

The Stereotypical Image of Muslim Women in Some Belgian Writings

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Received: 13/12/2025, Accepted: 01/02/2026, Published: 28 /03/ 2026

Abstract

In recent decades, the representation of Muslim women has drawn significant attention from certain Belgian scholars and writers. Their works often focus on issues such as the headscarf, marriage, polygamy, inheritance, and divorce, portraying Muslim women through a lens that tends to reinforce stereotypes. This interest is largely influenced by the increasing Muslim population in Belgium, the rise of human rights and religious freedom discourses, and legislative measures prohibiting the wearing of the veil in public spaces and government institutions. Such portrayals have contributed to distorted images of Muslim women, impacting both public perception and social integration. This study critically examines these Belgian writings, highlighting the biases and misconceptions they propagate, and underscores the need for a more balanced understanding of Islamic teachings concerning women.

Keywords: Muslim women, stereotypes, Belgium, Islam, human rights, headscarf, polygamy, inheritance, divorce, religious freedom

Introduction

In recent decades, the issue of women in Islam has attracted the attention of a group of Western thinkers of Belgian origins. A number of works have been produced that address some of the issues associated with Muslim women such as the headscarf issue, marriage, polygamy, inheritance and divorce. It seems that the main reason for this interest is due primarily to the growing number of Muslims in Belgium on the one hand, and the growing call for human rights and religious freedoms on the other. A third reason is the passing of laws banning the veil in public and government institutions, which raised questions throughout Europe, especially Belgium, as to whether there is freedom of religion, and if so, why are there laws preventing and prohibiting the practice of these freedoms?

Some have attempted to justify the prohibition of the veil among others, by addressing the issue of women in Islam in a manner contrary to the established facts and practices of Islam and Muslims. Such an approach was pursued by Etienne Vermeersch, whose writings are rife with misrepresentations, distortions, and fabrications. His writings presented a new image of Islam to the Western public that was full of falsities. The cause for such an erroneous approach was Etienne's inability to properly understand the evidences in the Qur'an and Sunnah pertaining to the issue of women in Islam.

Praise be to God, and peace and blessings be upon our master the Messenger of God, and upon his family, his companions, and those who follow his guidance, and after: The issue of women in Islam has attracted the attention of a group of Belgian Western thinkers

in recent decades, and many works have appeared that addressed some issues related to Muslim women such as the headscarf, marriage, polygamy, divorce, and inheritance. It seems that the reasons for this interest are primarily due to the increasing number of Muslims in Belgium on the one hand, and the emergence of agreements and slogans calling for human rights and religious freedoms on the other hand, and thirdly the enactment of laws banning the headscarf in governmental and public institutions, which raised a problem in Europe in general and in Belgium in particular, namely if there are religious freedoms, then why is there prevention and prohibition of practicing these freedoms?

From here some have tried to justify this ban on the headscarf and others by addressing the issue of women in Islam in a manner contrary to the reality established in the Islamic religion and to what exists in the reality of Muslims, as is the case with Etienne Vermeersch through his writings which were dominated by distortion, alteration, truncation, and fabrication, thus presenting to Western public opinion a new image colored with lies and false claims, and his basis in that was casting doubt on what is stated in the Qur'an and Sunnah regarding rulings and misrepresenting them.

On the other hand, other objective studies have emerged that attempted to refute the first falsehoods and respond to them objectively, as was done by some thinkers such as Dardenne Michel and Lucas Catherine and others, and here I would like to point out the difficulty of tracking all the opinions of Belgian writers in a brief and focused research like this, therefore we will follow the most important opinions that we were able to access through some of their writings and articles, and attempt to understand the mental image that these writers have formed about Muslim women in the Belgian imagination as a model of the Western imagination. In writing this paper, we followed an approach in which we tried as much as possible to correct the errors written by Etienne Vermeersch in particular through analyzing the content of some of his discourses and responding to them, and to uncover the fallacies that were and still are inserted by the pens of many writers who drew from the orientalist intellectual school, and the topics that we will address are:

1 The Headscarf

The headscarf is the clothing of the woman and part of her personality, rather it is a symbol of her since the revelation of the verses of the headscarf which stipulate the obligation of covering the entire body of the woman, and a wide controversy has been raised in recent decades in many European countries after decisions banning the wearing of the headscarf in these countries, until it seemed as if it were a European war on the headscarf, despite the slogans raised by these countries regarding respect for human rights and freedoms, and many writings appeared in the West, foremost among them what was written by Etienne Vermeersch on this subject, and his attempt to link the idea of the headscarf with the image of the oppression of Muslim women and its obstruction of their freedom, and its contradiction with the concepts of equality and freedom.

Etienne Vermeersch states in an article entitled Islam and the Headscarf that the command for Muslim women to wear the headscarf is not mentioned in the Qur'anic verses, but rather there is only a reference to the khimar, and in this context he cites a number of Qur'anic verses related to the headscarf including the saying of God "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze

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P-ISSN: 2496-4476 E-ISSN: 2273-1571

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and guard their private parts and not display their adornment except what is apparent thereof and to draw their coverings over their bosoms” and he interprets these verses in a specific way stating that there is no condition in them for wearing the headscarf and that the text only refers to the khimar which existed before in many cultures and ancient civilizations and the issue as he states is a matter of natural desert climate.

Thus he links the wearing of the khimar which is part of the headscarf to the desert environment in which the Qur’an was revealed and that it existed before and this statement repeated by Etienne Vermeersch is not disputed as the khimar and headscarf existed among previous nations such as the Romans Greeks Indians and Persians and texts of the Tanakh mention the khimar and the veil as it is mentioned in the Book of Genesis “And she said to the servant who is this man walking in the field to meet us he said the servant it is my master so she took the veil” and from here Islam came and the headscarf was known and familiar among different nations. Etienne Vermeersch also mentions that there are pressures exercised by fathers on their daughters to wear the headscarf as he states there is pressure from parents on children to wear the headscarf and conditions imposed on some Muslim women to wear the garment which is the headscarf everywhere and even requiring others to wear the niqab which is a face covering in any place

It is noted from his words that he makes statements without evidence or proof to support them as definitive proof in this matter as if he had supported his statements with some percentages or statistics including statements from a group of Muslim women who declared to him this pressure to wear the headscarf and niqab therefore his statements cannot be relied upon or considered as an established premise

On the other hand we find that Lucas Catherine disagrees with Etienne Vermeersch on this issue saying I do not believe that the vast majority of Muslim women wear the headscarf because of social pressures but on the contrary we should ask all schools to allow the wearing of the headscarf and in this case all scarves will be spread and social pressure will be reduced From this Lucas Catherine shows that the real pressure lies in banning the headscarf and that this ban contradicts in reality the Belgian constitution which grants religious freedom in private life and in public places

This is with regard to the headscarf

2 Marriage

Marriage in Islam is the bond that connects the hearts of a woman and a man and unites them with a bond of affection and harmony and unites their souls in a way that minds cannot define or determine and Etienne Vermeersch mentions in this regard that in Islam there are behavioral rules derived from the Holy Qur’an or the Prophetic Sunnah which are rules derived from the statements and actions of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him including the duty of the wife to obey her husband and the right of the father to determine or refuse the choice of marriage of his daughter and the marriage of Muslim girls at a very early age

Here Etienne Vermeersch raises the issue of the marriage of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him to Aisha may God be pleased with her when she was six years old and his consummation of marriage with her at the age of nine and he asks Aisha is a minor so how can she be married at this age

CORPS & PSYCHISME

P-ISSN: 2496-4476 E-ISSN: 2273-1571

Volume 13/ Issue 1/ 2026

This writer goes further when he touches the personality of the Prophet asserting that he presented a bad example when he married Aisha while she was still a young girl not exceeding nine years of age as he said Muhammad also had excessive sexual desire when he married a girl aged six and consummated marriage with her at the age of nine it is not a good example. It is observed from his words that he tries to reinforce the image entrenched in the minds of many Westerners about the sensuality of Arabs in general and the sensuality of the Prophet Muhammad in particular and more severe than that is the attempt to equate the marriage of the Prophet with cases of sexual abuse of minors as happens in many parts of the world today. We respond to him that the Prophet married Aisha when she was mature or close to maturity and the evidence for that is her statement if the girl reaches nine years then she is a woman and the statement of Imam al Shafi I saw in Yemen girls of nine who menstruate frequently and al Bayhaqi narrated in al Sunan from al Shafi also his statement the earliest I heard of women menstruating were women in Tihama who menstruate at nine years and this is confirmed by contemporary scientific studies regarding the age of puberty in girls as Doctor Mona Rashad a pediatric consultant says puberty begins in girls after the age of nine and in some cases at the age of eight and this is considered a natural matter and from this and based on that the Prophet consummated marriage with Aisha when she was mature or close to maturity and there is no violation of a minor girl in this.

Etienne Vermeersch (Etienne Vermeersch) also portrays the wife in Islam as being deprived of her rights, with the man holding a higher and superior position over her, as testified by the Qur'an itself. He cites the verse:

Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance—advise them; [then] forsake them in bed; and [finally] strike them. But if they obey you, seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand. ﴿ (An-Nisa/34)

Here, Michel Dardenne (Dardenne Michel) responds that the “qiwamah” mentioned in the above verse does not imply superiority as Vermeersch and other critics of Islam interpret it. Instead, it signifies provision, strength, and responsibility. The man is responsible for the material support, protection, and care of his wife. Qiwamah therefore reflects care, responsibility, leadership, and understanding, rather than inherent superiority.

Another aspect of women's oppression, as Vermeersch portrays it, is the husband's right to strike his wife if she disobeys. He cites the example of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab, who once told a companion: “Do not ask the man why he struck his wife.” From this, Vermeersch infers that a husband may beat his wife without accountability, and thus believes that European laws on religious freedoms cannot be fully applied. He states: “It goes without saying that the right referred to in Article 9 of the European Convention regarding ‘preservation of practice and consideration’ of religion here cannot be fully applied.”

From the above, it is evident that Vermeersch's writings contain certain stereotypes widely accepted by many Westerners, often applied to Islam without careful verification of primary Islamic sources.

3. Polygamy:

The issue of polygamy in Islam is another key topic raised by Etienne Vermeersch. He states: “The Qur’an explicitly permits polygamy,” implying that it indicates a humiliating social position for women. He cites the Qur’anic verse:

﴿And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphans, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four.﴾ (An-Nisa/3)

In response, it is noted that polygamy existed in pre-Islamic societies without restrictions on the number of wives, financial capability, health, or competence. It was not introduced by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Jewish law allowed polygamy at a man’s discretion; for example, King David had numerous wives, and his son Solomon did as well. In 1 Kings it is stated: “Solomon loved many foreign women, besides Pharaoh’s daughter... he had seven hundred wives of noble birth and three hundred concubines.” In Christianity, polygamy remained permissible until the 16th century, even among clergy (Wester Mark).

Islam, however, imposes conditions: financial capability to support multiple wives and justice among them in food, clothing, housing, and intimacy. Those unable to meet these conditions are restricted to one wife, as stated in the Qur’an:

﴿...then [marry] only one or what your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice].﴾ (An-Nisa/3)

Polygamy serves wisdom: the first wife may be infertile, so having a second wife ensures continuity of offspring. The second wife participates by her choice, exercising her right to select her husband. Polygamy may also address imbalances in population after wars or disasters, providing social stability and protection for women.

Roger Garandy (Roger Garandy) observes: “The Qur’an acknowledges polygamy, but did not introduce it; it existed in the Torah and Gospel. Islam imposed limits, such as perfect justice among wives in spending, love, and sexual relations. If applied literally, these rules make polygamy virtually impossible.”

Polygamy does not inherently cause harm, as Vermeersch and others claim, because Islamic law aims to remove harm and promote benefit.

4. Divorce:

Islamic law permits divorce as a remedy when marital conflicts cannot be resolved otherwise. Islam is not the first to legislate divorce; it existed in Jewish law and in ancient civilizations. However, Islam ensures the rights and dignity of both spouses.

Vermeersch argues that Islamic permissibility of divorce greatly harms women, particularly regarding custody, granting boys over 7 and girls over 12 to the father.

Michel Dardenne responds that Islam grants women the right to divorce under specific procedures, protecting rights unseen in any other divine religion or Western civil law for fourteen centuries. He cites the Qur’an:

﴿Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three menstrual periods, and it is not lawful for them to conceal what Allah has created in their wombs if they believe in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands have more right to take them back in this [period] if they desire reconciliation. And women have rights similar to those over them in kindness, and men have a degree over them. And Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise.﴾ (Al-Baqarah/228)

CORPS & PSYCHISME

P-ISSN: 2496-4476 E-ISSN: 2273-1571

Volume 13/ Issue 1/ 2026

If a husband divorces his wife, she observes a waiting period of three months; if pregnant, she waits until delivery. The husband provides for her during this time. Dardenne asks Vermeersch: “Do you know a law that grants these rights to women for 1,400 years?” Divorce in Islam preserves women’s rights and dignity far better than any other divine law or secular legislation.

Inheritance:

Vermeersch discusses women’s inheritance in Islam, aiming to distort and denigrate Islam by emphasizing the inequality between male and female shares. He claims women’s inheritance is half that of men, and that their testimony is inferior.

In response, Islam is the only religion historically to grant women inheritance rights compared to other religions. Women received inheritance despite previously being bought and sold or excluded, as in Judaism, or only given by male discretion in most Christian laws. Pre-Islamic Arab women were often part of inheritance themselves. Michel Dardenne emphasizes that Islam freed and protected women’s inheritance rights.

Distribution differences reflect financial responsibilities and are not intended to favor men. Sometimes women inherit more than men, sometimes equal, sometimes less, as confirmed by Dardenne. Gustave Le Bon (G. Lebon) notes: “The inheritance principles prescribed in the Qur’an are extremely just and equitable. Compared with French and English laws, Islamic law grants wives rights unheard of in other legal systems.”

Conclusion:

These are some of the stereotypes of Muslim women those certain thinkers have attempted to shape in the Belgian imagination. It should be noted that these images are not merely abstract ideas but intellectual constructs used by some thinkers to justify aggressive attitudes toward Islam, as with Etienne Vermeersch, promoting false ideas about Muslim women characterized by fabrication, lies, and complete ignorance of Islam.

Undoubtedly, these stereotypes have serious negative consequences, foremost among them discouraging people in Belgian society and other Western countries from understanding Islam correctly in terms of faith, law, and civilization.

Moreover, the distorted image of women in Islam damages human relations between Muslim Arabs and the West. The prevalence of such images prevents establishing relationships based on mutual understanding, exchange, reassurance, and trust.

Finally, there remains the negative impact that this distorted stereotype has on the interactions of Arab and Muslim communities in Belgium. The prevalence of such a distorted image contributes to creating a hostile environment toward Muslim immigrants in Belgium and other Western countries. This underscores the necessity of correcting the Western perception of Islam. Michel Dardenne (Dardenne Michel) and Catherine Lucas (Lucas Catherine) have addressed this issue in their writings, taking a stance of fairness and appreciation toward Islamic teachings regarding Muslim women. Their work highlights a perspective that should be further promoted in Western societies through appropriate methodologies for Islamic discourse, raising awareness about Islam and its principles, and strengthening communication and integration among institutions and individuals involved in educating about Islam.

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P-ISSN: 2496-4476 E-ISSN: 2273-1571

Volume 13/ Issue 1/ 2026

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