individual autonomy.

Introduction

This essay examines the attachment of secularism and gender equality to Australianness in speeches by members of the John Howard led Coalition Government and how this attachment is reliant upon a racialised ideal of Anglo-centric mainstream values as the norm through which difference can be evaluated. The links between secularism, gender equality and race are reflective of a particular relationship between 'Australian women' and 'political power' that is achieved through the use of certain images or representations of femininity in various political ways. This is evidenced in the intersections between feminist rhetoric and mainstream political debates about representations of a perceived gender inequality in Islamic practices, such as the wearing of headscarves or the hijab by Muslim women. In 2006 there was widespread media coverage of Prime Minister John Howard's comments that "there is within some

sections of the Islamic community an attitude towards women which is out of line with mainstream Australian society” (AAP 2006a). The positioning of gender equality as the basis for which “mainstream Australian society” can be differentiated from “sections of the Islamic community” is implicated in the wider political context of the ‘war on terror’ and how this war works to conflate Islam with terrorism. An ideal of gender equality as inherent to Australian society reproduces liberal freedoms as fundamentally ‘Western’ and ‘democratic’ in opposition to ‘Islamic’ terrorism (Imtoul 2004, 2005; Kampmark 2003; Lambert 2007). The following will interrogate the kinds of gender equality used in invocations of national identity by the Prime Minister and others in relation to their deployment of a mainstream feminist discourse. It is argued that a ‘mainstream’ consensus of gender equality in Australian culture is assigned a corresponding ‘feminist’ consensus. The consolidation of this mainstream feminist discourse obscures the complexities in locating secular Australia as the only site through which emancipation from deterministic religious beliefs and discriminatory gender practices can take place.

The first section of the essay considers the relation of the ‘war on terror’ to the emergence of a mainstream political discourse of feminist rhetoric in the Republican George W. Bush Administration of the United States (Ferguson 2005). It then evaluates the influence of this rhetoric on the Australian Howard Government’s aligning of gender inequality with ‘Islamic’ practices and beliefs considered ‘other’ to Australian values. This ‘othering’ is achieved by a conflation of what Howard refers to as “extreme Islam” with terrorism (Shanahan 2006) so that Islam itself is positioned as morally problematic in relation to Australian culture. The positioning of Islam as problematic turns on a moral differentiation from Australianness based on women’s rights and a perceived gender inequality within Islam. I argue that race is implicated in the construction of Islam as morally ‘different’ because an unnamed assumption of the Australian ‘mainstream’ as Anglo-Celtic and white informs terms through which ‘secularism’ is invoked by the Howard Government (see Randell-Moon 2006a). By ‘Anglo-Celtic’ and ‘white’ I mean the ways in which ‘Australian cultural representations’ are founded on and through an “Australian Anglocentric whiteness” which is “a product of modernity and colonisation ... predicated on racial difference and domination” (Moreton-Robinson 2004:87). Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that such representations gain a status of normalcy because they “are presented and taught as

though they do not have” a “connection to whiteness” (87). In this way, racial difference is commonly attributed to non-white political subjects leaving the subject position of whiteness and white Australianness racially unmarked and thereby reproduced as “normal” (Dyer 1997: 2; Frankenberg 1993: 192; Moreton-Robinson 2004: 82; Perera 2005; Pugliese 2006).

This essay argues that the framing of Islam as religiously different to mainstream Australian culture by the Howard Government is underpinned by a racialisation of Islam in opposition to “the normative white corpus of the ... nation” (Pugliese 2006: para. 21) that fosters gender equality and women’s rights. I use Michael L. Ferguson’s feminist theoretical approach to draw out the religious and racialised frames through which mainstream political debates concerning Muslim dress construct women’s rights in a particular way in relation to Australianness and national identity. Ferguson argues that accounting for the associations of feminist language with conservative political rhetoric must go beyond determining its authenticity as either pro-feminist or anti-feminist. She employs a methodology to critically evaluate instead the specific discursive “frames” through which feminism is understood and deployed at particular political and historical moments (2005: 13). Through the identification of what I term ‘feminised mainstream values’, I show how a combination ‘feminist’ rhetoric and ‘mainstream’ Australian values is used by the Howard Government to frame gender equality as an Australian norm against which other cultural and religious practices are measured.

This will be linked to Stewart Motha’s critical insights on feminism and secularism as both tied to an emancipatory politics which seeks to protect an individual’s autonomy from heteronomy (rules and regulations derived from external religious or cultural formations) (2007: 155). He argues that mainstream political debates on Muslim dress centre on “a *civil war of heteronomies*” around the legitimacy of religious beliefs to “contravene” the “civil law” of secularism (155). I transpose Motha’s insights to an Australian context in order to demonstrate how a mainstream Australianness that is distinguished from a particular kind of Islam on the basis of gender equality disavows its own heteronomy. That is, by presupposing the agency of Australian women inheres in the state, the political imperatives to a certain mode of behaviour (such as abandoning Muslim dress for ‘secular’ norms) can be obscured. The essay concludes by considering how the rhetorical currency of associating gender equality with secularism as a

dominant feature of mainstream Australian cultural and political spaces is predicated on the re-framing of the heteronomous aspects of Australianness as democratic and progressive. For example, the idea espoused by Federal Treasurer Peter Costello that Australia's Christian heritage is able to foster secularity. The use of secularism as an unproblematic norm, in conjunction with gender equality as a political and cultural norm, make invisible the racialised frames through which dominant discourses of national identity can be embodied in relation to women.

Feminism, Religion and the 'War on Terror'

Representations of the 'war on terror' in mainstream news media and political commentary have emphasised supposed distinctions between 'Western' traditions of democracy and 'fundamentalist' notions of Islam (Chambers 2006; Farid 2006; Imtoul 2004; Lambert 2007). These differences when applied to issues of gender equality focus on Islamic practices that are said to restrict the freedom of Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002; Eisenstein 2002; Kampmark 2003; Motha 2007). This has contributed to the formation of a specific kind of feminist rhetoric adopted by political commentators and politicians that focuses on the social importance of gender equality (Ferguson 2005). However, this rhetoric neglects other aspects of feminist theory that critically interrogate the social construction of gender norms as concomitant with social, economic, and political forms of gender inequality. Furthermore, an equation between gender equality and democracy in opposition to a generalised Islam assumes feminist ideas and language are only accessible from a Western perspective and that such discourses are not utilised by Muslim women themselves (Abu-Lughod 2001; Abu-Lughod 2002; Mohanty 1991).

The use of feminism and feminist rhetoric by administrations with a neo-conservative political orientation, as in the United States with the Bush Administration and in Australia with the Howard Government, to present aspects of the 'war on terror' as culturally meaningful points to a shifting discursive formation and understanding of feminism. In an essay called "'W' stands for women: Feminism and Security Rhetoric in the Post-9/11 Bush Administration", Michael L. Ferguson identifies the use of a "feminized security rhetoric" in key speeches made by the Bush Administration about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. She argues the adoption of such rhetoric by the Bush

Administration can be viewed as “a particular kind of response to the growing influence of feminist ideas about security” (2005:13). That is:

insofar as women’s rights are seen as instrumental to national security, they have a kind of centrality and rhetorical purchase in the war on terror that they have not had in the past – especially with a conservative administration (33).

One of the examples Ferguson uses to illustrate this point is the radio presidential address delivered by the president’s wife, Laura Bush, in November 2001 prior to the United States’ military intervention into Afghanistan. Positioning the Taliban regime’s proscription of education and other civil rights for women in opposition to gender equality in the United States, Bush argued

The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women... We respect our mothers, our sisters and daughters. Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity (2001 cited in Ferguson 2005:22)

In Bush’s speech a “feminized security rhetoric” is deployed which combines a discourse of chivalrous respect for women with democratic reform as enabling this respect (Ferguson 2005:19). Although the use of the words ‘rights’ and ‘dignity’ have traces of feminist notions of autonomy and physical freedom from (patriarchal) ‘brutality’, these notions are imputed a moral and universal character by the repetition of ‘we’ and ‘our’ that separates countries who exercise this “respect” (such as the United States) from terrorists. By extracting from feminism a moral and value based idea of gender equality, rather than a political or historical one, the contextual and institutional functioning of gender inequality is diminished. The discursive effects of this rhetoric then “both position Americans as superior to some particular others in terms of their treatment of women” and “motivate and justify intervention in other countries in the name of women’s rights” (19). Further, Ferguson suggests that the strategic advantage for the Bush Administration in having Laura Bush deliver this address functioned to present women’s rights and gender equality “as an achievement that had successfully occurred in the past” (20). Situating feminist struggles for equality as having already transpired works to nullify internal feminist criticality by projecting it onto the opposition between democratic values and terrorism.

From this vantage point, Ferguson theorises “feminized security rhetoric” based on a rhetorical and representational model of framing.

Frames are conceptual structures that enable us to make sense of information by selectively presenting it from a particular viewpoint” and

“rhetorical frames are introduced into an existing discursive context in which other frames are already operative (13-14).

This allows an analysis of the politicised uses of feminism to account for the historical and cultural contingencies which produce feminist ideas and rhetoric in particular political and historical contexts. Such an analysis would not suggest that criticisms of the human rights abuses perpetrated by Taliban and terrorism should not take place. Ferguson’s point is that an important feature of “feminized security rhetoric” is the way the universalisation of women’s rights and gender equality seeks to constrain oppositional responses to the “we” and ‘our’ ‘respect’ by framing any divergence from Bush’s views as the ‘them’/terrorists who do not value gender equality. Motha observes, “the unfolding of the emancipatory politics of the claim to autonomy of women, in its universalization as an absolute, becomes an unconditional demand that sweeps away any claim that does not fit with the ideal” (2007:146). The subjective investments in this universal emancipatory politics tied to ‘respect’ and nation work to constrain critical feminist or otherwise interrogations of both government policies and global political environments that marginalise women and children (Eisenstein 2002). Zillah Eisenstein uses the term “sexual terrorism” for example to refer to how “September 11 must also be viewed in relation to the way that male patriarchal privilege orchestrates its hierarchical system of domination” (2002:81). An “oppositional stance” based on a geo-political differentiation of the “West” from the “East” obscures how “neither side embraces women’s full economic and political equality or sexual freedom” (ibid: 80).

The universalisation of women’s emancipation from a gendered and religious dominance through concepts such as autonomy and respect function to reproduce gender equality as intrinsically connected to liberal democracy. Religious dominance (as that which is practised by the Taliban) is also projected outside of liberal democracy by virtue of secularism’s protection of religious plurality and freedom (this will be discussed in more detail below). Because a moral and cultural superiority is ascribed to Western democracies on the basis of women’s rights as fully realised, the negation of women’s rights is presented as only occurring outside of Western democracies. Both of these moves require the protection and governance of women’s rights as ‘vulnerable’ to justify and maintain contemporary democratic power structures. The reproduction of a security ethics based on “feminized security rhetoric” then has implications for the ways

feminist criticisms can contest domestic and national claims that gender equality is realised and I will return to this point later.

Feminised mainstream values

Ferguson's identification of a "feminized security rhetoric" in associations of women's rights and the "war on terror" can be found, though with some variation, within similar language utilised by the Howard Government. In this localised version of 'feminized security rhetoric' there is less emphasis on democratic peace and reform to substantiate military interventions as a direct foreign policy initiative (due to Australia's limited military capacity). At the same time, given the Howard Government's geo-political alignment with United States' security project (Lee Koo 2005), there is an emphasis on the strength of domestic democratic values such as gender equality to counter potentially non-democratic values found in terrorism and extended to Islam.

This rhetorical strategy involves a repudiation of contemporary feminist political activity by locating feminist achievements in the past, as exemplified by Howard's comments that "we are in the post-feminist stage of the debate" meaning "the feminist battle has been won" (cited in Summers 2003:21). A 'post-feminist achievement' is then equated with the full realisation of gender equality as a norm in Australian society. This norm can then be compared to aspects of Islamic practice thought to lack gender equality. During 2006 Howard was reported in newspapers as saying, "there is within some sections of the Islamic community an attitude towards women which is out of line with mainstream Australian society" (AAP 2006a). Similarly, in a 2006 speech given to the Sydney Institute, Federal Treasurer Peter Costello argued that:

terrorists and those who support them do not acknowledge the rights and liberties of others" in contradistinction to the liberties and freedoms found in Australia where "importantly women have a high measure of personal freedom (Costello 2006a).

Although personal freedom is cited as a general liberty available to all Australians, the particularity of this freedom with respect to women implicates an Otherised culture that does not accord women personal freedom.

The positioning of Islam as this Otherised culture is supported by a generalised connection between Islam and terrorism. In an interview for *The Australian* newspaper on the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks Howard stated,

“people in Australia are in no doubt that extreme Islam is responsible for terrorism” (Shanahan 2006). Both Costello’s and Howard’s comments position a generalised Islam and terrorism as diminishing civil liberties in comparison to the values of mainstream Australian culture which foster gender equality as a ‘feminised mainstream value’. Like Bush’s ‘feminized security rhetoric’, mainstream Australian values are made commensurate with the privileging of women’s rights. This rhetoric also stages a contradictory dismantling of female autonomy in the requirement for these rights to be protected from incursions of religious inequality. The use of the pronoun “we” in Howard’s comments about post-feminism is aligned with the ‘mainstream’ acceptance of gender equality in the second comment about Islam. Similarly Costello’s explicit identification of “personal freedom” for women (where the other liberties remain ostensibly gender-less) again suggests a moral and cultural superiority to Australia’s gender equality lacking in “some sections of the Islamic community”, “extreme Islam” and terrorism.

Whilst the significance accorded to gender equality in the above remarks corresponds with some aspects of feminist ideas, they also imply such an equality is unproblematically valued and practiced within mainstream Australian culture. The privileging of gender equality can be contrasted with Howard’s description of Liberal Party policies for women as reflecting “the police officer and the part-time sales assistant” (Howard 2005) model of the working family. This potentially limits the choices of women by framing them within a conservative ideal of familial roles that genders a full-time occupation as an androcentric, indispensable civil role, and part-time employment as somewhat superfluous to the principle ‘carer’ role in the family. Thus the rhetoric of ‘feminised mainstream values’ under the Howard Government highlights women’s rights as a cultural norm even as this normalcy is undone by the exceptionalism accorded to gender equality in the deterministic rhetoric and discriminatory policy cited above.

The Howard Government’s appropriation of feminist rhetoric then becomes ‘feminist’ when it is attached to a specific (secular) emancipatory project that makes gender equality visible in ways that do not undermine normative representations of Australian culture. It is important to mark the anti-feminist aspects of the Government’s policies and rhetoric. But it also important to resist examining the Howard Government’s

‘feminised mainstream values’ as a kind of ‘pseudo-feminism’ in order to avoid reproducing feminism as a ‘pure’ form of political critique detached from the social and cultural norms that make up dominant discourses of Australianness. Ferguson notes that a significant part of feminism involves appealing to a rights based discourse of freedom and equality in order to align feminist language with dominant media, legal and political discourses (2005:9). For this reason, Ferguson’s analysis could be taken further to consider how the rhetorical frames that produce feminism in representations of the ‘war on terror’ are not just reflective of security policy priorities and the influence of feminism in mainstream politics. These frames are also supported by already existing discourses of race and religion that constitute the dominant culture from which ‘feminist’ rhetoric is invoked. The remainder of the essay examines how the framing of both terrorism and Islam as lacking gender equality is also framed as a lack of Australianness, reproduced in dominant discourses of mainstream Australian culture as implicitly Anglo-Celtic and white, and evidenced in political debates about Muslim dress.

Religious Dress and ‘Mainstream’ Australia

The framing of Muslim dress through feminised mainstream values attempts to conflate racial difference with religious difference and is supported by the deployment of secularism as an intrinsic feature of democratic progression (which will be discussed in the next section). Fatheena Murbarak writes that:

if racial discrimination against many Muslim males is bad, then the prejudice experienced by many Muslim women is worse, as their physical appearance gives them away directly as Muslims or as a group ‘different’ from other Australian ethnic groups (1996:124).

Within a normative framing of Australian culture as ‘secular’, this ‘difference’ symbolises excessive religiosity and is portrayed as an impediment to integration into mainstream Australia. For example, Howard has argued that “remarks about jihad” and oppressive attitudes towards women held by Muslims are “not a problem that we have ever faced with other immigrant communities who become easily absorbed by the mainstream” (AAP 2006a). Elsewhere in interviews with *Sky News* and radio talkback host John Laws in February 2006, Howard made a series of comments about the “confronting” wearing of the burqa by Muslim women. He went on to say, “in expressing that view I believe I am expressing the views of most Australians and indeed of [a] lot of Islamic women” (AAP 2006c) and “that is not meant disrespectfully to

Muslims because most Muslim women, a great majority of them in Australia, don't even wear headscarfs and very few of them wear the full garb" (AAP 2006b). These comments followed earlier proposals made by Liberal MPs Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Mirabella to prohibit Muslim headscarves in public schools (AAP 2005) along the same logic of an implicit incompatibility of Islamic dress with 'Australian' culture.

These statements about Muslim dress being 'confronting' for a 'mainstream' that is ostensibly neutral and apolitical, masks the existing geo-political and racialised frames of the 'war on terror' and representations of 'extreme Islam' through which questions of 'absorption' for particular groups can be expressed. What is unnamed here is the centrality of an Anglo-centric and white understanding of the discourses that constitute 'mainstream' Australia. As Ghassan Hage points out, the cultural norms of Australianness are produced within and through institutional power structures that are "essentially Anglo-White" and performed by people in power who are "largely Anglo-White" (1998:190). On the other hand, these norms and their embodiment by a majority of Anglo-Celtic Australians are often presented "as though they do not have" a "connection to whiteness" (Moreton-Robinson 2004:87). Racialised frames of reference to the Australian mainstream as Anglo-centric and white are fundamentally implicated in the ways Islam is differentiated from this mainstream. Although Howard's comments were framed in a way that presented mainstream Australian values as consistent with the rights of Muslim women, it is Islam and Muslim women that are singled out of a neutral Australianness. The construction of a unified 'we' connected to the Government's invocation of the mainstream does not need to be specified as such because "nationalism works to cement certain characteristics as natural and self-evident" (Kelly 2006:464). That this racialisation is unnamed further reifies the normative power of whiteness and Australian national identity as the centre through which normalcy is established and understood.

The invocation of the subject position 'Muslim woman' by Howard and others whilst attempting to refer self-evidently to a woman whose practice of Islam may manifest itself in the wearing of a headscarf or burqa is supported by the essentialisation of Islam as a uniquely gendered religion through Muslim dress. This essentialisation reproduces religious veiling as external to Australian culture, and alongside the geo-political frames of the 'war on terror', contributes to a characterisation of Islam as a 'foreign' religion

(Joshi 2006:219). The occurrence of religious veiling in some denominations of Judaism and Christianity does not draw the same degree of criticism due to the latter's religious association with Australian values (expanded on below). When Howard had an audience with Pope John Paul II in Rome in 2002, his wife Janette was required to wear a head covering in the Pope's presence, which derives from a reference in the New Testament to women being veiled during church services. By contrast, the hijab functions to racially denote moral difference through the designation of particular kinds of religious beliefs and practices as outside the Anglo-centric norms of mainstream culture. That is, comments about Muslim dress as "different" are demonstrative of an "ideology that assumes an essential difference between ... Muslim Australians" and "other Australian citizens" which "frames such a difference as a distance from and a lack of Australian whiteness" (Farid 2006:1). The deployment of feminised mainstream values mobilises racialised parameters of Australian society by assuming that Muslim women are somehow separated from 'mainstream' Australian norms. This separation is constructed on the basis of Muslim dress as signifying a 'lack' of mainstream Australianness and whiteness.

Secularism, feminism and race in representations of Australianness

This 'distance' from 'Australian whiteness' is further supported by common sense ideas of secular political comportment that heighten 'religious' instances of gender inequality in different ways to "secular" forms of gender inequality. Stewart Motha (drawing of the work of Jean-Luc Nancy) argues that localised representations of Islam as producing gender inequality within Western nations turn on "a tension between individual *autonomy* (in the form of individual choice of religious practice) and *heteronomy* (being subject to a different, external law)" (2007:155; see Nancy 2007). In the context of political debates about Muslim dress and women's rights in Britain, Motha notes that:

The veiled woman troubles feminism and secularism in much the same way. Both feminism and secularism face a problem of finding a consistent position that respects individual autonomy, and simultaneously sustains a conception of politics freed from heteronomous determination. (2007:140-141).

Motha is outlining how both secularism and feminism seek to enable autonomy because they liberate the individual from heteronomous determinations (which can mean religious values) that compel women to act in certain ways. According to this formulation, autonomy is positioned in opposition to heteronomy inasmuch as it

guarantees a politics whereby the individual is free to be autonomous in their religious choice (Motha 2007:143; Nancy 2007:3). For Motha however, the state does not afford autonomy by expelling heteronomy from civil life. Rather the state's privileging of secularism can act as a form of heteronomy recast as the fostering of autonomy. That is, the discursive conflation of terrorism and some Islamic practices as irreconcilable to democratic women's rights reveals the willingness to suppress an individual liberal right (religious freedom) in order to 'protect' the collective mainstream from an Islam that 'threatens' democratic values (Motha 2007:140). In this way, democracy has a heteronomous character like religion in that "it cannot guarantee its own law by its own means unless the autonomy of the political is already heteronomous" (Motha 2007:162; see Nancy 2007:9). For the purposes of this essay it can be said the hijab debates are about "a *civil war of heteronomies* ... between which external law, of God or nation-state, will determine individual and collective practice" (Motha 2007:155). The nation-state effectively disguises what are heteronomous determinations (by compelling Muslim women to dress according to dominant cultural norms) through the ideal of a secular gender equality providing autonomous emancipation. By reproducing secular discourses of gender equality as a norm that 'we' endorse, religious heteronomy is then only registered in the 'other' – represented as Islam.

Secularism forms part of the frames that render "feminised mainstream values" culturally intelligible as common sense and self-evidently 'Australian' even as they displace the racialised frames that contribute to an understanding of 'mainstream' Australia as Anglo-centric and white. If the political and representational power of whiteness is made invisible as K. E. Supriya argues through "the ways in which white identity is figured into the construction of otherness" and the "construction of otherness assumes and engenders white identity" (1999:139), then secularism contributes to the racialised construction of Muslim women as a religious other and the positioning of women's rights and feminist language as an implicitly white and Western feature of Australian national identity. In an address to the Australian Christian Lobby National Conference on September 23, 2006, Costello outlined the ways Australian culture both endorsed Judeo-Christian values and religious plurality through a separation of church and state. It is the ability to practice religion free from state intervention that forms the basis for "Muslims who are seeking to emigrate to, and live, in peace in western societies established in the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Costello 2006b). He goes on to

say, “a secular national state can be adopted by Muslim societies, and, what is more, that doing so will lead to greater technological and economic progress” (Costello 2006b). A discourse of Christian-democracy is framed here along a teleological political trajectory whereby the presence of Judeo-Christianity gave way to a ‘peaceful’ ‘western society’ because of secularism. This trajectory equates the ‘adoption’ of secularism with technological and economic advancement. The use of the word “adopted” has a dimension of cultural superiority in that “Muslim societies” are positioned as able to be secular but have not yet chosen to be so, connoting the idea that “Muslim societies” are lacking the advancement and “progress” ‘western societies’ have.

Although Costello refers to the principle of religious freedom “under a secular state prescribed by the Australian Constitution” (Costello 2006b), constitutional jurisprudence concerning religious matters has established that there is no legal separation of church and state as such in Australia (see Eburn 1995; Hogan 1981; McLeish 1992; Randell-Moon 2008). The only three High Court cases to deal with the right to freedom of religion both ruled against the plaintiff’s rights in favour of the state (see Gageler and Glass 1998:58; Hogan 1981) and the Court has upheld government assistance to religious-based state schools (Hogan 1981). In the latter case Justice Wilson determined that the section of the Constitution dealing with religious matters (section 116) “cannot answer the description of a law which guarantees within Australia the separation of church and state” (1981 cited in Wallace 2005). The contradictions in Costello’s use of secularism and juridical understandings of a separation of church and state suggest there are particular investments in upholding a connection of secularism to Australianness in the framing of Islam as lacking “progress”.

Returning to the hijab debates, I’m arguing that the emancipation of Muslim women through mainstream Australian values is predicated on subordinating a ‘deficient’ Islam to the heteronomy of the state. Only this heteronomous imperative to ‘feminised mainstream values’ is made invisible through the framing of secularism and feminism as fostering autonomy and progression. This lends the liberal democratic nature of Australian national identity and its investment in whiteness a kind of ‘immunity’ (Motha 2007:156) to feminist critique by virtue of secularism’s metonymic relation to autonomy and women’s rights. That is, the representation of secular democracy as reflective of gender equality in and of itself suggests, “what is important is not how you

live your democracy but the fact that you *have* your democracy” (Hage 2006:47). Ghassan Hage talks about how discourses of the ‘war on terror’ allow a “warring society” to make comparative claims about democracy. Referring to this as a phallic logic, he argues “once you claim to *have* a democracy you enter the domain of comparative democracy. My democracy is *bigger* than your democracy” (2006:47). There is a similar logic to “feminised mainstream values” in that the claim to have gender equality and secularism justifies the maintenance of a geo-political distinction between the ‘West’ and ‘terrorism’ which is extended to Islam. The ‘West’ is represented as having gender equality and thereby having a greater protection for women’s rights. This makes the ‘West’ ‘better’ than terrorists and religious practices that may threaten gender equality. Such a claim of having secularism and gender equality overlooks how they are used and operate in particular cultural and national contexts.

The language deployed through ‘feminised mainstream values’ frames political debates about women’s rights as universal, thereby diminishing the particularity of gendered relations of power within Australia. This has effects for addressing how gender inequality functions within specific cultural contexts and is co-extensive with the operations of the state. Christina Ho points to how “the racism that has been generated by the close linking-up of women’s rights with an anti-Muslim agenda” makes it harder for Muslim women to speak about domestic or sexual violence because Muslim community and activist groups are already preoccupied with combating racism (cited in ABC News 2006). Because the language of gender inequality is racialised and religious when applied to ‘others’ outside the ‘mainstream’, the Government’s rhetoric does little to help the women it frames as ‘victims’ of gender discrimination. Secularity has a rhetorical monopolisation on the framing of women’s rights and Islam, despite the lack of constitutional protection for secularism, because the Australian state is represented as essentially progressive (see Randell-Moon, 2006b). It is not only that the adoption of feminist rhetoric into discourses on the ‘war on terror’ elides the structural inequalities between men and women that constitute and make up democratic values as Ferguson argues (2005:30), and so requires the location of feminist actions “as an achievement that had successfully occurred in the past” (20). Rather, the reiteration of mainstream values as accommodating a secular gender project is predicated on the assumption that even if gender equality is not operational at all levels of society, its successful

achievement would not alter, but add to, the Australian culture and democratic system already in place.

Conclusion

Ferguson's methodological approach to the intersections of conservative political rhetoric with feminist notions of women's right as an examination of the discursive frames through which such an intersection can take place, is productive in a number of ways. This approach allows an analysis to account for the contextual frames that render feminisms meaningful in particular political contexts. In representations of the 'war on terror' feminist or feminised language is used to differentiate 'Western' democratic nations from terrorism based on the realisation of women's rights and gender equality in liberal democracies as a successful achievement and so past occurrence. As a result, an ostensibly pro-feminist rhetoric paradoxically renders obsolete contemporary feminist agendas (since gender equality is positioned as having already occurred) and frames women's rights as vulnerable to Islamic terrorism. I have identified a feminist rhetoric used by the Howard Government in an Australian political context called feminised mainstream values that draws on and localises the geo-political distinctions in the 'war on terror' between the 'West' and 'terrorism'. The Government re-frames this geo-political differentiation to extend the security threat of Islamic terrorism to domestic Islamic values based on the religious dress of Muslim women as prohibiting 'absorption' into mainstream Australian culture. The representation of Islam as potentially problematic for women's rights is underpinned by a racialised conception of Australianness as secular and gender equal. The deployment of feminised mainstream values by the Howard Government attempts to read Muslim women through a particular kind of Australianness that is sustained by the political alignment of gender equality, progress and Anglo-centric cultural values.

Importantly, framing gender equality as intrinsically connected to the democratic structures of mainstream Australian culture limits the kinds of alternative feminist criticisms that can take place by positioning oppositional views as consistent with a lack of 'respect' for women's rights (embodied most dangerously by Islamic terrorists according to this binary logic) (Ferguson 2005:19). Secularity also forms a significant part of the way rhetorical frames work to "constrain and limit possible discursive responses" (12) to "feminised mainstream values". Normative understandings of

secularism imply religious incursions of women's autonomy are heteronomous in that they must be external to the laws of the nation-state. This masks over the ways in which the universalisation of women's rights and secularism as demanding conformity and a loss of religious choice in dress is also a form of civil heteronomy. As Motha argues, "the relation between autonomy and heteronomy" undoes "the simplistic opposition between Islam and democracy" that frames debates about Muslim dress (2007:145). The racial and religious homogeneity implied in the invocations of mainstream Australian values as enabling a universal gender equality (supported through secularity) constitutes a form of heteronomy. By naming such invocations as heteronomous, the unnamed racialised and gendered frames that comprise dominant representations of Australianness in mainstream political discourses can be made visible and interrogated.

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