How colonial discourses on polygamy disenfranchised Algerian Muslims and supported the right to vote of French women

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Abstract

The French ‘anti separatism’ bill, which portrays polygamy as oppressive, highlights the significance of understanding how colonialist views on polygamy in the 19th century shaped the perception of the Algerian Muslim ‘Other’ in terms of their citizenship and gender. This paper will investigate the role of French feminists in shaping these gendered views and the resulting racialized and gendered narratives. The institutionalization and scientization of monogamy and polygamy led to the creation of a colonized ‘Other’ in Algeria, particularly Algerian Muslims, with different citizenship statuses assigned based on proximity to Western monogamy. French feminist discourse added a gendered dimension, framing polygamy as nonconsensual due to its deviation from monogamous nature of women, while men's sexuality was presented as more inclined towards polygamy, justifying the denial of citizenship. This reinforced the subordinate position of the colonized through the education and 'enlightenment' of colonized women about their supposed inferior status due to polygamy, while colonized men were branded as sexual predators due to their polygamous nature. At the same time, this strengthened the status of white women and gave them credibility in the fight for the right to vote.

Keywords

Monogamy, Gender, Algeria, Citizenship, Feminism, Polygamy

Positionality

In this paper, I use constructionism as a vantage point and assume that societal structures and systems of oppression are discursively produced yet have a real impact on individuals and their position in the hierarchy of power. My education background in gender and sexuality studies as well as political theory has fostered an epistemological approach which strives to give a multidimensional and complex account of the ways in which power operates and impacts certain groups of people. I believe that by acknowledging the adaptability of power to different contexts, its complexity, and internal contradictions and by shedding light on these complexities, its impact on certain groups and individuals might be accounted for in a more holistic manner. This background has also made me aware of the intricacies of colonial power and has sensitized me to how pervasive it is in different areas of society. My positionality as a white European middle-class woman limits my understanding of the

implications these systems of power have on the lived experiences of marginalized individuals; I hence take an outsider perspective to the subject. My privilege as a white person of French heritage, however, I think provides me with a responsibility to shed light on the structures that have enabled the oppression of Algerian Muslims. My inevitable position of privilege in a white supremacist and capitalist system combined with my education leaves me very conscious of the impact of my research, the biases within myself that I need to address and my responsibility to question and challenge these systems.

Introduction

The French 'law consolidating respect for the principles of the republic' or commonly called the 'anti-separatism bill' issued on the 24th of August 2021 (Vie Publique, 2021) has been denounced by civil society as targeting Muslim people, since it is supposed to target Islamist separatism and has led to the closure of mosques around the country, heightening scrutiny of Muslim religious spaces (Le Monde, 2022). This 'thinly veiled' attempt to control Muslim religious spaces (Le Monde, 2022) implicitly reproduces stereotypes against Muslim people (Lallab, 2020): the bill aims to 'combat any exploitation of a polygamous situation' (Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-Mer, 2022, p. 7) in an aim to improve equality between men and women, cited in the same context as the declaration to go against forced marriage. According to a feminist and antiracist French organization, this perpetuates stereotypes against Muslim people because these laws are already enshrined in the Civil Code and are reiterated to condemn 'behaviors perceived as Muslim' (Lallab, 2020). The anti-separatism bill bases its combatting of polygamous relationship structures in the commonly called 'Pasqua-Debré' law of 1993 which foresees that a resident card cannot be delivered to a foreign national if they live in a polygamous arrangement, nor to foreign nationals who are the partners of a polygamous foreign national under article 15, a law in place since 1945 (Légifrance, 1993). Under article 30, the resident permit of any additional partners in the relationship can be refused or withdrawn, as well as that of the polygamous partner who made more than one partner come to France and the resident permit of the children from one of the other partnerships (Légifrance, 1993).

Despite the marginal phenomenon of marital polygamy in France (it is vaguely estimated to be between 8000 and up to 20000 households (Commission National Consultative des Droits de l'Homme, 2006)), its legislation makes it a political issue. Polygamy has been politicized in Europe as a sexual phenomenon belonging especially to Islam, assuming a sexual deviance of Muslim peoples compared to the monogamous superiority of Christian Westerners (Krafft-Ebing, 1894, p. 5). Therefore, exploring the origins of stereotypes of polygamy as an oppressive relationship structure becomes relevant as we see these stereotypes perpetuated by the French state today.

The question that will be investigated in the following is how colonialist views on polygamy led to the creation of a purported Algerian Muslim 'Other' both in terms of their citizenship and gender, showcasing the role of French feminists in shaping these gendered views. I theorize that different citizenship statuses for Algerian Muslims and other Algerians were legitimized through the degradation of polygamy.

I will identify gendered and racialized narratives that shaped how polygamy was perceived by the French colonizers and which, in turn, justified granting Muslim Algerians a lower citizenship status. Moreover, I will

also examine how these narratives were used to advance the cause of French women in their struggle for the vote and greater recognition as citizens.

Broader literature on polygamy was reviewed to identify prominent narratives surrounding polygamy, race and gender. Subsequently, I selected studies that, by reviewing historical accounts and archival material of discourses surrounding polygamy, give more insight on the connection between polygamy, race and gender, among which studies on discourses surrounding Mormon polygamy are the most broadly published. I then selected primary sources to achieve a better understanding of the exact discourses at hand during the colonization of Algeria in the 19th century. Due to the lack of accessible primary accounts of Algerian Muslims from the 19th century and in an attempt to better comprehend how discourses on Algerian Muslims polygamy came to be constitutive of citizenship, primary sources that were accessible to me from French authors were selected.

Despite the prominence of ideas relating polygamy to racial inferiority as in Hegel's work (Hegel, 1837/2007, as cited in Denike, 2010, p. 858), few empirical accounts exist that focus on the discursively established connection between polygamy and racial inferiority, with most studies concentrating on the United States. Ertman's research demonstrates that the ban on polygamy in the US was motivated by the politicization of Mormon polygamy and the perception that it was a form of 'race treason' (2010, pp. 288–289). Mormons were stripped of their citizenship rights, including the right to vote, due to their polygamous practices (2010, pp. 287–288). The ban on polygamy was justified by the belief that it was natural for non-white people but unnatural for white people and engaging in the practice was seen as the creation of a 'peculiar race'. This shows how central whiteness and monogamy were to obtaining full citizenship rights (Ertman, 2010, p. 292).

While the ties between polygamy and citizenship and Algerian's rights during the period of colonization by France have been investigated by Surkis (2019) whose work I will draw from, such analysis lacks a gendered lens that examines the power dynamics of French feminists and Muslim Algerian women and a racial lens which investigates what racializations in combination with gendering took place to legitimize imperialism. Additionally, the existing literature on the topic is missing the racialized stereotypical portrayal of Arab men which plays a role in denying them citizenship. This paper adds to the academic discourse by adding a gendered and racialized lens to the analysis of the ties between relationship structures and citizenship, therefore providing a multifaceted account of agency, oppression and colonization in Algeria.

In the following, I will explain how different citizenship statuses for Algerian Muslims and other Algerians were legitimized through the degradation of polygamy before moving on to uncover underlying Western discourses on monogamy and polygamy which were prevalent in the French colonial administration in Algeria and that equalled monogamy with civilization. Furthermore, I will delve deeper into how these perspectives on polygamy shaped discourses on gender and the women's movement, focusing mostly on French feminists' role in the creation of those discourses. Moreover, I will detail how monogamy was created in Algeria under French colonial rule and what racial and gendered aspects underlied those narratives. Finally, this paper will shed light on the role of French feminists in creating a stereotypical image of the Algerian Muslim woman which is in line with the 'Average Third World Woman' concept introduced by Mohanty (1984).

How citizen status depends on perspectives on polygamy in Algeria

During the French colonization of Algeria, citizenship status was accorded differently, depending on religion, ethnicity and practice of polygamy, as Kaiser (2015) shows (p. 195). While nationality was extended to the whole Algerian population after 1848, citizenship remained exclusive to certain groups. For instance, Jews were granted French citizenship under the 1870 Crémieux decree while Muslims were largely denied citizenship (Kaiser, 2015, pp. 195–196). This separation between religious and ethnic groups in Algeria was created based on which groups polygamy is more prevalent in (Surkis, 2019, p. 57). In 'Polygamy, public order, and property', Surkis (2019) mentions that 'For […] advocates of Jews' legal assimilation, Muslims' greater attachment to polygamy justified the Jews' qualification for French citizenship' over that of Muslims, showing that relationship structures played an essential role in determining who obtains access to French citizenship (p. 57). In doing so, a fragmentation of society was reinforced which reduced cohesion and thus the potential for resistance among the colonized.

French feminist newspapers also played a role in fragmenting Algerian society along ethnic lines in the process of acquiring citizenship. In French feminist newspaper articles such as in 'La Française', the so-called Kabyle myth was reproduced, contending an alleged superiority of Kabyles (a predominantly Muslim Berber ethnic group in Algeria) over Arabs because – it was claimed – they had more liberal kinship traditions and were thus 'less polygamous' than Arab Muslims (Boittin, 2010, pp. 136–137). In that, they were portrayed as 'colonizer-friendly' and closer to the colonizer which was supposed to grant them a higher status in citizenship than their Arab counterparts (Boittin, 2010, pp. 136–137). The Kabyle myth created by French feminists is hence a prime example of how hierarchization of Algerian society was brought about by the colonizer on the basis of relationship and kinship practices. This hierarchization aided the fragmentation of the Algerian Muslim community and it is conceivable that this weakened resistance against colonization.

Monogamous marriage and practices were not legally imposed in Algeria which was an important aspect of dissent as will be elaborated on further, but it became contingent to obtaining citizenship. As a consequence of holding on to one's 'personal status', such as religious law and practices in the case of Algerian Muslims, one would have to relinquish full French citizenship. Surkis (2019) mentions the Enos case jurisprudence which purported that maintaining 'personal status law', thus religious law, leads to a continued status of the colonized as subjects (p. 58). Citizenship therefore becomes inaccessible when one seeks to maintain their personal status law as it required individuals to relinquish their local civil status and to adopt the Civil Code instead (Surkis, 2019, p. 58).

The reasoning behind why citizenship required the adoption of the Civil Code in addition to the renunciation of personal status which was used as a justification, was that personal status was in some instances incompatible with the French Civil Code and with French morals. It was invoked that rights would clash and contradict each other when personal status was deemed incompatible with morality and 'good order' of family life as it is enshrined in the French Civil Code (Surkis, 2019, p. 58). Because of that difference in morality, it was argued, French citizenship could only apply to those that fully assimilate to French morality and hence to the French

Civil Code. This shows that Quranic law and Muslim religious law were framed as incompatible with morality, thereby justifying that Algerians must choose their allegiance.

Moreover, 'morality', 'the good order of families' and 'public decency' are very general terms taken as having universal appeal. Quranic law is here implied to be opposed to a supposedly universalistic definition of what is 'moral' and in 'good order'.

Western discourses on monogamy and polygamy

The underlying narrative serving to justify a different citizenship status for Algerian Arab Muslims is that polygamy is deemed 'uncivilized' and therefore 'un-French'. The idea of a civilized metropolitan France can be put in the broader context of the West purporting to be more 'civilized' than the rest of the world, and therefore also more 'civilized' than the peoples colonized by the West. Rademaker (2017) finds that 'Western societies have long conceived of heterosexual, monogamous marriage as the foundation of a stable nation as well as the means for the state to regulate a gender order and property.' (p. 642), therefore highlighting the role of monogamy as an institution in the creation of the nation.

The establishment of monogamy as an institution through marriage in the West led to it being perceived as 'common sense', a notion used by Cott (2000) which is, in its definition, universalistic and homogenizing (p. 5). The notion of 'common sense' is homogenizing because it makes claims about ideas and practices that humans should have in common when it is in actuality context-specific and – in the context of monogamy – contingent on beliefs, kinship and other societal arrangements specific to a society. The insistence by Western and – in the case of Algeria – French colonizers that there is such thing as a 'common sense' concerning how relationships ought to be structured has detrimental consequences for cultures and societies not fitting this very narrow idea as the case of the downgrading of Arab Algerian Muslim's citizenship has shown.

In Western Christian societies, monogamy became analogous to the Church where Christ was seen as head of the Church and that same structure was replicated in the household with the husband being hierarchically superior over his wife (Cott, 2000, p. 6). This then also applied to the state as the husband held to role of citizen in the household and having dependents and caring for them became a responsibility because of his citizenship (Cott, 2000, p. 6). What underlies traditionally monogamous ties is the idea of a contract between two people, analogous to the 'contract' between the state and the citizen (Cott, 2000, p. 15). During the American revolution, the idea of reciprocity between the state and its citizens became a requirement for justice (ibid.). This results in the view that, in polygamous relationships, without a two-sided contract, there is no reciprocity as the relationship involves more than two people and thus no justice.

Polygamy came to be viewed as non-consensual because it became analogous with views on the state. Monogamy was viewed as analogous with a democratic state based on a social contract between the ruler and the citizens. In contrast, the harem which emerged as the Western stereotype of polygamous relationships was equated with a tyrannical government which is non-consensual since it is not based on approval of the governed (Cott, 2000, p. 6). Thus, polygamy came to be seen as an oppressive and coercive structure and something

analogous to the public realm. Therefore also, adopting polygamous practices has broader implications for the structuring of Muslim Algerian society, as this comparison of relationship structure with state structure implies. This extends relationship practices beyond the private realm and into the public realm, making it subject to contention.

While marriage evolved into a symmetrical tie between husband and wife, the underlying moral prerogatives remain that elevated monogamous relationships above polygamous ones and links to views on the nation remained. During the French revolution, monogamous marriage was seen as the foundation of national morality whereas polygamy implied immorality of the citizen since marriage served as the metaphor for a consensual relationship between the state and its citizens and one of voluntary allegiance (Cott, 2000, p. 10).

This supposedly symmetrical union that monogamous marriage provided came too be seen as the ground for what was to be deemed 'civilization'. Krafft-Ebing (1894) sees the moment when the woman was acknowledged as equal to the man in their partnership – a union consolidated through legal, moral, and religious institutions – as the moment when Christian peoples gained moral and material superiority over what he calls 'polygamic peoples', especially over Muslims people (p. 4-5).

In making claims about what was 'civilized' and 'uncivilized', polygamy obtained a racialized connotation. Polygamy was a point of distinction for the colonizers who saw it as the 'other'. People practicing polygamy were explicitly called 'polygamic peoples' or 'polygamic races' while monogamy remained without racial connotation (Krafft-Ebing, 1894, p. 5; Frankenberg, 1997, and Morrison, 1993, as cited in Willey, 2006, pp. 531–532). Given that monogamy was un-racialized unlike polygamy, it can be seen as a marker of whiteness and polygamy as a marker of the racialized 'Other' (Krafft-Ebing, 1894, p. 5; Frankenberg, 1997, and Morrison, 1993, as cited in Willey, 2006, pp. 531–532). The 'Other' in Edward Said's definition is a prejudiced fiction created in Western thinking about the 'Orient' (Mohrem, 2020, p. 2), thereby homogenizing entire populations, cultures, religions and ethnicities into an entity different from the Western subject.

The claim that non-monogamous people were 'uncivilized' was not only justified in moral terms but was also rooted in the (pseudo-)scientization of monogamy, which gave it a more authoritative character, as Willey (2019) notes (p. 98). It was justified as inborn by pseudoscientific phrenology and therefore said to be more prevalent among white people and white women especially; in contrast, non-white people could be said to be inherently 'less monogamous' (Willey, 2006, p. 537). Through the scientization process, polygamy came to be seen as a racial characteristic, beyond discourse and in what was seen as 'biological'. From the Christian lens especially, it spurred the representation as 'a marriage practice allowed by Islam and prohibited by Christianity as a manifestation of atavistic sexual tendencies of the biologically inferior.' (Willey, 2006, p. 103). Therefore, any relationship structures outside of those of heterosexual and heteroromantic monogamy were constructed as perversions in opposition to an ideal claimed to be 'natural' which justifies superiority over all other kinds of relationship structures (Willey, 2006, p. 103). Instead, polygamy was constructed as an atavism and as a sign of barbarousness from the perspective of the Western colonizer (Surkis, 2019, p. 44). Scientization served the

political and imperialistic purpose and pursuit to improve and facilitate the means of social control over the colonized because it could be framed as pursuit to 'improve the race' and society (Surkis, 2019, p. 44).

Moreover, through scientization, it became easier to essentialize polygamy as an inherent trait to people of a certain race, ethnicity, or religion and to create a hierarchy. Polygamy thus becomes sexuality, therefore essentializing it and erasing its meaning as a way to structure kinship relations.

French feminists such as Hubertine Auclert (2014) saw 'barbarousness' and being 'uncivilized' as the result of adopting polygamous marriage practices (p. 20). She observes that:

> Arabs, healthy while they had one wife, became weaker and lost their health as soon as they had several. Polygamy not only hastens physical decrepitude, it brings with it intellectual degeneration. Concentrating their cerebral activity on bestial instincts, it destroys their intelligence and atrophies their brain. (Auclert, 2014, p. 20)

Therefore, atrophy and atavism are said to be brought about by the adoption of polygamous practices.

That polygamy is an atavism inherently tied to race is the product of the idea that the colonized have remained in a space where time has stopped, as if they were 'remains of the past', which is what McClintock (1995) calls 'anachronistic space' (pp. 30–31). This narrative then serves to justify the brutal endeavor of 'improving the race' or 'bringing modernity', to the colonized.

Similarly, in late 19th century France, there was quite broad consensus among French feminists that the Civil Code must be applied universally in Algeria for Algerian women to achieve emancipation because they diagnosed Quranic law as the source of their oppression (Kimble ,2006, p. 125). This was only contested by Algerian Muslim women such as Madame Séhir Hacène who emphasized the importance for Algerian women to adhere to cultural mores and claimed that French feminists were misinterpreting the condition of Algerian Muslim women. Colonialism was seen by French feminists as the best way for Algerian women to achieve emancipation (Kimble, 2006, p. 125). However, Hacène and Zenati viewed cultural practices and lack of educational opportunities as the main causes for a lack of women's emancipation in Algeria (Kimble, 2006, p. 122).

The discourse of monogamy as constitutive of the nation and 'civilization' justified creating a difference between the colonized Muslim Algerians and white French people. Pseudoscientific claims about how polygamy renders individuals 'atavistic' further spurred the process and made it seem like intervention through the 'mission civilisatrice' was needed to prevent the physical degeneration effects that polygamy was said to bring about. Through that, the quest for women's rights in metropolitan France and imperialism could be connected because French women could claim to defend women's rights as polygamy was seen as inherently oppressive.

The implications of polygamy for gender discourses prevalent in the French feminist movement

Through the rejection of polygamy as 'barbarous' and 'primitive', women were subordinated, spoken for, and agency was taken from them because they were victimized by white colonizers claiming to be able to 'save them' from their position. This trope is coined by Mohanty (1984) who calls it the 'Third World woman' trope through which white colonizers constitute the colonized woman as helpless, uneducated, poor, and dependent on the non-white man who exploits her (p. 337). In that, Orientalist myths are recurring too. This purported position of absolute subordination is what, according to Mohanty, posits the white colonizers as saviors of the 'Third World women' because they can free non-white from their oppression by offering them education, 'giving them a voice' by speaking for them and demonizing non-white men as predators.

White women especially play an essential role because of Christian missionary work where they sought to 'educate' the local population for instance and could breach the gender divide that male colonizers could not. This was observed by Pruitt (2005) who claimed that Orientalist myths created and maintained by colonizers and missionaries portrayed 'Oriental' women as imprisoned in the domestic sphere and in their own ignorance and being degraded by their culture (p. 44). Therefore, white women saw themselves as the only people able to access their 'sisters' to bring them salvation (Pruitt, 2005, p. 44).

Algerian Arab and Berber Muslim women were seen as having been rendered 'inferior by their male counterparts' under 'personal status law', resulting in a lack of education, poverty, and legal inferiority. As a remedy, French feminists with ties to the metropole proposed a stricter application of French law and of the French Civil Code and no exceptions made for 'personal status' (Kimble, 2006, p. 110). The underlying idea was that a French citizenship model would bring about education and secularism and thus 'republican mores' (Kimble, 2006, p.110). In general, a stricter imposition of French law was supported by French feminists since its lax application was seen as what led to the continued oppression of women. Hubertine Auclert puts that indignation into words:

> France, under the cover of its civilizing mission, has dispossessed Arabs of Algeria's territory, and now it claims its respect for the barbarism of the vanquished in order to keep them outside the very civilization in the name of which it conquered them! This is unimaginable! (Auclert, 2014, p. 23)

In general, the influence of Islam and the incomplete French 'mission civilisatrice' pertaining to marriage is seen as the continuation of oppression of Algerian women. Therefore, a dismantling of Shari'a jurisprudence and Islamic courts was supported (Kimble, 2006, p. 115).

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125). However, Hacène and Zenati viewed cultural practices and lack of educational opportunities as the main causes for a lack of women's emancipation in Algeria (Kimble, 2006, p. 122). The voices of Algerian women who contested the French feminists' opinions, however, remained underrepresented among feminist discourse which was dominated by French women.

The universal framing of the Muslim Algerian woman in line with the myth of the 'Third World woman' was done in terms of her allegedly being pliant to her oppression and finding content in it. This characterization of the Muslim Algerian woman is put forward by Marie Bugéja, a white French Algerian feminist who claimed that the 'Maghrébines' are 'content' in their position as passive victims, isolated and uncultured and secluded in the patriarchal family structure (Bugéja, 1931, as cited in Kimble, 2006, p. 111). The purported oppression of the Algerian colonized woman thus was claimed to not only lie in her submission to the Algerian man and in the polygamous relationship structure she was in, but also in her ignorance of her oppression. This justified the intervention by white French women to 'save' her from her oppressive polygamous marriage.

The subordination of the 'Third World woman' by white women was reinforced by pseudoscientific racializations by French feminists. Bugéja maintained that for the Muslim woman to become 'modern' and educated, she needs the intervention of French law and legislation and the work of French feminists which would help her 'break out of her ignorance' induced by her 'primitive brain' (Bugéja, 1931, as cited in Kimble, 2006, p. 121-122).

A recurring trope in French feminist discourses is one that sees Muslim Algerian women as collectively against polygamy because it hurts their feelings as it is not about 'true romantic love', but centers around the sexual fulfilment of men, therefore exploiting the women in the relationship (Auclert, 2014, p. 28). Polygamy is perceived by French colonizers as a sexual fulfilment for men which requires coercive means such as 'buying off women' since it is claimed that they would not enter a polygamous partnership by choice, according to Saint-Simonian historian Berbrugger (Berbrugger, n.d., as cited in Surkis, 2019, p. 50).

Through Western myths by non-polygamous colonizers that polygamy leads to jealousy as observed by Cott (2000, p.10) in the Aboriginal context and perpetuated about Muslim Algerian women by Auclert (2014), polygamy was equalled with adultery (p.21). The very idea that polygamy makes women jealous centers men as women's object of desire in polygamous relationships. Compulsory monogamy further devalues other relationships such as community ties and friendship ties and posits the monogamous relationship as higher in a hierarchy of relationships (Willey, 2006, p. 531).

The gendered nature of myths on monogamy and polygamy in colonized Algeria

Male colonizers in Algeria conceived of polygamy as a sexual privilege instead of a form of kinship and relationship. Thus, women were seen as the property of the man and available for sexual services for the man. Conceiving of polygamy as a sexual privilege of the colonized was one of the reasons why indigenous legal status was refused by colonizers: this sexual privilege being denied to French men was inconceivable and

considered ‘unequal’ (Surkis, 2019, p. 58). In turn, renouncing that privilege as which polygamy is framed, is seen as an ‘honorable sacrifice’ because man is not giving into his ‘natural sexual instincts’, making him eligible for French citizenship. It therefore also puts French citizenship on a pedestal because it requires some alleged ‘purity’ found in monogamous marriage and French men are those upheld as morally superior because they did not ‘give into the temptation of polygamy’ (Surkis, 2019, pp. 59–60). This idea links to the portrayal of the colonized ‘Other’ as overly lascivious, sexual, and sex as ‘primitive’ because polygamous relationships are claimed to center only around sex and the domination of women, hence framing Muslim Algerian men as sexual predators.

The framing of Arab men as predators because of the prevalence of polygyny in Algeria during its colonization was perpetuated by French feminist Hubertine Auclert. She claims that Muslim men are uninhibited because Quranic law allows them to and that they are unfaithful and volatile since their partners or concubines constantly fear being ‘downgraded’ from being the favorite (Auclert, 2014, pp. 18–19, pp. 19–20). She further portrays Arab men as objectifying women who serve to satisfy their needs, which is most prevalent in her text about polygamy where she states that ‘‘Woman has been created for man’s pleasure’, say the Arabs, ‘how could only one wife amuse a man his whole life? Polygamy and repudiation are necessary.’’, stereotyping Arab men as overly sexual (Auclert, 2014, pp. 19–20). Muslim Arab men are claimed to profit off their wives by treating them as mere sexual objects but also because they are said to see them as property: when they do not provide men with sexual services, the men can sue for damages because the ‘property they bought’, in Auclert’s words, was not fulfilling his needs and instead those of another (Auclert, 2014, p. 30).

In contrast to the inherent nature of men to be polygamous portrayed in the latter example and in the repression of the urge of colonizer men to have multiple partners, women are said to be inherently monogamous. An alleged ‘closeness to nature’ and lack of sophisticatedness are said to be reasons for the monogamy of women (Auclert, 2014, p. 22). Auclert states that even in the situations where women are the most demeaned, they are choosing a monogamous relationship, implicitly alleging to the fact that polygamous marriages go against any choice of the involved women even when she is already demeaned. This view encourages the intervention of white French feminists as the metaphor for the Muslim Arab woman in a polygamous relationship used by Auclert and Bugéja is that of a plant: Muslim Algerian women are portrayed as fragile and easily shattered by the brutishness of their male counterparts in polygamous relationships (Auclert, 2014, p. 28). Bugéja claims that the Muslim Algerian woman ‘has no preparation for her milieu [for a life in the outside world]. She is less like a beautiful plant and more like one that must be pruned and trained in order to grow at all.’, thereby encouraging a French imperial feminist intervention into the domestic life of Algerian Muslims (Bowlan, 1998, as cited in Kimble, 2006, pp. 121–122). Because the Muslim Algerian woman is alleged to have a ‘primitive brain’ (ibid.), she is said to need saving from French women in order to reach her ‘full potential’ or to grow as a person and independently assert herself. This implies that Algerian Muslim women are passive because they rely on outside forces to provide them with the tools for their own emancipation (such as through education). To paraphrase Spivak (1993), this example shows that white women are attempting to save non-white women from non-white men, an endeavor supported by the white man as part of the imperialist project (p. 93).

Quranic law was not just seen as the root of oppression of Muslim Arab women because it allowed polygamy, but also because it was said to condone marriage with minors. By imposing that narrative, French colonizers could reinforce the myth that Muslim Arab men are degenerate and sexual predators, both for their wives and for children, and that Islamic law is oppressive. The allegation that Muslim women are in need of intervention by white women makes them look childish and innocent and worthy of protection from sexual predators by higher-ranked French officials.

The role of French women's campaign against polygamy for demanding the right to vote

French feminists capitalized off the few cases of child marriage that occurred in Algeria among Muslims to emphasize their campaign against Quranic law and the 'personal status law'. Though Islamic law forbade marriage with a minor, French feminists framed the few cases where that law was breached as an issue that lies within Islamic law (Kimble, 2006, pp. 112–113). These cases created an outrage by French feminists and led to them petitioning the French government to apply the Civil Code to its colonies (Kimble, 2006, pp. 112–113). This case shows that instead of letting Muslim Algerian feminists take matters into their own hands and address the issues that lead to child marriage, French feminists imposed their point of view to further their own agenda.

This 'speaking for' Algerian Muslim women and framing polygamy as an issue undermined the efforts of Algerian feminists who had to go against patriarchal structures in their country. Conversely, however, in claiming to defend the cause of Algerian Muslim women against polygamy and positing themselves as being in a prime position because of their 'access' to the colonized, French women could justify their quest for the vote in showing that they can play a role in the French imperialist project or 'mission civilisatrice' (Boittin, 2010, p. 138). Disenfranchised in France until 1944, they attempted to compensate their lack of recognition through engagement in other social causes overseas (Boittin, 2010, p. 134). Repeatedly, they emphasized their crucial role in educating the local population and in advancing the cause of Muslim Algerian women, especially when it comes to 'freeing' them from polygamous relationship structures as has been shown before. Because it could be claimed that Algerian women and children were in need of help, French feminists could claim the right to vote for themselves. More than an imperialist mission, French colonized Algeria provided a ground for the white French women to enforce their agenda and have influence, even though that came at the cost of the dehumanization of Algerians in favor of spurring the campaign of French women for their right to vote.

Conclusion

The creation of a colonized 'Other' in Algeria, particularly Algerian Muslims, was facilitated through the establishment and scientific validation of monogamy and polygamy. Monogamy was seen as a form of consent-based governance, while polygamy was deemed its opposite. Consequently, different levels of citizenship were assigned to the colonized in Algeria based on their proximity to Western monogamy. In French feminist discourse, a gendered aspect was added, which argued that polygamy was nonconsensual due to its conflict with the monogamous nature of women. On the other hand, men's sexuality was framed as more inclined towards polygamy, which was used to justify denying citizenship to them, as they were perceived as oppressing women.

The endeavor of educating and 'enlightening' the colonized women on their purported inferior status induced by a polygamous relationship structure reinforced the status of white women and gave them credibility in the struggle for the right to vote.

By exploring how closeness to monogamy led to different citizenship statuses, the paper contributes to the growing field of social science research on the importance of relationship status for citizenship. Additionally, the paper highlights the processes of gendering and racialization, making clear that understanding how citizenship rights were gained for French women also involved racializing polygamy. This multi-faceted account of citizenship rights and oppression of the colonized 'Other' in Algeria opens new avenues for further research, including the area of citizenship rights for immigrating polygamous families in France, which is policed through the Pasqua-Debré law (Légifrance, 1993). Investigating racialized and gendered discourses surrounding polygamous family structures in the context of immigration from previously colonized countries to France is an under-researched area that is relevant to understanding minority citizenship rights.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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