In recent years, veil, referring to Islamic lifestyle and Muslim identity has been provoking debates elsewhere and particularly in Europe. The discussions became principally heated following the bans of 2004 and 2010 in France, followed by Belgium in 2011 and recently by Netherlands (Guardian, 2015). Currently, Sweden, Italy and Germany are discussing the possibility of taking similar steps. It can be argued that disputes around the headscarf stretch beyond the immediate subject towards the Orientalism discourse in Europe. From a piece of cloth used by women to cover their heads or entire bodies, the veil is convoluted to the sign of backwardness (see Fanon 1959: 38) and female oppression against male dominance. While Fanon’s discussion of the problem as perceived by Algerian women and his allegory of veil with a female hymen (1959: 45) seems to be insightful, his argument seems to envelope within dominator versus subjugated domain. And even though I truly enjoyed reading Fanon as much as I did when reading Said or Chomsky, for example. I feel that his influential ideas, even though not credited to the full extend in scholarship, contributed to the debates on post-colonialism in general and veil debate in general. Nevertheless, I feel that the strokes of his brush get a bit too broad at times. Navigating further week four’s readings has inspired me to explore the matter within finer strokes. That is, the alleys of ‘phatic labour’ suggested by Elyachar (2010) and revised by Sopranzetti (2013). It seems that the scholars’ arguments are directly relevant to the subtler notion of Muslim women in Europe as ‘hybrid identities’ (Shirin, 2001) vis-à-vis the power asymmetry and suggest a closer view on the issue. With this in mind, I am going to draw an unusual analogy between veiled women in Europe and Sopranzetti’s motorcycle taxi drivers in the light of a broad subject of mobility, immobility and association (2013). Namely, I am zooming focus on veil as European Muslim women’s attempt to self-express and resist their ‘absolute marginality’ (2013: 3) and their further ‘absolute necessity’ (ibid.) for their inclusion in larger European society.

For starters, oppression of women in subjugated lands was traditionally explained by detrimental cultures of those lands. Perhaps, therefore, the colonial way of freeing women started from exclusion of indigenous customs. Only then, as it was believed, women had access to freedom (see more e.g. in Fanon 1959, Said 1979). Perhaps, therefore, in 1955 an Oxford-based scholar, Hourani, predicted eventual disappearance of veil in future in the name of liberalism (Guardian, 2011). Yet, contrary to these expectations, not only did veil disappear but it obtained popularity in and outside of its immediate surroundings, including Europe. Indeed, locally it symbolised continuation of historical narrative. Transnationally, in the first instance the veil linked migrant females in Europe to their diasporas (Shirin, 2001; Tarlo, 2010). Secondly, however, headscarf allowed bargaining the imported language actually spoken (dress-code, morals and values from their homelands) with the local grammar of a new setting (European dress-code, sexual relationship, values). As Shirin and Tarlo showed in the instance of France and UK, not did only veil come to new lands as explicit embodiment of Islam but primarily it was favoured by females as a means to express their identity. Therefore, there were numerous cases, when adjustments were made both ways: females preferring veiling, refashioned it in local terms. Indeed, as Tarlo portrays, in UK, females used creativity to reconcile their conservative appearance through fashioning of scarfs to attune to local motives (2010). In other words, veil has become the facilitator of ‘physical and social landscape’ (Sopranzetti 2013: 56) and ‘phenomenological dimension’ (ibid.) of the female identity.

Sopranzetti further draws a link between freedom and danger in specific contexts (2013:75). This argument seems to be largely pertinent for Muslim women in Europe. On one hand stepping outside her house promises unique opportunities for her empowerment. Yet, on the other hand, her ‘freedom’ is pregnant with the hazard of losing her ‘face’ and that of her family and community. Veil, in this case, could be interpreted as a negotiator of that power asymmetry caused by the contrast between one’s diaspora and wider society. Being a medium it seems to reconcile the conflict. Phenomenologically, then veil can be perceived as the ‘bodily attunement to the space… as well as its sensual dimensions’ (2013:74). ‘Channel’, ‘attunement’, ‘negotiator’ could be summed by what Elyachar (2010) calls ‘phatic labour’; and the phatic labour of veil indeed seems to create infrastructural channels providing resources for sociability within sturdy diasporic frames. This argument appears to be relevant following Shirin’s argument on hybrid identities constructing themselves as same (in the eyes of family, diaspora and others) and different within larger society (2001).

I believe, therefore, that projecting Sopranzetti’s example on Muslim communities in European countries one could, perhaps, better understand the intrapolitics within marginalised veiled women. From this point of view then the salience of veil for Muslim women is as significant as for motor taxis for drivers: it is a ‘mediator[s] and reproducer[s] of … [female] narratives;’ (2013:75) and a ‘channel[ ] that allow[s]’ (ibid.) their inclusion and self-realisation. Banning, therefore, the medium, furthers power imbalance and intensifies resistance.