

## **A PROGRESSIVE STUDY ON THE INCLUSION OF ISLAM IN THE MODERN FRENCH FILMS**

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**Abstract.** Islam is frequently characterised as democracy's adversary. This paper examines two contemporary films where Islam plays a significant role in French society to examine how French directors have portrayed the intricate connection of Islam and the French society. 'May Allah Bless France' (2014) by Abd Al-Malik and 'Made in France' (2015) by Nicolas Boukhrief (2015). Allah be praised. While 'Made in France' dispels the myth that French Muslims are radicals, France portrays Islam as a source of instruction for minority youth. The first is based on the upbringing of Abd al-Malik. It shows how Islam might assist troubled minority teenagers in finding harmony in French society. On the other hand, 'Made in France' shows a homegrown Islamist terror group, demonstrating how the marginalisation of Muslims in France encourages the growth of such organisations. Although the films' methods for conveying this message are diametrically opposed, they have common ground in their critique of Islamophobia from a liberal perspective. According to the decolonial analysis of these movies, so as to fight against the subjugation of Muslims in French society, it is necessary to address past injustices resulting from colonial legacies. On the other hand, France can create a more united society by embracing the uniqueness of marginalised residents who are no longer seen as "typical" French citizens.

**Key words:** Marginalisation, decolonial worldview, and minority French.

### **Introduction**

France has made an effort to reduce the appearance of Islam through the idea of secularism since it has been perceived as a danger to French identity. When the administration outlawed the wearing of the veil in public places, including schools, in 2004, this fear of the other became obvious. In actuality, the oppression of the Muslim population perpetuates the legacy of French colonialism through practises and beliefs that are reminiscent of that era. Fear is also

fuelled by Islamophobic reporting in the media, which pushes minorities to the edges of society and makes Muslims feel like they don't belong in the Republic.

Étienne Balibar, a philosopher, notes that people frequently encounter discrimination based on race, religion, and culture in the context of postcolonial immigration. Muslims and African immigrants proliferated in France after colonisation. As a result, French society combines the categories of race, religion, and immigrants. This "neo-racist," according to Balibar, differs from conventional racism because it is based on disparities in cultural practises and lifestyles. While older French films focused on the suburbs, more recent films investigated how Islam was being incorporated on a national level. Two recently watched movies have influenced these arguments about how Muslims are assimilated into society.

'Allahu Akbar' based on his autobiography, Abd Al-2014 Malik's film France takes the audience through his life in the suburbs of Strasbourg, his conversion to Islam, and his journey toward realising his dream of being a rapper. A Muslim journalist named Sam infiltrates a jihadist terrorist cell in Nicolas Boukhrief's 2015 film Made in France in order to conduct research for an article about the motivations of French youth who join these organizations.

This paper examines two filmmakers with diverse backgrounds: Abd al-Malik, a Muslim of Congolese descent who was raised on the outskirts, and Nicolas Boukhrief, an Algerian French child who experienced prejudice against his father. Allahu Akbar was first published in 2014, the year before France experienced numerous terrorist attacks, including those on Charlie Hebdo and others that occurred in Paris in 2015. Five days before one of the bombs, 'Made in France', was released in 2015. It wasn't released until 2016 though these movies helped start conversations about Islam, integration, and extremism in the social setting they were made for.

The historical context required to comprehend how Islam and integration are portrayed in French cinema is crucial to assess these movies properly. It also examines how Muslims' ability to assimilate is represented with regard to their relationship to French society. The relationship between colonialism's ideology and the assimilation of Arabs and Muslims in modern France will be discussed in the final section. This paper discusses how crucial it is to talk about colonialism's past injustices to bridge the gap between French society and Islam.

In order to inform French viewers, the videos discuss certain historical connections between the colonial eras and how Muslims are treated in France today. The administration's failure to address this ongoing issue and the misconceptions surrounding the omission of colonial history from the school curriculum make this conversation crucial. These two recent movies defy French prejudices about Islam despite having diverse themes and visual styles. While 'Made in France' is critical of the French State's role in Muslims' marginalisation, 'May Allah Bless France', promotes the integration of Muslims into the country. These movies argue that the real threat to France is not Islam but rather the French government, which has threatened Muslims ever since colonisation, fuelling their animosity towards the Republic.

One issue that is frequently ignored is the historical mistreatment of Muslims throughout colonial times. Since capturing Algeria, France has come to view Islam as a threat to both its national character and society. Many regulations, and in particular the idea of secularism, are still used to restrict Islam today (Bozzo and Pernsteiner 123). Despite the fact that everyone who lives in France is free to practise their religion, Muslims in France face a number of social issues. People are not familiar with their colonial past. The problem begins at the educational level, since the French colonial past is not given adequate time in the school curricula. It

frequently emphasises proclaiming its "civilising mission" and integrating colonised people (Lemaire and Pernsteiner 80). So, students don't know that colonial laws and practises were unfair, which is what caused the colonised people to rise up. Students are unable to comprehend the backdrop of Islamophobia in France and the relationship of Muslims with the Republic because of the long common history between France and Islam.

At the governmental and national educational levels, there is a denial of the colonial past. After the 2015 assaults on Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher supermarket, Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared that a new age had begun, one that was characterised by the ongoing danger of terrorism by Islamists and the worry that extremists would seize power (Hargreaves and Pernsteiner 413). Nicolas Boukhrief's movie 'Made in France' is based on this widespread worry.

Following the attacks, the French government decided that secularism instruction in school curricula needed to be strengthened. Despite the government's and schools' lack of comprehension, then-Minister of the Economy Emmanuel Macron disagreed with the majority of French politicians on how to respond to the attacks. He emphasised that the government had made it easier for jihadist extremism to grow by ignoring the social divide caused by discrimination.

These topics are frequently ignored in the classroom and have historically received negative media coverage. However, as a result of the artistic mediums of music, film, and literature, they progressively enter public conversation (Kleppinger and Reeck 12). Understanding the effects of the colonial past on minorities is crucial in order to fully comprehend the current problems of Islamophobia. Renan believed that until everyone who resided on French soil attained a certain level of uniformity, France would not truly be France. All individuals who are subject to the Republic and all French regions, including colonial territories, are included in this uniformity. This philosophy holds that integration is necessary for minorities and colonised people to develop a true French identity (Bancel et al., 157).

In order to create the French Empire, France aspired to forge a national identity through the assimilationist philosophy. The idea and the image of the immigrant, which refers to white Europeans or the stranger, which refers to migrants from the Maghreb, were born with colonisation. In the shape of political and economic dominance and the exclusion of these communities, the colonial era's dominance and legal discrimination system persisted. France has developed a national identity from the roots of modern nationalism.

Muslims and Arabs have long been marginalised in French society. In their academic work about postcolonial France, *The Colonial Legacy in France: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid*, Deltombe and Rigouste say that there are two ways to think about being French. The first definition is valid and applies to all Republic citizens, regardless of their culture, religion, or skin tone. The second description, which was partly created by the media, depicts the French identity as being white, Catholic, and secular because it asserts that religion should only be practised in one's personal life (117). The integration of Muslims into French society was impacted by this.

These communities have been portrayed by the media for years as a threat to French political, social, and cultural life as well as the nation's sense of identity. The French media makes Islam the scapegoat because they believe that Muslims and Arabs want to take over their nation. The French public has long been taught to dread Islam and to think that it is

incompatible with France through these media portrayals. Therefore, suppressing Muslim identity would be the only option to preserve French identity, which would result in these groups being oppressed despite their integration attempts. In order to inform French society on how the various populations of the Republic may coexist, it is crucial to examine how films depict Muslims' assimilation because they mirror French perceptions of Muslims while also adding fresh images to these debates.

Movies have the ability to combat colonial representations. The French premiere of Rachid Bouchareb's 2006 film *Native* taught audiences about the secret history of North African troops who served France during World War II. As a result, just like the media, movies help to clarify complicated circumstances and affect public perception. In light of this, it is crucial to research and evaluate how Muslims are portrayed in current French cinema.

Islam did not traditionally make an appearance in French movies until after World War II. Islam only appears throughout the colonial era as a supplemental background element, such as in scenes that depict mosques or gestures of prayer (Cade 42). In the 1970s, French movies started to show immigrants from the Maghreb as soldiers to show how hard they fought for independence (43). Due to socio-political causes, the issues of immigrants and Islam grew more important after the 1980s. The word "Beur," which has been used to people of North African ancestry without their consent, has been used to refer to those who were born in France to parents who immigrated from the Maghreb. This section is not meant to keep the prejudice against French people whose parents or grandparents are from the Maghreb, which has been called an insulting word.

Films began to depict Muslim cultural traditions, such as diet and prayer, in the 1980s and 1990s. However, for a variety of reasons, French filmmakers continue to limit the portrayal of religion in their works. According to Cade, one of the causes is that Islam has been concealed to promote more open assimilation. Nevertheless, Islam and its place in French society have received a more prominent role in several recent French films.

### **Assimilation in contemporary movies**

The aforementioned French films fill this representational gap and offer societal critiques of anti-Islamic prejudice. The 2014 film 'May Allah Bless France', which was directed by renowned Muslim rapper Abd Al-Malik, depicts the influence of Islam on young people in the Strasbourg outskirts. The misconceptions that society spreads about Islam are brought to light in Nicolas Boukhrief's 2015 film 'Made in France', which features the essay A Radical Conspiracy of Islam. These two movies take integration head-on instead of skirting around it in an effort to convey to French viewers that France and Islam are neither incompatible nor adversaries. Both movies were released at a time when Islam in France was seriously threatened, as seen by the bans on the niqab and the Islamic hijab in schools in 2004 and 2010, respectively. The terrorist events in France in 2015 only served to highlight this rising anti-Islam sentiment. In the context of these discussions, each of these movies shows that people shouldn't be afraid of Islam and that the two cultures can live together in the same country.

It is important to know who each film is intended for in order to comprehend how these movies approach integration. The films are directed in various ways at this audience in order to educate them about common misconceptions about religion and the assimilation of Islam in France. While in 'May Allah bless Her', France strives to demonstrate to the public the essential way that the majority of Muslims live their faith. The second movie exploits the

mistrust of Islamophobic tropes. Boukhrief aims to demonstrate that radical terrorists can be French citizens and are internal adversaries rather than foreign adversaries. However, one could also argue that in 'May Allah Bless Her' France is aiming for Muslims and suburbanites. The movie demonstrates to teenagers in the suburbs that they are not the criminals that the media portrays them to be and that they are capable of so much more—even changing their lives. It provides commuters with a voice by highlighting their challenges, the discrimination they face, and their attempts to improve their lot in life.

Allahu Akbar the France film is based on Abd Al-autobiographical Malik's book of the same name, recounts the life of Regis, a young black guy who grows up in the Strasbourg suburbs and eventually becomes a rap musician. He distributes narcotics and robs tourists' wallets to make more money to buy instruments for his rap group. Before dying, Regis, a former acquaintance who committed thievery and drug trafficking, made the decision to give up crime. To improve his life and prevent experiencing the same fate as his companion, Regis converted to Islam and adopted the Muslim name Abd Al-Malik. His conversion to a new religion enables him to support his brother's rap career without utilising money obtained through drug sales or theft. Abd Al-Malik works to reduce the distance between the two civilizations he is a part of. The Muslim world is one thing, while his upbringing in French society is another.

The main character modifies his course in life. More specifically, he may focus on his music while still attending the University of Strasbourg. This understanding of Islam is in stark contrast to 'Made in France', a film that examines the radicalization of a certain strain of Islam and the causes of this hatred for the French Republic. Sam is a Muslim journalist who is working on a piece about the motivations behind why young males join extremist movements. He infiltrates a jihadist terrorist group made up of young Muslims who are not yet completely versed in the religion in order to gather the essential information. The police make Sam stay in the jihadist cell as a spy after he tells them about the plans for the attacks. They want to find out where the orders for the larger Islamist network, of which this cell is a part, come from.

According to Abd Al-Malik, young people in the suburbs experience discrimination and struggle to survive. Beginning with the arrest of Regis and his pals, the movie opens with a conversation between his brother and a police officer. One of these young people threw a stone at a police van, leading to their detention. The spectator observes that there are additional young men of colour from the suburbs, including Pascal, one of Regis' siblings, after they are stopped and placed in the back of the van. Pascal begins yelling at the policewoman that he despises France because of how individuals like him are treated there. The tension that young people in the suburbs must continually experience in relation to French society is established in this scene. In this way, Malik demonstrates that not all commuters are the same by endorsing a favourable image of Islam in the wake of the conflict with the police. This scene almost completely ignores the discrimination that young people experience in the suburbs.

In "Made in France," Boukhrief takes aim at secularism when terrorist cell members are given advice on how to escape capture. The group chooses to give up all Muslim customs and practises in order to avoid being linked to terrorist activities. The chief, Hassan, orders them to perform taqiyya, which is Arabic for strategically concealing one's religion in times of danger. Although Hassan originally used the taqiyya as a self-defence technique, he now utilises it more as a military tactic. Hassan instructs the group to "integrate into French society

so that no one suspects them of being Muslims and consequently terrorists" by shaving their beards, smoking, drinking, and defending America and Israel. His directives are all in opposition to Islamic principles. So, according to Boukhrief, adopting a Western way of life is the only way for a Muslim to avoid being linked to terrorism. Ironically, the fundamentalist Muslims are the ones who seem to be the most "integrated."

Sam, the only terrorist in the group who studies the Quran and appears to really uphold Islamic beliefs, finds it difficult to carry out *taqiyya*. Sam believes that he can be a French citizen and a Muslim and that he has no need to give up his beliefs in order to assimilate because he has lived as an integrated Muslim in French society. The folks are shown being embraced by their family and French culture in the scenes that follow. According to Anna Bozzo, French secularism frequently causes tension with Islam and hinders simple integration. Boukhrief would agree with Bosso as he challenges the idea of Western assimilation, which says that the only way for Muslims to fully fit into society is to become secularists.

In 'May Allah Bless France', the director alludes to earlier depictions of Islam in popular culture. The majority of "suburb" or "Beur" movies that include Muslims are either set in the suburbs or take place outside of the country. As Malik departs for a trip outside of the Republic, the director muses about this time. In one of the final sequences, we saw the most representations of Islam, including prayer and brotherhood. A close-up of his face is seen during this scene, and he can be seen grinning, crying with joy, or reciting prayers when he realises that he has attained peace. Abd Al-Malik and other Muslims are seen in these moments conversing and praying. The purpose of this scene and these effects is to demonstrate to the public how little French society understands Islam.

On the one hand, we could consider the fact that the movie's ending occurs elsewhere as evidence that religion and French society are incompatible. The final moment, however, solidifies Abd al-Malik's Islam in his life in France. Malik and his girlfriend act as a link between the two businesses. They talk about how important it is for them to feel at home in their own country, which may be why they decided to get married in a civil ceremony rather than a Muslim one, as is highlighted in the last scene. Integration is both possible and desired in this scenario. Abd al-Malik is committed to his religion and keeps practising it in order to bring about peace and promote happiness in his neighbourhood. Malik doesn't have to give up his religion in order to learn French culture and habits.

In a similar spirit, made in France's climactic sequence suggests two distinct types of integration. Sam's incorporation of Islam into his life in France, which allows him to eventually finish writing his article and go back to his previous life, is the first example. Sam returns home with his wife, demonstrating that he is resuming his life as a typical Muslim who is not radicalised. His assimilation is, however, only partial. He is required to pray only at home and refrain from practising his faith in public. Sam's voiceover depicts his incorporation into extremist groups, which is the second type of integration. He informs the audience that he developed a strong bond with the group and at times felt as though they were his biological brothers. Sam's incorporation into the terrorist group serves as an example of how simple it is for an extreme organisation to turn into a community of solidarity and support for the oppressed. When minorities are left out of French society and try to find acceptance elsewhere, dictators like Hassan find it easy to pick them off.

The film's cryptic title also conveys this idea. He makes the claim at the beginning of the movie that the leaders who were raised in France made up these new terrorist threats. In the end, the title appears to allude to the French state's physical and metaphorical fabrication of this menace. Because it turns out that Hassan acted alone and that there was never a network, the deep network of radical terrorists in France was a theory created by the French authorities.

These two films, which both criticise the idea of secularism as it is practised in France while enlightening the public about Islam, come from two different perspectives: those of a French Muslim director who grew up in Strasbourg and a French director who witnessed his father being subjected to discrimination. *Allahu Akbar France* concludes that Islam and France can coexist and calls for a unified society. *'Made in France'* criticises the link between Muslims and terrorists by demonstrating that these people are part of French society. From a postcolonial point of view. It is important to look at the tensions in movies to better understand why it has been hard for Muslims to fit in France.

### **The colonial setting in a modern film**

The ability of Muslims to assimilate into French society was examined in the parts that came before this one, but this section will focus on the impact of colonialism on the integration of Arabs and Muslims in contemporary France. to end the conflicts and injustices brought on by colonial legacies.

In *Allahu Akbar* the images of France are in black and white. This colour selection serves several purposes within the theme. First of all, he establishes the mood for the movie, especially by establishing it in a historical era before the modernism of the location, the furnishings, and the clothing. It brought to mind the colonial era, when black and white movies gave way to coloured ones. Since colour films frequently exaggerate the colours that would be apparent in a particular frame, the choice of black and white also gives the impression that the movie resembles reality. Black and white makes it simple for viewers to observe the colour contrast among various subjects in a shot since it lacks vibrant and varied hues. The disparity in skin tones, as shown in the opening scene where the young lads from the suburbs have darker skin than the French police officers, serves as the best example of this. Its use implies that the suburbs, which French folks who don't live there neglect or fear, are where events frequently occur in real life and that the movie depicts this.

A relationship between two diametrically opposed ideas can be seen in the opening scene montage. The people who live in Strasbourg's suburbs are depicted in the opening scene. The suburbs take place throughout the day as locals go about their regular lives and stroll the streets. The police and the Groupe Intervention Police National (GIPN), tactical troops operating in France's continental territory, are seen conducting building raids in other intersecting shots. Because these were recorded at night, they appear darker. In these interlaced pictures, the difference between day and night alludes to a conflict between light and darkness. Since colonial times, some minority groups have always been afraid of state violence because they are constantly watched and attacked in their homes (or countries).

The following scenario, which depicts a dispute between the police and a large portion of non-white teenagers, confirms the idea that we are seeing a conflict between colonisers and colonised. When Regis and his companions are arrested, friction develops between the French state and ethnic minorities who are not seen as French as a result of their confrontations with

the police. The National Liberation Front, which liberated Algeria from France, is one of many anti-colonial Muslim organisations that are evoked by the song's lyrics, which depict the fight for equality as a war against the state. Abd Al-Malik is referring to the fight for freedom during colonization, when people were afraid and thought that Islam was their enemy.

Made in France, on the other hand, employs a different strategy to critique societal integration from a decolonial standpoint. 'Made in France', as opposed to 'May Allah Bless France', is in colour, highlighting the fact that the movie deals with concerns unique to the current day. Despite this, Boukhrief builds the storyline of the movie on the French people's greatest nightmare: the colonisation backward. This phrase conveys the worry that the Republic may be colonised by France's adversaries if the State cannot maintain control over Islam.

The gang leader, Hassan, has pronounced cutting traits that distinguish him from Sam. Last but not the least, Sidi stands in for young black suburbanites who also experience discrimination in France. Sam goes up to the police to let them know that he has infiltrated a terrorist group. Because Sam is a Muslim, the police decide not to thank him for telling them about the threat and instead keep using him to find the leader of the terrorist cell. This interaction exemplifies how colonial rulers ruled over the colonised people throughout that time. The interactions in the picture demonstrate how long after colonialism, the French State continued to rule over Muslims.

Sidi, a terrorist cell member, mentions his developing animosity toward the French State in the moment where he explains why he joined the group. He made the choice to join the terrorist cell in order to exact revenge on the Republic. We can see Sam and Sidi because this scenario was shot up close. As Sam enters the room, the scene shows Sidi sitting and clearly in a depressed state as she muses over what the cell is doing. The two individuals are then closely framed by the camera. It depicts a private conversation between Sam, Sidi, and the viewers.

In the film, Sam acts as an example for the young, transforming into a kind of parent, while Sidi represents the minority youth of France and thus, plays the role of the child in the cinematography. Through this scene, Boukhrief implies that the state should adopt a similar strategy; there needs to be an open dialogue about the suffering brought on by prejudice against minorities.

These two movies criticise the false perception of Islam in France, which prevents Muslims from feeling fully integrated and like full citizens. Since many of the themes that each movie tackles have to do with colonial tendencies. It is important to study movies from a postcolonial viewpoint. In order to help Muslims, integrate into society, France has the chance to start addressing the history between the two groups. Currently, because of a lack of historical understanding, society views Islam as a threat to French identity. The complicated past can be understood in order to comprehend how Muslims currently feel about the French State and culture. The two are seen as irreconcilable, but as we discover more about this secret religion, we come to understand the ideals it stands for: liberty, equality, and brotherhood.

## **Conclusion**

For French Muslims, it might be challenging to feel at ease, secure, and welcomed in the only country they have ever known. Minorities experience neo-racism in a postcolonial setting and have historically been side-lined. The Republic now oppresses immigrants and Muslims



despite the fact that they are French citizens. The government's decision to target Islam by removing public symbols associated with the faith is one instance of government's dominance. As a result, minorities feel excluded and unable to assimilate into French society as a result.

By learning about the colonial oppression of Muslims and North Africans, French society will get an understanding of the battle for independence and the reasons why some people decide to join terrorist organisations to fight against the state. The most common interpretation of the Algerian War of Independence is that Muslims and people from North Africa engaged in a bloody conflict with France. By talking about their colonial past, French people will realise that it was a fight for their political, religious, and cultural freedom.

Understanding neo-racism in various societies is crucial, not only in France but in any community where minorities have faced marginalisation and persecution because of cultural differences. Neo-racism has evolved into a justification for classifying and treating all minority groups equally. If we want to stop this kind of bigotry, we need to talk in depth about hard topics like how minorities are still being mistreated.

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