

Veils: Who are we to judge?

Why the debate over the veil is much more complicated than you think

by Anne Kingston on Tuesday, January 17, 2012



No item of female apparel summons more attention, animosity, debate or censure in Western society than the veil covering Muslim women. That's saying something in a culture inured to the sight of sweatpants with "Juicy" on the backside, Abercrombie & Fitch's padded "push-up" swimsuit tops for eight-year-old girls, and women teetering on skyscraper porno heels as hobbling as the "chopines" worn by 16th-century Venetian prostitutes.

Governments are racing to restrict the veil in its various declensions: hijab, chador, abaya, niqab, burka. France and Belgium banned face-and-body concealing burkas and niqabs last year; similar legislation is in the works in other European countries, echoing campaigns to rid cityscapes of minarets. Last June, Muslim women were singled out by FIFA, the world soccer body, which banned players from wearing Islamic headdresses on the grounds they could cause a "choking injury." The Canadian federal government drew its first line in the sand last month when Immigration Minister Jason Kenney announced a ban on face veils during the swearing-in of the citizenship oath. Quebec's Bill 94, which

would deny essential public services to women in niqabs in the name of “public security, communication and identification,” is wending through the legislature.

So what’s really going on here? Why are women many see as subjugated the ones being censured? Part of what’s driving this is the visceral response a veiled face summons in the West: it’s a mystery and a threat. Unless you’re a surgeon, a goalie, a bride or a belly dancer, masking one’s face is anti-social, a prelude to robbing a bank or attending a Ku Klux Klan meeting. Faces confer identity, legally and socially. Covering them can signal Darth Vader menace. It’s dehumanizing.

A covered or veiled woman summons more complex associations, given that female emancipation in the West focused on bodily autonomy and was mirrored in fashion trends—beginning with Coco Chanel, who believed women should share the same liberties as men and replaced restrictive corsets and long skirts with jersey dresses, knits and pants. Instructing a woman to cover up to preserve sexual modesty and prevent lustful thoughts is viewed as archaic and misogynistic—harking back to the Victorians hiding curvy table legs or the kind of dystopian theocracy depicted in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The “liberated” woman eschews modesty; any instructive to preserve it is code for oppression, as seen in global “SlutWalks” protesting “victim-blaming” after a Toronto police officer suggested women could avoid sexual assault if they stopped dressing “like sluts.”

Western women may be shackled by clothing and customs—six-inch stilettos, Brazilian waxing, cosmetic surgery, the imperative to be thin—but that’s seen to be their choice, their self-expression within a culture that often conflates female empowerment with female sexuality. A veiled Muslim woman is therefore even more freighted, thought to represent a second-class citizen deprived of identity and isolated from public life, a trapped victim of “gender apartheid,” as witnessed by the horrific acid attack on Afghani schoolgirls who abjured the offensive burka.

Yet we didn’t always see it that way. In the 1990s, the niqab, the veil that leaves only eyes exposed, was exotic, a marketing ploy: Loblaw put a photograph of a woman wearing one on the box for its “Memories of Marrakech” couscous. The “otherness” of a veiled Muslim could occasionally inflame bigotry, as seen in 1994 when female high school students in Montreal were expelled for wearing the hijab; the head scarf worn to preserve modesty was deemed an “ostentatious symbol.” But the burka was off the political radar, with the exception of feminist groups that protested the repression of women in fundamentalist Islamic nations, particularly Afghanistan, where Taliban rule in 1994 torched advances made by women.

Then came 9/11, and the burka was hijacked as a handy accessory for the emerging “war on terror.” The week after the twin towers fell, *The Economist* sent out a “free trial offer” mailer recycling a February 2000 cover of a woman in a niqab below the line: “Can Islam and Democracy Mix?” The image was sultry, destined to boost subscriptions, even if linking a veiled woman with all of Islam was below the magazine’s usual intellectual rigour. Not all Muslim women wear face-covering veils; many Muslims oppose the practice. The Quran, an enlightened text regarding gender equality, enforces no dress code; “hijab,” or cover, refers to the curtain that separates man and the world from God, not to clothing. Men and women are only called to “lower their gaze and guard their modesty.” Nor are Muslim nations in

sync on veiling, which has come to represent an oppression-meter of sorts—from Afghanistan, where women faced a mandatory burka law punishable by death, to Tunisia and Turkey, where burkas are banned in schools and government buildings.

Turkish-born sociologist Necla Kelek dismisses the idea that the burka has anything to do with religion or religious freedoms, but rather represents an ideology whereby “women in public don’t have the right to be human.” France’s Fadéla Amara views the garment as a form of religious obscurantism, “a kind of tomb for women.” In her 2004 book, *The Trouble with Islam*, Irshad Manji rejects any notion of “spiritual submission” to the veil, calling adherence “closer to cultural capitulation”: “To cover my face because ‘that’s what I’m supposed to do’ is nothing short of brand victory for desert Arabs, whose style has become the most trusted symbol of how to package yourself as a Muslim woman.”

Yet as a symbol, the “desert Arab” packaging of women offered powerful visual shorthand for the indeterminate “war on terror.” It was harnessed to garner support for the invasion of Afghanistan, where the road to female freedom was measured in media reports in terms of women’s access to lipstick and beauty salons. Then the burka was tied to Islamic terrorism itself, linking the “war on terror” with a “war on Islam”: video footage that appeared to show one of the failed July 2005 London bombers wearing a niqab implanted fear that the garment posed a national security threat. That risk migrated to Muslim immigrants’ seeming unwillingness to conform to European and American mores. Even global cultural juggernaut Disney, whose 1992 *Aladdin* came under fire for promoting racist Arabic stereotypes, joined the hijab jihad last year, telling more than one Magic Kingdom employee that they were “not part of the Disney look.”

We can only await the Disneyfication of the burka, which has acquired near magical powers in its ability to turn right-wing politicians into situational feminists. French President Nicolas Sarkozy called the garment “a debasement” of women that rendered them “prisoners behind a screen, cut off from all social contact, deprived of all identity,” ignoring the fact that his ban would closet these women in their homes. As British writer Myriam Francois-Cerrah, a Muslim, puts it: “[Governments] have a funny idea of liberation: criminalizing women in order to free them.”

Sheema Khan, author of *Of Hockey and Hijab: Reflections of a Canadian Muslim Woman*, likens the paranoia over female veiling to another trumped-up distraction: “These new WMDs (women in Muslim dress) seem to evoke the same fear as those other WMDs (weapons of mass destruction),” she writes. Khan, who wears the hijab, sees a cultural disconnect over the female body and its display: “Muslim women value their bodies, they simply don’t believe in flashing skin.”

In their covering and attempt to disappear from the public sphere, veiled women have acquired paradoxical power in a society that pays attention to women for what they’re not wearing: as the most visible of visible minorities, they’re a measure of multiculturalism’s limits. And as a graphic reminder of the world’s fastest-growing religion, they test how much religious observation and cultural defiance we’re willing to accommodate—and accept.

Jason Kenney described a covered face as “un-Canadian” when announcing the new citizenship ruling: “Allowing a group to hide their faces while they are becoming members of our community is counter to

Canada's commitment to openness, equality and social cohesion," he said. The minister admitted he found it "frankly, bizarre" that women had been allowed to veil their faces. Some 81 per cent of Canadians agreed with the veto, according to a Forum Research poll, which raises questions as to whether we'll see similar rulings in other public spaces; Muslim women's right to veil their faces while giving testimony is currently being challenged.

Canadian political scientist and Middle East scholar Katherine Bullock predicted that Muslim women would become "the visible link between Western power politics and an anti-veil discourse in the West," in her 2002 book, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*. The University of Toronto professor, a convert to Islam since 1994, wears the hijab. She was prescient: Sarkozy's targeting of the Muslim minority is viewed by many as a pander to voters on the extreme right.

Bullock challenges the common view that the veil is oppressive and degrading. While she acknowledges the horrific violation of women's rights in Islamic states, she writes that these must be addressed by the courts, and that a woman's right to wear the veil should be separate from other human rights issues. That argument is a hard sell in the West, where high-profile murders of Muslim girls and women are associated with their rejection of the veil in "honour killings," the odious term that segregates extreme domestic violence: Aqsa Parvez, the 16-year-old Mississauga, Ont., girl who was murdered in 2007 by her father and brother for refusing to wear the veil, and the ongoing Shafia trial in Kingston, Ont., in which a husband, wife and son are accused of murdering three teenage girls and a first wife. At that trial an expert prosecution witness overtly raised the connection when speaking of Muslim mores: "A woman's body is considered to be the repository of family honour," he said.

That any woman would willingly wear an "ambulatory prison," as Christine St-Pierre, Quebec's minister for the status of women, has called the niqab, is a mystery in a culture focused on the exposed female body and the distorted "body image" resulting from artificial Photoshopped standards. Amid "Does this burka make me look fat?" jokes, female Western journalists took the garments out for test drives, reporting back that they were confining, isolating and even elicited hostility, which is predictable. Veiled Muslim women have become doubly dehumanized in the West—by the veil itself and incendiary responses to what it's seen to represent—which makes them vulnerable to the kind of violent Islamophobic attacks seen in France.

Yet the defiance expressed by hijab and burka wearers confounds the stereotype that they are submissive and lack will. Disney's hijab ban has been successfully challenged. Last September, Hind Ahmas and Najate Nait Ali made headlines when they were fined for disobeying the French burka ban.

Inscrutable and complex, the veil is a code that can't readily be cracked. Many women are veiled against their will, it is true, yet many others choose it. The idea that the veil could represent an assertion of identity, defined by daily connection and devotion to God, is alien for many in a secular culture. Liberal ideas of equality and liberty, which distinguish want from need, trump other ways of looking at the topic, says Middle Eastern historian Christina Michelmore, a professor at Chatham College in Pittsburgh, Pa.: "A lot of women want to wear it because they have to," she told the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* in 2001. "It was a commandment, and I would obey," Bullock writes. That's a mindset alien in the West,

Michelmores observes: "For many Americans, cultural restraints on individual behaviour automatically look like oppression. I think that's a very American look at the world. For lots of cultures, communal standards aren't seen as inhibiting individual freedoms."

Women wear the veil as a rejection of Western values, Michelmores notes: "They see it as part of their identity, as separate from this globalized McDonald's world." Many of the veil's most vocal proponents, ironically, are Western women who've converted to Islam, among them Tony Blair's sister-in-law, Lauren Booth, German broadcaster Kristiane Backer, author of the 2009 book *From MTV To Mecca*, and Yvonne Ridley, of Islam Channel TV. Ridley extols the veil as offering freedom from Western sexism—the male gaze that renders a woman "invisible" after a certain age and undue judgment of women based on their appearance: "What is more liberating: being judged on the length of your skirt and the size of your surgically enhanced breasts, or being judged on your character and intelligence?" she asks. Yet to frame the debate as an either-or duality between two cultures is to ignore the continuity that exists. There's synchronicity in the burka being stigmatized at the same time female display in the West has geared into cartoonish, hyper-sexualization—the mainstreaming of the stripper aesthetic, the creepy *Toddlers and Tiaras* commodification of girls, and billboards like Estée Lauder's: "Beautiful gives her daughter something to look forward to." A new study from the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism reveals women are increasingly under-represented and overly sexualized in top movies: they're far more likely to be seen in "sexy" clothing (25.8 per cent, compared to men at 4.7 per cent) and to be partially naked (23.6 per cent compared to 7.4 per cent). Yet the barbaric repression of women in fundamentalist Islamic nations—stoning for adultery, being denied the vote and access to education—renders complaints about continuing gender inequities in the West trivial by comparison, when, in fact, they are all extremes on a vast continuum.

Legislating what women wear under the guise of freedom is a worrisome portent, one Human Rights Watch calls a "lose-lose situation": "[Burka bans] violate the rights of those who choose to wear the veil and do nothing to help those who are compelled to do so," Judith Sunderland, a senior researcher with the group, said last April.

Art allows an exploration of the ambiguities that politics cannot. Canadian photographer Lana Slezić captured a fearful complexity in her famous portrait of Lt.-Col. Malali Kakar, Afghanistan's most senior female police officer, who was murdered by the Taliban in 2008. Taken in profile, the image shows Kakar shrouded in a half burka, holding a handgun, her fingernails painted bright red. The image of the Afghan police officer working to emancipate Afghan women wearing a symbol of oppression upends the assumption that an unseen woman can't yield power. Last week, Michelle Risinger, an NGO worker, blogged on *GenderAcrossBorders.com* about a successful uprising in Kabul by women disguised by their burkas; it forced her to redefine the garment "from a symbol of repression to a means of protection, and even the sustainment of women's empowerment activities."

Parisian guerrilla artist "Princess Hijab" explores the power of the veil in her work, using a black marker to "hijabize" and "niqabize" billboards to subvert consumer imagery and push cultural boundaries. "The niqab is very powerful, not just religiously," the artist told Al Jazeera in 2010: "It has been used in fairy tales, it's part of the collective memory, a symbol of religious observance, mourning and death." The veil

doesn't belong to a single religious or ethnic group, she points out: "It's an empowering piece of clothing but it also can be frightening."

Exiled Iranian artist and filmmaker Shirin Neshat, known for her "Women of Allah" series, similarly creates haunting, powerful images of veiled women, some with guns, their bodies superimposed with Farsi poetry. "Western culture generally tends to mystify women behind a veil," Neshat told *hEyOkA* magazine: "It seems ironic but true that the more a female body is covered, the more desirable it becomes. Therefore much of the credit goes to the phenomena behind Islamic culture that by controlling female sexuality, it ironically heightens the notions of temptation, desire and eroticism."

That would explain the bizarre spectre of the increasing sexual fetishization of the burka in the West. In 2003, rapper Lil' Kim appeared in a half-burka, naked below, on a magazine cover. In 2009, Mattel endorsed a "Burka Barbie." The pneumatic plastic doll, once banned in Iran as a threat to "morality," was outfitted in lime-green and Day-Glo orange "burkas" and auctioned off at Sotheby's for Save the Children. A few months ago, Kim Kardashian, of sex tape infamy, pranced around in a burka in Dubai. Paparazzi swarmed. It was defiant, outrageous, more shocking than nudity. And anyone who sees it as cultural progress hasn't been paying attention.