"TARGETTING MUSLIMS THROUGH WOMENS DRESS

Using the niqab in the psychological war against Muslims "

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Introduction

In writing this article I wondered whether there was anything more that could be said about the niqab and the hijab – (Islamic dress), since what had already been written was very much from the point of view of the meaning of dress and the right to choose. However it became clear that as material conditions changed and as the psychological war on terror sharpened, the Muslim community was becoming increasingly racialized. The habituated vilification of 'the Muslim' in the media, the public monolithic discourse that essentialises and demonises them, the refusal to recognise verbal attacks on Muslims as race hatred, and the condonation of insult as satire in the context of rising xenophobia, all demonstrate the necessity for a 'real time' analysis. Marked out by their clothing women, especially, have become identifiable targets for right wing extremism and violent assault whose hurt and disposal is rendered no more than 'collateral damage' and in whose victimisation public discourse and media representation in promoting orientalised and racialized tropes of Muslims must bear some responsibility. Within this the Western world in a self-professed secular crusade against the niqab has positioned itself as the saviour of womankind.

What has happened in very recent times is that the once recognised polysemicity of the niqab as discussed by Young (2003)[1] with its several and contradictory meanings, are understandings that have now become displaced and subjugated, in the Foucauldian sense

(Foucault,1980)[2], whilst a highly orientalised trope of the niqab and its wearer, and to a lesser extent the hijab becomes fetishised at national and governmental level. There is now little inclination to understand why women wear the niqab, even less to give them a voice from their subject position. Arguably, the work of Brems (2014),[3] and others may be the last attempt to explore this question from the subject position of the wearer, as the dominant discourse from the perspective of the onlooker becomes enthroned and authorised as knowledge. The right to manifest ones religious belief (Article 9, European Convention on Human Rights, ECHR) however continues to be articulated by human rights activists and lawyers in defence of the niqab, albeit before a partisan interpretation of religious rights by the judges of the European Court of Human Rights.

Western governments, France and Canada especially, have demonstrated their preparedness to subordinate religious rights to other less determinable and vicarious rights including the 'rights of others'. France has made niqab wearing a criminal act. Whereas in both jurisdictions the right to citizenship depends on the applicants acceptance of certain so called 'national values' together with the rejection of those considered inimical to state interests. What emerges is that the niqab has become central to the project of Western nation states condemnation of the Muslim 'other'.

Saving Muslim women

'Saving Muslim women,' it is pleaded, has been the avowed justification for recent restrictions on the niqab. Harriet Harman, in 2006, when a cabinet minister, said the niqab was 'an obstacle to women's participation, on equal terms, in society.'[4] The altruistic pleadings in support of its restriction is not, so we are told, because of any objection to the 30 grams or so of polyester, cotton or silk, or to the colour of the cloth per se, but to what is perceived to be its intrinsic meaning. The objection, it is asserted, is to what is considered to be its paramount meaning – that of subordination. Such understanding Ahmed (1992)[5], Yeğenoğlu (1998)[6] and others point out is based on fallacious presumptions that are mere reflections of orientalist and colonialist representations. Mancini (2012)[7] identifies the duplicity lurking behind such altruistic claims of salvation. She writes 'today's appeal to gender equality ennobles anti-Muslim racist bigotry'.

The genuineness of this recent display of concern for Muslim women is certainly doubtful since the public agenda with regard to the experience of all women in immigrant communities, including Muslim women, has not demonstrated any predilection to respect or protect them. Instead, the historic evidence points to a disregard of Muslim women's lives either because of a feigned 'respect' resulting in a non-interference, in domestic violence for example, or else because women from minority ethnic communities were, and are, not regarded as equally worthy of protection as indigenous women. Such non-interference and respect was in evidence for example, when I was working in Islington, London, in 1984 examining the Police Response to Domestic Violence. I wished to interview women who had experienced domestic violence. Some of those women were from Afro-Carribean, African, Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi communities. At that time the local council's 'Police Monitoring Group' (which was funded by Islington's Labour Council) were engaging with and supporting minority communities experiencing racism at the hands of the police. The male Chairman of the committee advised me that the only way to proceed with my empirical research would be to approach the community (male) leaders for their approval and permission to interview 'their' women in 'their' communities. Such left wing, anti-racist 'sensitivities' developed blind to the bane of patriarchy. Noteworthy too was that in 1987 the Metropolitan Police issued a 'Force Order' directing all police stations in London to set up domestic violence units, Southall London with a significant South Asian population was one of the very few police stations that did not establish such a unit because of a 'respect' for the South Asian community (Southall Black Sisters 1989).[8]

   'Saving Muslim women' has been very much cast in the frame of saving them from Muslim men**.** This thinking has been informed by a constellation of orientalist stereotypes based on racialized and 'Eurocentric prejudice' (Said, 1978)[9] shaping public and official accounts and redolent in media representation (Said, 1997).[10] Within this orientalist sexual binary the Muslim woman is always subjugated without agency, led, controlled, vulnerable and victim. Khalid (2011)[11] confirming this tendency argues that gendered orientalism marks '"Other" women as voiceless victims of a barbaric (male)'. The barbaric male is of course the Muslim male. The dominant discourse on Muslim men in recent times has stigmatised Muslim communities and presented men within them as dangerous, (see Lynch 2013).[12] The Muslim man is not only presented, especially at this time, as 'a threat to be contained' (Khalid 2011)[13] but also as a problem within the community.

From within we have witnessed the recent essentialisation and racialisation of all Pakistani men following the conviction of an organised gang of men of Pakistani descent who were convicted of the rape and trafficking of young girls. The men ranged in ages from 19 years to 63 years and with low IQs. Jack Straw, MP., chose to describe these offences as a 'suspect community' problem. 'But there is a specific problem which involves Pakistani heritage men ... who target vulnerable young white girls. …We need to get the Pakistani community to think much more clearly about why this is going on and to be more open about the problems that are leading to a number of Pakistani heritage men thinking it is OK to target white girls in this way'.[14] Attempts to explain these crimes have theorised this criminal conduct as an inevitable product of a community where sexual restrictions are placed on males and females limiting sexual encounters outside marriage, suggesting that the cultural norms of Muslim communities force them to prey on young non-Asian girls. Martin Amis who defines himself as an Islamismophobe in *The Second Plane: September 11, 2001-2007*[15] (a collection of his journalism on 9/11) takes this even further and identifies what he regards as sexual frustration and testosterone as characterising Muslim men and communities. This of course contains echoes of the presentation of the sexualised black African male stereotype (Hernton,1992).[16]

Outside this specific context it is not just Muslim men, it is Muslim culture that Bernard Lewis (1990)[17] and others perceive as the problem. In his essay 'The Roots of Muslim Rage' (1990) he argues that the struggle between the West and Islam is the result a clash of civilizations where the so civilised West is juztaposed with Islamic backwardness and anti-modernity. Of course it is to be wondered how one explains the rationale, or the psyche, sexual or otherwise, of a government which authorised torture, those who committed torture and the torture lawyers who defended the use of torture in Guantanamo Bay (Luban 2007).[18] Methods included 'waterboarding,' rectal feeding and rehydration (Iglesias 2014).[19] And it was the medical profession, who disavowed the Hippocratic oath to treat the sick, who aided the torturers in providing advise on how to prevent death but increase suffering, (Wilcox 2011).[20] Perhaps we should be reminded too that at Abu Ghraib in that sadistic denigration of Iraqi internees a festival of cruelty ran amok where sexual abuse was deliberately conceived, orchestrated, and executed to offend Muslim sensibilities (Eisenman 2007a,[21] 2007b,[22] Bourke 2004).[23]

Muslim culture is also considered especially bad for Muslim women so argues Susan Moller Okin, in her much critiqued essay, 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' (1999).[24] Here she exposes what she sees as the problems in accommodating a diversity of cultures, cultural norms and multicultural practices for gender equality or sexual diversity. In this regard her critique echoes the concerns of Sahgal and Yuval-Davis (1992),[25] Patel (1997)[26] and others who worry that multicultural policies often embrace uncritically traditions and cultural practices, some of which are damaging for women. Okin recognises the importance for minorities to determine their existence, customs, traditions and faith. She writes: 'Until the past few decades, minority groups-immigrants as well as indigenous peoples-were typically expected to assimilate into majority cultures' (1999).[27] Yet protecting all that is so called 'cultural' raises for her serious concerns and formidable policy and legal challenges, for gender equality. However it is the bluntness of her 'solution' which has led to post-colonial feminists and opponents of what has been dubbed the 'multicultural fallacy' to dissociate themselves from her arguments. Okin has proposed cultural 'extinction' as a solution. 'In the case of a more patriarchal minority culture, no argument can be made on the basis of self-respect or freedom that the female members of the culture have a clear interest in its preservation. Indeed, they might be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture) or, preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women . . .'.[28] The culturalists (Lewis and Okin above) are not without their critics however. Abu-Lughod (2015)[29] makes the point that the iconic use of honour crime as an exemplar of cultural practices stigmatises not only particular acts of violence but entire communities.

It is significant perhaps that the saving Muslim women 'project' has been of relatively recent origin and has been appropriated by colonial strategists and used to great effect to justify Europe and America's colonial and military interventions in advancing the war on terror outside the UK in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Syria and in Libya and to further counter terrorist strategies and attempts to gain greater control over immigrant communities within the UK.

Saving women by Criminalising and Excluding them

Punishment and control is central to delivering the saving women project, strategies of prohibition have been instituted to restrict Muslim women's dress. Currently, the French prime minister in the name of state secularism said that the (hijab) headscarf should be banned in state universities on the basis that veils as well as head coverings represented the enslavement of Muslim women.[30] The wearing of the niqab in France and Belgium, across Europe, and in Canada and the US has either been banned or publically condemned. As Moors (2014)[31] points out, in the Netherlands, Gert Wilders banning campaign was so he said motivated by the desire to free women from oppression. But the far right Belams Velang party campaign of 2013, in Belgium, clearly betrays the sinister motive behind these claims. In this promotional video Muslim women are presented as demonic.[32]

In France in April 2011 and Belgium, in April 2011 has crimed the niqab in all public spaces prohibiting its wearing and fining or imprisoning any woman in breach (see Barbibay 2012)[33].

In the introduction, to the Gerin Report of 2010.[34] M. André Gerin, the President of the Commission, said 'the report shows with precision how the wearing of the full veil infringes upon three principles that are included in the motto of the Republic: liberty, equality and fraternity. The full veil is an intolerable infringement on the freedom and the dignity of women. It is the denial of gender equality and of a mixed society. Finally, it is the will to exclude women from social life and the rejection of our common will to live together. [3]'. President Sarkozy, had said that veils oppress women and were not welcome in France. The criminalisation of the niqab was the subject of legal challenge in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in the case of *SAS v France*, 2014.[35]The litigant was a 24 year old woman of Pakistani origin described as a 'perfect French citizen ...who speaks of her republic with passion.' The ECtHR upheld the legality of the ban but notably was not persuaded that the law was justified and proportionate in the name of saving women or gender equality. The Court in reasoning its support for the ban said that the prohibition was '[157]…. proportionate to the aim pursued, namely the preservation of the conditions of "living together" as an element of the "protection of the rights and freedoms of others."' Living together was the paramount objective undermined it was considered by permitting a few women the right to wear the veil whilst thereby privileging the sensibilities of those for whom the veil created a sense of unease and discomfort. The Court somewhat apologetically reminded itself of the fundamental values of openness and tolerance (para [148]), 'Pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness are hallmarks of a "democratic society"…' whilst endorsing the intolerance of the anti veilists. Judges Nussberger (in respect of Germany) and Jäderblom (in respect of Sweden), in dissent, asserted '...there is no right not to be shocked or provoked by different models of cultural or religious identity, even those that are very distant from the traditional French and European life-style' SAS [B7].

Belgium law banning the niqab was also unsuccessfully challenged in the Constitutional Court, 6 December 2012,[36] no. 145/2012. Elsewhere in Europe there were similar prohibitions have been upheld. In Italy, some local councils have introduced byelaws. In Novaro, its Mayor, Massimo Giordano, in saving women rhetoric explaining the ban said 'We cannot accept cultures that destroy women's dignity,' [37] However, Spain's Supreme Court in February 2013 took a different position ruling that the local ban in Llieda on the niqab 'constitutes a limitation to the fundamental right to the exercise of the freedom of religion, which is guaranteed by the Spanish Constitution.'[38]

Outside the criminal law, citizenship ceremonies require women to remove their niqabs, or, if they refuse, are threatened with citizenship refusal. In France, the Mabchour case [39] and in Canada, the Ishaq case,[40]shows that citizenship hangs on a thread of retaining or disgarding the niqab. In the Machbour case, the judge stated; 'it seems that Madame Machbour has not made the values of the Republic and in particular those of the equality of the sexes her own. She lives in total submission to men and to her family, which is manifested as much in her manner of dress as in the organization of her daily life [...] she finds this normal and even the idea of contesting this submission does not even occur to her'. In Canada, the Prime Minister Stephen Harley in 2015 had declared the niqab incompatible with Canadian values and gender equality in refusing citizenship to Zunera Ishaq. The Federal Court of Ontario February 6th 2015 in *Ishaq v Minister of Citizenship and Immigration* [41] ruled the policy incompatible with the Charter and deemed that such an erroneous interpretation in the removal of a niqab was not required by the Citizenship Act 2011. Whilst the niqab is not banned in the UK a school in Camden did just that and banned one of its pupils[42] from wearing the veil.

It is perhaps of interest that the same argument is not had, or experienced, with regard to the necessity to save women in other minority groups, nor is the integration of women in other communities so compelled. The ultra-orthodox Jewish women in the Haredi community in North West London cover. Less scrutinised little was said for example in London when organizers of the 'Seret 2015' the Israeli film festival, cancelled a screening of the film 'The Gift of Fire' by ultra-Orthodox Director Rechy Elias because the cinema refused to accede to the Director's requirement to bar men from the audience.[43] Haredi Jews want to live

separately and in response to this quest for separateness the local council permitted an 'eruv'. This a symbolic enclosure, 11 miles long enclosing an area of 6.5 square miles, covering Hendon, Golders Green and Hampstead Garden Suburb, and parts of Child's Hill, Cricklewood, East Finchley, Finchley and Mill Hill within which religious observances must be kept. By contrast the very women whom the ECHR argued should remove the niqab in the pursuit of the goal of 'living together' reported to researchers in the Brems collection that they interacted with family, friends and neighbours, with their teachers, and others in everyday life.

Saving and restrain

The various permutations of the saving rhetoric betrays a toxic blend of seeping control of Muslim women. This can be observed in the over-policing of Muslim communities and the recent positioning of Muslim women as the vanguard responsible for monitoring the internet activities of their offspring and also other family members. Her inability to read English is now presented as the problem, albeit that it has been stated that only 6 per cent of Muslims are actually illiterate.[44] The Prime Minister said that Muslim mothers unable to read English would be unable to 'monitor' the internet behaviour of those in their families for whom they were responsible. 'If you're not able to speak English, you're not able to integrate, you may find, therefore, that you have challenges understanding what your identity is and you could be more susceptible to the extremist message that comes from Daesh.'[45] This demonstrates the utter confusion in government thinking about Muslim women who on the one hand need to be saved and yet on the other have a key influence. With this in mind, the Home Affairs Select Committee on Countering Extremism on 19th January, 2016,[46] questioned David Anderson QC (Independent reviewer of terrorism legislation) on this very point. Chairman Mr Keith Vaz asked: 'One of the points that the Prime Minister made yesterday is that he felt that it was a language problem and that, by giving Muslim mothers, in effect, £20 million to teach them how to speak English, this would somehow have an effect on stopping people going [to Syria], because it is the Muslim mothers, in particular, who seem to be encouraging people. Do you agree with what the Prime Minister has said? Do you think that that is one way of making sure that people are more integrated?' (Question 930). David Anderson QC replied, 'I think it is unfortunate that this whole question of language learning, which is a

very important part of the integration and empowerment of women, should get mixed up with the business of ISIS'.

The journey of the niqab - from subordination to extremism

Sociologists have pointed to multiple meaning of the niqab and hijab and the problem with essentialising these clothing items. De Saussure (1995) [47] has taught us that the signifier is the construct which fixes the meaning of the sign in time, and here in real time. El Guindi (1999)wrote, 'the veil is a complex symbol of many meanings. The signifier(s) situates the meaning of the sign in its time and place.'[48]Applying this understanding the niqab can be read as text. It is a sign which can engender a multiplicity of signifiers abrogating any fixity of meaning. Fanon (1965)[49] understood the historical dynamism of the niqab. More recently Bouteldja (2014),[50] identified the continuing multi-dimensionality of motivations that impact on a woman's decision to wear the niqab.

Notwithstanding there is a binarist presentation of the meaning of the niqab at public and governmental level. The narrations of Western governments in very recent years reveal a shift in positioning the perceived symbolism of the niqab as a private emblem of domestic oppression within certain sectors of Islamic communities to regarding it as an expression of global support of extremism and a strident symbol of refusal to integrate (see Edwards 2010,[51] 2012[52]). This shift in framing has morphed as the perceptions of Muslims as 'suspect communities' and Islam as 'extremist' are tropes and motifs that have become calcified in institutions and the public mind. The West has produced a monolithic construction of Islamic or Muslim identity which serves its own political agenda in domestic, multicultural and international foreign policy and Muslim women and what they wear has become a conduit through which this agenda is realised. Clearly what we see is a political manipulation of intrinsic meaning. Whilst Stuart Hall in interpreting the work of Fanon, capturing the fluidity of the niqab and its capacity for cultural, historical and political appropriation, reminds us that, 'no sign is fixed in its meaning,' (Fanon film 1996),[53] there seems to be now a deliberate policy of closing down in the public mind any possibility of alternate meanings. The force of the public trope is presented through the media and the state continues to command ultimate authority over inscribing the meaning of religious symbolism (Talal Asad 2006).[54]

That official state narrative represents the wearer of the veil no longer subordinated subjugated and to be saved she having rejected the Western males attempts to save her, now is represented as a woman of agency, an extremist, a danger to be feared and to be controlled and punished. Muslim women find themselves policed in this the enveloping governmentality and under increased surveillance regarded as 'suspect communities' of which there are numerous examples. 'Operation Champion' set up 200 CCTV cameras in Sparkbrook, Birmingham to surveill the Muslim community in 2010 (Fussey 2013,[55] Coppock 2014,[56]Edwards 2016).[57] The Prevent policy places Muslim men and Muslim women within educational spaces and in educational institutions, including schools and Universities under increased surveillance, in which the democratic space for dissent within the Muslim community is being shut down (Kundnani 2014).[58] Christopher Denson, a teacher from Coventry, said on March 28 2016 at the National Union of Teachers conference that he had reservations about using the term 'fundamental British values' in schools because many of his students had ancestry in countries which had been at the mercy of British colonialism. He said: 'The inherent cultural supremacism in that term is both unnecessary and unacceptable. And seen with the Prevent agenda, it belies the most thinly veiled racism and a conscious effort to divide communities.'[59]

The aspiration of multiculturalism is dead. Parekh's [60]idea that we might have a blended community and that we might also show tolerance towards others is an aspiration we have lost. Indeed central to Nussbaum's[61] argument is that we now live in an era of religious intolerance. The dissenting judgments in SAS (above) are muses on a distant horizon: 'Furthermore, it can hardly be argued that an individual has a right to enter into contact with other people, in public places, against their will. While communication is admittedly essential for life in society, the right to respect for private life also comprises the right not to communicate and not to enter into contact with others in public places – the right to be an outsider.' Dissent or difference within the Muslim community is regarded as 'vulnerability for terrorism'. Understood by the British government in this way 'Most significantly, these "vulnerabilities" are closely tied to issues of integration into, and social cohesion with, a normalised understanding of British society' (Martin 2014).[62] The Home Office took the view that that communities who cannot or will not participate in all civic society 'are more likely to be vulnerable to radicalization by all kinds of terrorist groups' (Martin 2014).[63]

The 'real time ' pressures to unveil her are less about saving her from her subordination by Muslim men (Okin) and from Muslim culture and more about crushing her through stripping her. Fanon analysed the meaning of forcible unveiling for Algerian women in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*. He wrote: 'There is also in the European the crystallisation of an aggressiveness, the strain of a kind of violence before the Algerian woman. Unveiling is breaking her resistance to colonial rule' (1965).[64] Another expression of that violence is directed in race hatred against her community en masse. David Cameron talks with reference to the Muslim community and terrorism of the need to 'drain the swamp which they inhabit'(Kundnani 2014).[65] Polly Toynbee writes: 'I am an Islamophobe, and proud of it.' [66] Robert Kilroy Silk writes '…they (Muslims) are backward and evil, and if it is being racist to say so then I must be and happy and proud to be so.' [67] Has any other group been so racialized or met with such hostility.

This is the real context that feeds the anti-Muslim women agenda. What can she do but resist. Anne McClintock's analysis of the veil in Algeria argues that in response to French colonialism, the veil became the 'living flesh of the national body.'[68] Today, the niqab becomes for many who wear it a skin of resistance to foreign policy intervention and a visible and outward expression of protest against foreign intervention.

Violating women violating the niqab

Kundnani frames all this in the context of what he sees as anti-muslim racism whereby Muslim culture and Muslim religion is under attack. [69] Muslim women because of their visibility, because of their dress styles become the direct targets of attack. As Kundnani states liberation for Muslim women is positioned not as a question of autonomously transforming their own culture but assimilating into a different culture and behind this integrationist feminism lies the presumption that the West is the sole bearer of enlightened progress.[70] Harassment and attacks is part of the Muslim experience demonstrated in a significant increase in assaults on Muslims and Muslim women. Criminal Statistics in England and Wales for 2011/12 and 2012/13[71] reveal that approximately 70,000 incidents of religiously motivated hate crime are perpetrated annually with Muslim adults the most likely to be a

victim of religiously motivated hate crime. There were 52,528 hate crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in 2014/15,[72] an increase of 18 per cent on 2013/14 figures of 44,471 offences.As for the victimisation experienced by Muslim women research by Sahir Aziz [73] reveals the extent of an increase in attacks on the street. In addition the report '"Maybe we are Hated": The Experience and Impact of Anti-Muslim Hate on British Muslim Women'[74] found that of hate crimes reported 58% were against women and of those 83% were against women wearing a niqab or hijab. The Tell Mama helpline[75] on 21 Dec, 2015 disclosed that most victims of the UK hate crimes were Muslim girls and women aged from 14 to 45 in traditional Islamic dress. The perpetrators were mainly white males aged from 15 to 35. The report said a large number of the reported attacks were in public places, including on buses and trains. Thirty-four victims were women wearing the hijab, while eight involved young children. 'This is concerning since the cases show that women who wear the hijab are the ones being targeted for general abuse and threat.'

Nawal El Saadawi says: 'No one criticises a woman who is half-naked. This is so-called freedom … The problem is our conception of freedom. Men are encouraged neither to be half-naked, nor veiled. Why?'[76] The West persists in talking about the veil wanting to remove the veil claiming that freedom is measured in bearing the flesh. But the violence of the Wests collective endeavour reveals the real motive is to control and conquer in a new phase of post postcolonialist routs against the Muslim community through physical and psychological denigration of women as an exercise in extirpation.

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