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# When gender turns right: racializing Islam and femonationalism in online political discourses in Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

In Flanders-Belgium, a Belgo-Iranian politician has gained nationwide attention for her critique of Islam. Safai's political discourses are built around her opposition to the violation of women's rights in Iran, and to the hijab as a political-patriarchal symbol. Through this latter opposition, she has gained prominence among Flemish nationalists. The emphasis in Safai's discourses has been on using Iranian gender politics to frame her antagonism to Islam as opposed to a patriarchal political ideology and the supposed progressive elite who threaten the secular order. Sparking fear of political Islam—in her words, 'you should be more scared'<sup>1</sup>—and gender as her subject matter has gained Safai acceptance not only among some Belgian and Flemish, but also among some Iranian nationalists. This paper investigates Safai's gender activism and femonationalism featured in online media to show how emancipatory gender discourses are employed in the service of right-wing agendas.

## KEYWORDS

Belgium; gender; femonationalism; racialization; right-wing politics

## Introduction

In Belgium, Islam is a topic that is either not addressed in the media, or implicitly or explicitly associated with negative themes such as fundamentalism and terrorism (Ichau and d'Haenens 2016). Islam is also often discussed with links to migration and integration policies. Within the current migration and integration discourses in Belgium, the role of the diasporic elite is not to be undermined. The diasporic elite are sometimes presented as exemplary success stories of migrant integration, secularization, and adaptation to Western culture. Integration is a topic of high social and political importance and complexity in Belgium that sometimes contributes to the existing reductionist discourses on Islam and Muslims by focusing on problematic tropes about the Muslim population. The existence of the diasporic elite has, in a way, shielded nationalist parties against critiques of racial politics. Nationalist parties have explicitly stated that having members with a migration background – such as migrants and former refugees – as members make them more racially inclusive. For instance, Theo Francken, member of New Flemish Alliance party (N-VA) and former State Secretary for Asylum Policy and Migration, named four female politicians (i.e. Darya Safai, Assita Kanko, Zuhaila Demir, and Nadia Sminate) all of whom are women who have migrant or refugee background to claim "inclusive

nationalism” (De Tijd 2019). The contribution of the diasporic elite in the party and State politics have been, besides being racially motivated, oriented towards women’s and gender right discourses.

In this article, I focus on one case of Iranian diasporic women’s activism in Belgium in order to illustrate discourses on the racialization of Muslims/Islam and femonationalism. I would like to clarify that the Iranian diaspora is characterized by pluralism and complexity, and is diverse in terms of ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, political, and religious affiliations. This case study does not intend to generalize the findings to the whole community, but rather to certain individuals in the diasporic community. Femonationalism, is conceptualized as a form of feminist and femocratic nationalism that refers both to the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam and anti-immigration campaigns (Farris 2017, 3). Sara Farris emphasizes the political and economic aspects of Islamophobia, by arguing that femonationalist discourses call Islam a misogynist religion and treat veiled Muslim women as self-enslaved individuals who do not enjoy much freedom. Additionally, Muslim migrant women in Europe are obliged to undergo integration programs that prepare them to work in the most racialized, feminized, low-status, and low-paid sectors (Souvlis 2017). By doing this, Farris aims to unravel the economic interests behind the seemingly benevolent rescue narratives mobilized in the case of Muslim women (Farris 2018).

Farris also argues that feminists and gender political activism has also contributed to the stigmatization of Muslim men as perpetrators and oppressors of women under the banner of gender equality. Femonationalism thus describes the attempts of Western European right-wing parties and neoliberals to advance xenophobic and racist politics through the touting of gender equality. At the same time, it captures the involvement of feminists and femocrats in the framing of Islam as a misogynistic religion and culture (Farris 2017, 3). In this article, focusing on the case of women’s and gender equality activism by an Iranian diasporic activist in Belgium, I aim to shed light on the usage of discourses on gender equality within the framework of Belgian right-wing and nationalist politics.

The core question that this study aims to answer is, ‘what is the role of individuals in the Iranian diasporic elite in contributing to femonationalist discourses located at the crossroads of Iranian and Belgian nationalism?’ To provide an answer to this question, I focus on the discourse of Belgo-Iranian politician Darya Safai. My positionality, as a migrant Iranian woman living in Belgium, informs my research and analysis. In the following sections, I first briefly introduce some diasporic discourses on nationalism among Iranians worldwide, before turning my focus to Belgium, and to the Safai case. I use different materials from political campaign advertisements to social media posts and opinion pieces to investigate how gender and nationalism are used, defined, and articulated by Safai. In the discussion and conclusion section, I will then place Safai’s discourses within the broader political context of both Iran and Belgium.

## **Diasporic Iranian activism and the case of Belgium**

In the past forty years, after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, the Iranian State has continuously used ‘fear’ as a weapon against unruly bodies. Iranian activists in the diaspora have had a central place in anti-government and resistance movements since the Revolution. The Iranian State recognizes the significance of their role, and they often face

prosecution.<sup>2</sup> While different forms of migration bring about differences in lived experiences, many migrants and displaced people share experiences of hardships and social deprivation, discrimination, and othering. Being a member of diasporic communities could, however, have certain advantages. Members of a diaspora are, for instance, somewhat immune to the mechanisms that States use to define the terms of political expression, national identity, and social formation (Akhavan 2013, 14–15). For some members of the Iranian diaspora, this is the case, for two reasons: Firstly, the general political atmosphere of Iran, as a country where political dissent faces harsh repercussions by the State, makes the price of socio-political activism very high. The members of the Iranian diaspora, especially those who have gained residence rights outside of Iran, are less prone to the State's retaliation as long as they are not in Iran.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, In the last two decades, the role of internet communities, social media, and cyberspaces has become increasingly prominent in producing political and social narratives, and the diaspora – being on the outside – might have the advantage of less censored and less biased media. While a great number of blogs and media in the Persian/Farsi language are run from inside the country, some of the most prominent platforms of online political commentary are managed overseas by diaspora activists (Shakhsari 2012). The Iranian State has a two-pronged strategy for dealing with digital media: a well-documented set of repressive mechanisms that functions alongside a vast but largely overlooked set of practices for actively using the Internet as a site for producing and disseminating favorable political speech and cultural products (Akhavan 2013; Rahbari, Longman, and Coene 2019).

The Iranian online community and Internet sphere is more than simply 'Iranian' because it flows across national borders and includes material written about Iran in both Persian and other languages (Akhavan 2013, 2). The online activities of the diaspora sometimes tend to, as Shakhsari (2012) recognizes, feed the imperialist projects the needed narratives of victimized subjects in dire need of saving and/or protection to justify war and occupation. Perhaps a vivid example of the white savior industrial complex<sup>4</sup> was when an Iranian-American reality TV personality, declared in an interview, 'I am down for bombing Iran' (Katz 2015)<sup>5</sup> in favor of foreign intervention in Iran's affairs. Additionally, some members of the Iranian diaspora are living in the form of nostalgia of the pre-Revolution past. For those who do not have the possibility of revisiting and re-inhabiting their 'motherland', there is an extra source of nostalgia for an imagined or/and real past, and resentment towards the current regime as the prominent role-player in their deprivation. Such sentiments, coupled with the lack of experience of living in Iran or experiencing it as temporary tourists, have resulted in inaccurate accounts of living conditions and everyday experiences of the Iranian people among some members of the Iranian diaspora.

Hamid Dabashi (2011) has discussed that some members of the diaspora adopt the position of 'native informant' by voluntarily contributing to colonial and Islamophobic discourses by presenting their narratives as archetypes and representations of 'traditions' or 'cultures'. The danger to 'the natives' from the native informants is discussed by Shakhsari (2012) who shows how narratives of escape from the homeland and gendered-sexual oppression are embedded within and employed in the war on terror<sup>6</sup> discourses that legitimize violence against the same 'natives' that the diasporic elite claim to represent. A common characteristic of native informants is Islamophobia that is often connected to the plight of women in Iran. The native informant voices and discourses are, however, not intended to be heard by Muslim women, as they target conservative men and

Western non-Muslim people as audience; this highlights the issue of agency of Muslim women in the discourses that so closely surrounds them (Nelson 2015).

In terms of women's activism in Iran, both reformist and conservative women<sup>7</sup> have contributed to both consolidation of, and criticism against the Iranian regime by political participation and social activism. Women politicians – within reformist and conservative groups as well as dependent political affiliations – have never been shy of expressing content and dissent towards the ruling powers in Iran. However, despite women's resistance inside Iran, it is mainly the digital activism coordinated from outside Iran that has attracted attention, both from the Iranian State and from the global audience.<sup>8</sup> Most talked-about Iranian women's activism against State mandates, such as the compulsory hijab and gender-based spatial limitations, include MSF<sup>9</sup> and LIWETS, both run social media campaigns from outside the country but advocate for the rights of women living inside Iran.

Let Iranian Women Enter Their Stadiums (LIWETS) is a campaign started by Darya Safai, Belgo-Iranian politician, and activist. The campaign holds events and protests for the right of Iranian women to attend sports events, and against the ban on women attending stadiums (Rahbari 2019). The campaign has attracted substantial media attention in Belgium (e.g. VRT, RTL, De Morgen, De Standard, De Tijd, Knack, among many others). Safai's activities in Belgium, however, go beyond this campaign. Safai, who is known as a women's rights activist and a politician, has gained nation-wide as well as international attention for what she frames as a critique of Islam, with a focus on the hijab. She is a member of N-VA (New Flemish Alliance, a Flemish nationalist party).

Belgium is a secularized country where the struggle to recognize and tackle the racialization of minorities persists. In the current Belgian social and political atmosphere, according to Belgian Intelligence Services (VSSE)<sup>10</sup> the threat of white nationalism is increasing (VSSE Report 2018), and Islamophobia is on the rise (Easat-Daas 2017). While Islam is at the center of political and social discussions on race, Islamophobia is not always acknowledged by political actors or institutions in Belgium. Additionally, the public and political discourses on Islam are skewed towards a narrow, and overwhelmingly dominant focus on gendered signifiers of Islam such as veiling, and issues regarding hijab and Muslim attire are considerably mediatized (Moore 2018).

The position of N-VA – Safai's party – within the Belgian discourses on Islam is partly built on Safai's activism against Islamic sharia. N-VA, founded in 2001, is a right-leaning and currently the first party in Flanders with a nationalist agenda that strives to an independent republic of Flanders (van Haute, Pauwels, and Sinardet 2018).<sup>11</sup> N-VA has been able to increase its vote share dramatically from 3.1 percent in 2003–20 percent in 2014, making it the first party in Flanders and leader in the Flemish Government (Jones 2016). Safai joined N-VA in 2018, and since early 2019, she is a member of the Belgian Federal Parliament as an elected member of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. N-VA has intentionally marketed itself as a nonracist alternative to other far-right parties in Belgium, such as Vlaams Belang, and does not use overtly Islamophobic rhetoric (See e.g. Jones 2016 for comparison between the two parties). However, both Bart De Wever – the party leader – and the Theo Francken – the N-VA former State Secretary for Asylum Policy and Migration – have used othering discourses against minority populations. De Wever, for instance, stated in an interview with VRT<sup>12</sup> that racism was a 'relative'

concept and too often used as an excuse for personal failure, especially among certain populations, such as the Moroccan community (RTBF 2015).

Partly because N-VA is the leading Flemish party and Safai's successful activism in the framework of LIWETS, and due to the perpetuation of Europe's 'Muslim question', as a result of which Islam – and the hijab – remain publicly debated, Safai's discourses on Islam have attracted substantial media attention in Belgium. She has appeared in numerous national and regional programs and has been featured on many news media across Europe. In the following sections of the paper, I elaborate on how Safai's discourses fit within the broader N-VA standpoints. In diasporic Iranian online and offline spaces, based on my observation, her imagery is perceived in diverse ways: from a 'progressive' activist with feminist agenda to a conservative nationalist who promotes Islamophobia. I will discuss Safai's contribution to femonationalist discourses in Belgium at the crossroads of Iranian and Belgian nationalism in the next sections.

## Methods

After my arrival in Belgium in late 2015 as a researcher, Safai was one of the first people of Iranian descent living in Belgium that I came to know. I had previously heard of her LIWETS movement, but I had not followed any of her political activities closely. I interviewed Safai in early 2016 in relation to her campaign for women's sports spectatorship rights as well as her general political standpoints. She showed great interest in my research. Since then, I have followed her social media online and have witnessed her political career grow. I acknowledge my positionality in Belgium as a migrant Iranian woman, a person 'of color', a person who is often referred to not only as a migrant but also a 'foreigner',<sup>13</sup> and a researcher on gender, religion, media, and migration in Belgium. I have lived in Iran for thirty years and thus have experienced living under Iranian laws and compulsory veiling. I thus consider my positionality of great significance in my reading and analysis of Safai's discourses. While the analysis has been mainly informed by my knowledge on the topic and my feminist theoretical standpoints, it is also influenced by epistemological and phenomenological standpoints that I am equipped with, owing to sharing some similar backgrounds with Safai, albeit our different socio-economic backgrounds (to which I will return in the analysis).

During the past four years, I have followed/read many of Safai's public tweets, opinion pieces, interviews, Facebook posts etc. in different languages. I have also watched and listened to multiple TV, radio, conference, and other event appearances held in English, Persian, French and Dutch languages. For this study, I used multiple online sources, including textual, video, and audio data that have been transcribed. If the original languages used were not English, I translated them from Dutch, French, and Persian to English. While the discourses built through social media are important and Safai has active social media profiles, I have chosen to follow Safai's main ideological standpoints expressed in less reactionary, more elaborated, longer, and accurately composed ways in order to portray a fair picture. All data that has been used in the research has been gathered from online and publicly available sources, and their relevant links and access dates are provided in the references.

The study is based on an analysis of the recurring themes in online Safai's publicly expressed discussions on political and social issues in Belgium. The analysis is thus

focused on mediatised and public political discourses, rather than policy. The initial search revealed that there is a large amount of online data on Safai's perspectives on different issues; however, looking into the content of the material led to identifying the recurring topics. Most data included arguments on Islam with a focus on the hijab. Other recurring themes were her own life story and struggles, social integration, education, and Iran. After narrowing down the content to these themes, I conducted a discourse analysis on selected pieces within the publication dates between the years 2015 and 2019. I will use quotations from the data to enrich and clarify the arguments.

## Racialization of Islam and Iranianness

Darya Safai has employed the Iranian State's Islamic laws as an example of religious backwardness, and as an epitome of the application of sharia law. She has used the case of Iran to warn Belgians of the threats of 'political Islam' and the danger in the application of sharia law (De Tijd 2017). Safai's discourses heavily rely on her own life story. She uses elements of her past as a woman who took refuge in, and found freedom in Belgium (Kosterman 2019) to make arguments on contemporary political issues in Belgium.

Safai's image has validated N-VA diversity in a two-fold way: First, by being a member of N-VA as a person with a migration background, the party has made claims of non-discrimination and inclusivity against people of migrant and non-Western background. Second, Safai's Iranian descent gives her voice the credibility and authority that the party would not have otherwise had, had it been of a man or a Western person. It is based on this background that Safai's image in Belgium as a women's rights activist is almost singularly built around her outspoken opposition to the hijab, which she considers an essentially patriarchal Islamic symbol.

Safai's opposition has not only made her well-known and well-received in right-wing, anti-Islam and some nationalist political communities, but has also led to her public and political popularity and election into the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (Het Laatste Nieuws 2019). Safai's status as a social activist and a politician is built around her usage of the Iranian State – her birth country – as an example of political backwardness. But her Iranian nationalistic tendencies, frame 'Iranianness' as something different from the contemporary State politics. In an interview, discussing the reasons behind Iranian diaspora's success in receiving countries, Safai explained:

That is our Persian blood, I think. We have to perform. We want to be the best. My parents always wanted me to be the best in class. I also see that in my surroundings. Many Iranians that I know are from the middle class. Their parents are highly educated; they expect the same from their children. (Delepeleire 2018)

Safai's discussion, as this quotation shows, is inclined to consider Iranians as generally middle class and highly educated. She considers them forerunners of what she defines as migration and integration success. This comment points to Safai's background and positionality about which she has been vocal. Her social status as a highly educated person of middle/higher class who, as a child in Iran, has had international schooling (Delepeleire 2018) shapes her standpoint. Besides mentioning 'Persian blood', Safai moves on to essentialize the position of the Iranian migrant even further, by providing a racialized view on Iranianness that is characteristic of Iranian nationalist discourses. This view is nostalgic



of the pre-Islamic Iranian history and handpicks elements of ancient Iranian history – in this case, Zoroastrianism – to create a sense of identity. The ancient Iranian history in the form of Zoroastrianism is often reincarnated to express nostalgia towards a non-Islamic past. In such discourses, quite often, the good and the moral phenomena are associated with ancient history, and what is perceived as decadent and backward is considered part of the Islamic legacy:

The Islamic Revolution has destroyed a lot, but not our educational culture. It comes from our rich Persian culture, in which humanism and rationalism were central. Zoroastrianism (the original religion of Persia, ed.) [sic] propagated that we had to work hard. As a result, the study comes first for many Iranians. (Delepeleire 2018)

This type of Persian-centric discourse of nationalism in Iran was revived, especially after the Pahlavi regime was founded in the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> It revised historical linkages to pre-Islamic Iran and imagined an authentic continuity with the past, hence creating an ‘official national memory’ (Fozi 2016, 236). This discourse blamed Islamic religious institutions for the supposed backwardness of a once-great civilization and stressed the superiority, ethnic and cultural inclusiveness, and continuity of Iran’s pre-Islamic history and culture (Fozi 2016, 236). This perspective claims that the long-standing Islamic culture in Iran is superfluous, and this must or can be removed (Jahanbegloo 2015). This discourse also assumes cultural proximity between the imagined ‘Iranianness’ and European secularism.

Based on the Persian-centric nationalist ideology, the emphasis in Safai’s discourses has been in using gender politics in Iran to frame the antagonism to Islam as opposed to a patriarchal political ideology. Using fear of political Islam – in her words, ‘you should be more scared’ (De Tijd 2017) – she advocates for banning the hijab in schools, because it is a sign of early Islamization:

There will be no revolution in Belgium like in Iran. But what you see is a slumbering rise in Islamism. I recognize this. And it is dangerous. I know what it does to people. It leads to apartheid ... I hear the same speech in Flemish schools as in Taliban schools. Teachers of Islam teach girls to wear headscarves. If the girls do not wear them, they challenge men. I feel so mortified when I hear that. If those children do not hear a voice of criticism at home, they too are lost. (Knack 2018)

Safai’s argumentation – in this case, with the usage of terms such as Islamism, danger, apartheid, and Taliban – is an example of how she builds her argument around a sense of threat and urgency posed by ‘political Islam’. Safai’s own ‘success’ story as a well-integrated Iranian migrant has attracted media attention, and used as a ‘model minority’ example. Theo Francken referred to Safai as, ‘an example for newcomers’, in an electoral meeting for the Flemish parliament in 2019 (Verbergt 2019).<sup>15</sup> Safai herself has also made explicit comments about her successful integration; in a video promoting her candidacy for the Belgian Chamber of Representatives in person, Safai explains:

My success in these elections is the success of all women who have fought against the compulsory hijab for years, and an indication of successful integration and social compatibility of Iranians in Belgium and Flanders. (Atashban 2019)

While there is little study on Iranian migrants’ attitudes in Belgium, the existing studies have shown that there are different attitudes towards the Belgian integration model

that has a focus on language and cultural norms (Rahbari 2018). Because of Safai's background, her narrative on Islam and Iran are considered to come 'from within' (Ide 2017), and have very rarely been substantially challenged in different Belgian media.

### Westernism and the construction of the 'other'

The discourses of Iranian nationalism explained in the previous section, have also involved – as many Persian intellectuals did in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century – actively encouraging the westernization of Persia (Leservot 2011). This version of Occidentalism, albeit growingly criticized by intellectuals during the twentieth century, continues to exist until today. Safai has repeatedly affirmed her conviction that Western culture has superiority – in comparison to an assumed monolithic and homogenous 'Islamic culture' – and is the source of democracy and gender equality. For her, the affinity between 'Western' and 'Persian' worldviews find a common antagonism in Islam:

All those Western values – equality, freedom, and democracy – are the reason for our happiness, the reason that we feel at home here ... what we find here is what we have been looking for in Iran for so long. (Delepeleire 2018)

Here, I want to draw attention to the usage of pronouns that contribute to the discursive construction of the 'other'. The 'we' in the quotation above, refers to a generalized and homogenized Iranian diasporic population who seemingly believe that the Western culture is the key to and the source of equality, freedom, and democracy. As any other essentialized and generalized 'we', this identity is built against that of the 'other', here, Muslims who resist Western acculturation:

It is not the ban on the headscarf that deprives these girls of their chances in education and the labor market, but the way in which they learn to resist Western culture, and their identification with a suppressive system. (Safai 2018a)

For Safai, the way to maintain the 'happiness' passes through acquiring Western qualities. Safai's position vis-à-vis Belgium's integration programs for migrants and newcomers reflects this perspective. 'Common points such as language, culture, or the values of enlightenment must be passed on to those who come here now', stated Safai in Knack (2018). It is, however, not enough to adopt 'Western norms', Safai explains elsewhere that, 'it should be an honor to have Belgian nationality. You have to be committed and want to belong' (De Standaard 2018). Nevertheless, even with the emphasis on the possibility of good integration, Safai believes that 'extreme Islamism' acts as a catalyzer to create dangerous individuals. In an interview with VOA-Persian<sup>16</sup> a few days after the 2016 Brussels bombings,<sup>17</sup> Safai argued:

I do not think that the reason behind a person turning to terrorism is necessarily their incompatibility to the society or bad integration; because there is evidence that this bad integration exists in all communities, why is it that only in communities with Muslim background these disasters happen? (VOA 2016)

Safai then continued to explain that while individuals could be 'angry' at the society because of bad integration, it is only by being exposed to ideologies such as 'extreme communism', 'Nazism' and 'extreme Islamism' that they turn into terrorism. While the great antagonist is extreme Islamism, in her discussion on migrants'

integration, Safai recognizes groups of sympathizers and facilitators who she considers apologists in the name of cultural relativism. The populist nature of Safai's gender discourses is built in opposition to these groups whom she demonizes as the progressive elite or the leftist feminists marked by them undermining the threat of Islamism and hence, their failure to see or fight the threat to the secular order. In a panel discussion on Dutch TV, Safai explained:

Standing up for equality between men and women is pushed to the corner [and labeled] extreme right; the reason is simple; today our 'feminists' [*sic*], feminists who used to stand up for the rights and equality of men and women, think differently about that equality. Today they sometimes practice cultural relativism; because they think people from different communities have different requirements. (De Nieuwe Maan 2019)

According to Safai, the feminists are not only to be blamed for ignoring the 'threat' of Islam but also because of creating a false narrative of Islamophobia and by focusing on issues such as 'burqa bans' that Safai considers a 'phantom' and unimportant issue:

Feminists and progressives have a habit of ignoring Islamism's female victims, preferring to focus on phantom reports of Islamophobia in the West. Enormous attention has been paid to 'burqa bans' in European countries. (Safai 2017b)

After stating that she does not believe that Muslim women enjoy a 'free choice' to veil, in a panel interview on Dutch TV, Safai explained:

[Feminists] take the wrong position against that struggle of Muslim women and Muslim communities. Because, they say [that my standpoint] is polarizing, stigmatizing, Islamophobia. It is not true. Not every criticism of Islam is Islamophobia. Not every criticism of Islam is against the Muslim community. (De Nieuwe Maan 2019)

I address the question of how Safai's 'criticism' of Islam related to Islamophobia, and whether it is possible to discuss Islam and Muslims as separate entities in the next section. While Safai has maintained that she offers a critique of Islamism or Islam in its political and extreme forms, her arguments do target Islamic sharia as a whole as the source of gender inequality:

Sharia, the Islamic law, has no respect whatsoever for women's rights, equality of women and men; and these are our achievements here. We acquired them; we fought for a long time for our values, equality between women and men. I believe that sharia is criminality. Criminality against women; criminality against children who could be married at the age of nine; criminality towards human beings; and criminality towards non-believers. So, it is very clear to us that there is no place for it in our politics. (Safai 2018b)

The repetition of the word 'criminality' in reference to sharia in this quotation is aimed to persuade the audience by showing them the relevance of opposition to them as 'human beings' and possible non-Muslims. There is a difference between statements such as 'sharia believes in discrimination against women' (Safai 2016a) and Safai's claims of 'critique of extreme Islamism' (Damavand News 2019). With the usage of 'we/our' in opposition to a cultural 'other', references to Western (and Persian) superiority over Islam and the interchangeable usage of sharia and extreme Islamism, Safai's arguments not only systematically mark and politically divide Islam and Muslims from an assumed 'us', but also consider Islam and Muslims as a monolithic and homogenous group.

## Who is to blame: Islam or Muslims?

Safai has maintained that her outspoken opposition to the hijab – as an essentially discriminatory symbol – should not be understood equivalent to a critique of Muslims as a people. This means that she makes a distinction between criticizing Islam and targeting Muslim people directly. This explanation places Muslims and Islam in separate categories. This standpoint can be scrutinized from two perspectives. First, by separating Muslims and Islam, Safai aims to criticize what she has consistently called ‘the philosophy behind the hijab’ (Safai 2016b) or the ‘theological background’ of the hijab (Safai 2018a). By doing this, Safai understands women to be victims of a system of oppression or are psychologically conditioned cultural dopes. Maintaining that she does not believe in hijab as a choice, Safai views women’s veiling as a form of internalized compliance. In a speech in the European Parliament on 7 September, 2016, Safai stated:

Choosing to wear a burkini or a veil cannot be seen as freedom of choice. Do not forget that the Muslim women who pretend to choose this are grown up with the indoctrination by their families and community who believe that wearing a veil is a good choice to be a good woman ... It is also possible that some of the Muslim women wearing the burkini are victims of the Stockholm syndrome ...<sup>18</sup> Liberating women from discrimination does not happen by defending wearing a burkini but by understanding the philosophy behind it and by throwing it off forever. (Safai 2016b)

It is not possible to see Islam and Muslims as completely separate entities, neither in terms of diverse public perceptions of Islam as a religion and Muslims as diverse populations, nor regarding the consequences of ‘othering’ one or the other. Muslims and interpretations of Islamic sources have to be understood not only in deeply contextualized ways, but also in relation to each other. Furthermore, even in Safai’s discourses, Islam and Muslims do appear as interconnected. In an opinion piece, which was a reaction to the 2015–16 New Year’s Eve sexual assaults in Germany,<sup>19</sup> Safai wrote:

Whether the perpetrators of the attacks in Germany were refugees or migrants of Arab and North African descent, their barbaric behavior finds its origin in the gender apartheid of the Islamic culture. They are themselves the victims of a religious worldview that regards women as inferior beings. We must make it clear to the perpetrators of sexual aggression and intimidation that their behavior in our society is not tolerated. That also means strict penalties. But it is even more important that Muslims in our society also condemn them strongly. They must also show that they are disgusted by practices of this kind against women, and that European rules of law are superior to pernicious religious dogmas, regardless of which country the perpetrators may come from. (VRT 2016)

In this argument, Safai calls on the Muslim community to react and condemn the assaults, while if she did indeed believe in the separation of Islam and Muslims, such a call would not be meaningful. Quite the opposite, while the common denominator that caused the violent behavior is assumed to be ‘Islam’ (Ide 2017, 20), Muslim people are expected to absolve themselves of the connection they are considered to have with it. In another moment, Safai adopts a discourse different from her usual portrayal of veiled women as victims, in which hijabi women seem complicit to discrimination:

The fight of the Iranian woman is not the same as the fight of women here [in Belgium] who want to be discriminated against ... You [to hijabi women in Belgium in the panel] are not discriminated against, thanks to the secular law of Belgium. However, with what sharia wants for

women, like countries in other parts of the world, sharia believes in discrimination against women. (Safai 2016a)

By stating that the women want to be discriminated against, Safai connotes a form of voluntarism, the existence of which she often denies. This points to an existing discrepancy in the portrayals of Muslim women: on the one hand, voiceless victims of male domination and 'Islamic' oppression and, on the other hand, active agents choosing to side with oppressors and taking part in the acculturation of new generations. In Safai's call for limiting Islam/Muslim practices, the boundaries between Islam as a textual, discursive, and lived experience get blurred. The usage of the term 'sharia' is in itself problematic because it refers to practices – including wearing the hijab – that are not unequivocally 'Islamic', but rather rooted in diverse Muslim customs. Directing the criticism towards Islam rather than Muslims could be a strategy to appear more empathetic to the people who are supposedly victimized by Islam. This approach is also compatible with both the white savior industrial complex – consolidated by narratives of migrant gratitude – and the seemingly 'inclusive' nature of the N-VA party that shields itself against claims of discrimination and bias.

### Nationalism and gender's turn to the right

By focusing on women's and gender equality activism of Safai, Iranian-Belgian politician, and recent member of Belgium's Chamber of Representatives (as of 2019), I aimed to shed some light on the usage of discourses of gender equality within the framework of Belgian right-wing politics.

To answer the research question 'what is the role of individuals in the Iranian diasporic elite in contributing to femonationalist discourses located at the crossroads of Iranian and Belgian nationalism?', I identified and highlighted recurring themes on Islam and gender in Safai's discourses. These discourses included a prominent focus on the hijab, Safai's own life story and personal past struggles, Belgian integration policies and politics, gender issues in Iran, and Islam. Safai has adopted the position of 'informant' and 'insider witness' and has extended the credibility of right-wing moral panic<sup>20</sup> regarding political Islam, and thus contributing to the racialization of Islam and Muslimness. She is, however, hardly the only politician – or political activist – in Belgium who has adopted Islamophobic discourses, and her discussions could be considered much less provocative in comparison with other notoriously anti-Islam politicians (e.g. Filip Dewinter).

Safai's femonationalism is understandable only by locating her position, discourses, and arguments within both contexts of Belgium and Iran, Islamophobic politics, the racialization of Islam, and politics of othering can only be understood by exploring the transnational nature of the 'war on terror' discourses.<sup>21</sup> While Belgian politics were affected by the post 9/11 world order, it was specifically affected after ISIL<sup>22</sup> terrorist attacks on Brussels airport and a Brussels subway station in the city's European quarter on 22 March, 2016 (22/3) (Laoen 2019). In the aftermath of the attacks, Belgium's right-wing Islamophobic and anti-migrant activism grew (Simons 2016; Gasparini 2016). In this political climate, blaming Islam for Belgium's political and social issues is even more embraced than it was before.

Because of her position as a native informant, the 'credible' and mesmerizing capacity of Safai's discourses on Islam for the rising new right-wing groups should be taken

seriously. The discourses of gender/sexual rights wrapped in patriotism and Western cultural superiority in femonationalist and homonationalist<sup>23</sup> movements appeal to the new generations of middle- and upper-class Europeans. This is especially important since the right-wing movement in Europe does not necessarily demonstrate traditional and conservative gender and sexuality views anymore (Blum and Köttig 2017). In the new right-wing movement, being female, non-white, and having been a migrant/refugee – as is the case of Safai – could be weaponized to build narratives of Western/white savior. This means that our analysis of the ideologies of the new right requires to consider this seemingly progressive turn.

This is what Farris (2017, 2018) takes into account in her discussion on the political economy of right-wing gender and sexuality discourses. Farris's femonationalism captures the complexity of rights discourses in liberal settings and their connection to other discourses such as homonationalism and social integration. What is clear in both concepts is that in order to tackle Islamophobia, we need to understand it as another form of racialization or race making (Meer 2017). As Susan Koshy (2008) argues, the intersections of gender and feminism with Orientalism and Islamophobia have proved to be among the trickiest analytics to negotiate in the last two decades, not because of the silencing of the other, but because of the proliferation of voices of simulated others. This is the characteristic of neo-orientalism – parallel to femonationalism – in which diasporic elite use their native subjectivity and agency in the West to render otherwise biased accounts of the region seemly more authoritative and objective (Behdad and Williams 2010). In Belgium, these accounts, specifically in the case of Iran, more easily dominate public perception because the number of diasporic Iranians in Belgium is small in comparison to Belgian-Moroccan and Belgian-Turkish communities (Rahbari 2018). Moreover, Iran rarely makes it to Belgian news and media reporting unless in the case of large-scale disasters, protests, and stories concerning Iranian refugees and migrants, and thus public knowledge about the country's political and social realities is limited to reductionist narratives of victimhood and oppression.

This study's contribution to the studies on femonationalism is in showing how individuals who are members of the diasporic elite subscribe to multiple discourses of nationalism; in this case, Safai adheres as much to Flemish nationalism as she does to Persian-centric nationalism. She instrumentalizes Persian nationalism to justify her Flemish nationalist position by highlighting common ground between the two in their rejection of 'political Islam'. Safai's approach towards her Persian roots, coupled with her perspective on Flemish-ness and Muslimness, tends to essentialize group identities and facilitate the racialization of the 'other'. The generalization of notions such as Islam, Muslims, and sharia in her standpoints against Islam, and her conviction that Islam creates a different sort of subject than other religions<sup>24</sup> lead to the essentialization of Muslimness. The activism of Darya Safai is only one example of how right-wing gender activism could be used in the ideological making of a racialized other. To counter it, not only the racial-religious politics should be brought back into the discussion, but also the taken-for-granted nature and simulated representativeness of the false knowledge perpetrated through claims of diasporic 'authenticity' should be disturbed. Minority women's rights in Belgium cannot be discussed without addressing the harmful discourses that continuously marginalize and demonize them based on their religion, color, place of birth, or cultural background.

In this article, I illustrated how emancipatory gender discourses could be employed in the service of right-wing and Islamophobic political agendas. Even though Belgium is a country that scores relatively high on the United Nations emancipation indexes, gender, immigration, and integration are frequently linked by right-wing populist parties (De Lange and Mügge 2015) who employ the hijab as a generalized symbolism for Muslim women's suppression by oppressive Muslim men. I argue that Safai's successful activism, above all in the framework of LIWETS, has addressed an important violation of women's rights in Iran. At the same time, her nationalist discourses have contributed to the othering and racialization of Muslim and migrant minorities, including some segments of the Iranian diaspora.

## Notes

1. In Flemish: 'Julie zouden gerust banger mogen zijn' (De Tijd 2017).
2. Iranian dual nationals and residents of foreign countries have increasingly faced persecution the Islamic Republic (Ditmars 2018).
3. This is a complex issue. The diaspora might be immune to Iranian regimes propaganda, but it is still prone to other forms of State propaganda depending on their location. Additionally, Iranian diaspora do not equally feel empowered to publicly engage in political commentary in online spaces. Depending on forms of residence rights they have and their relationship and connections to Iran, speaking out might be considered risky even from outside the country.
4. The white savior industrial complex is the social and emotional system of valuing the efforts that white people make for saving the seemingly poor and unfortunate non-white individuals (Aronson 2017, 37).
5. Reza, one of the characters of the American reality TV show *Shahs of Sunset*, stated this in an interview HuffPost Live (Katz 2015). The video snippet of the odd interview is publicly available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jR63-jQjMG4>
6. A series of military and intelligence interventions after 9/11 carried out in Muslim majority countries by USA and other Western allies launched to fight global 'Muslim extremism'.
7. While not entirely representative of the political diversities in Iran, the political forces are usually divided in two categories of reformist and conservative. In short, reformists attempt to reconcile Islam with democracy and human rights, while conservatives insist on keeping intact the founding ideologies of the Islamic Republic (Mir-Hosseini 2002)
8. By this I do not mean to undermine women's participation and role from inside the country, but that the coordination of the activities from outside of the country and brought about more visibility.
9. My Stealthy Freedom (MSF) campaign is an online movement that started by former journalist and Masih Alinejad who is Iranian born but runs the campaign from the UK and USA. The movement shares selfies and photos of women in Iran without the hijab to protest Iran's compulsory hijab law.
10. Veiligheid van de Staat: <https://www.vsse.be/nl>
11. The Federal State of Belgium is divided into three regions: (i) Flanders, the predominantly Dutch-speaking region; (ii) Walloon, the predominantly French-speaking region; (iii) and Brussels, which is the multilingual capital region.
12. the national public-service broadcaster for the Flemish Community of Belgium.
13. in Dutch, 'buitenlander'.
14. The Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979) was the Persian monarchy that was overthrown by the Iranian Revolution. The Pahlavi dynasty was founded by Reza Shah Pahlavi and was heavily reliant on cultural and political modernization of Iran and revival of pre-Islamic Persian culture and heritage.
15. In Dutch, 'Ze is een voorbeeld voor nieuwkomers'.



16. VOA is an international broadcaster that has a channel in Persian language. As a governmental institution, the channel is owned by the Federal government of the United State of America.
17. Three suicide bombings coordinated by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) took place in Brussels, on 22 March 2016. The attacks killed thirty-two civilians and three perpetrators and injured more than 300 people.
18. A contested and not always critically recognized and validated condition which causes captives and hostages to develop empathy/affinity/alliance with their captors.
19. Many sources were quick to blame migrants and refugees for the assault and a media panic was created. These allegations have however been debunked ever since, e.g. see Nolan Brown (2017).
20. Moral panics are collective societal reactions in condemning something by creating sensationalized reports and folk devils who are held responsible to the public outrage. The moral panics have social and political implications that might encourage more surveillance and control (Rahbari, Longman, and Coene 2019).
21. The purpose of the war on terror as an orientalist ideology in the post-9/11 era is to influence the public's thoughts, affects and actions to justify militarization and a large array of supposedly (counter)terror actions which normalize othering of migrants and Islamophobia (Beshara 2018).
22. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.
23. Homonationalism according to Jaspir Puar is the movement in which certain queer constituencies have embraced nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas. Within this movement gendered, raced, and sexualized counterterrorism illuminate the production of normative patriot and terrorist corporealities (see Puar 2018).
24. While the full discussion is beyond the capacity of this paper, Safai has compared Islam and Judaism as well as Islam and Christianity in the past. In a TV appearance she compared Islamism and Orthodox Judaism and explained, 'Islamism wants to conquer the world. It is a danger. It cannot be compared to ultra-orthodox Jews because what they [Islamists] want is an Islamic State' (Safai 2018b). In relation to Christianity, Safai has stated that, 'Christians revolted here in the twentieth century against the dogmas of the church. Now it is the turn for Europeans with a Muslim background to reject the discriminatory laws of sharia' (Safai 2017a).

## Disclosure statement

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