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“Burka” in Parliament and on the Catwalk

A few days before parliamentary elections were held in the Netherlands last November, the minister of immigration and integration, Rita Verdonk, stated the Cabinet's intention to ban the *burka* from all public space.¹ In the course of the last years the term *burka* has been added to the Dutch vocabulary, as happened previously with terms such as *fatwa* and *jihad*. It has not only become a common sense notion in public debate but has also made its appearance in official discourse and state documents.

Up until 2005 the Dutch media mainly used the term *burka* to refer to a particular style of Afghan women's dress that covers women from head to toe and has a mesh in front of the eyes. In 2003, when a school banned students wearing face-veils from its premises, the word *burka* was occasionally used, but other terms such as *niqab* or face-veil were still more common. This changed when Geert Wilders, a populist, right-wing member of parliament, who sees the Netherlands as threatened by a “tsunami of Islamization,” proposed a resolution requesting the Cabinet to take steps “to prohibit the public use of the *burka* in the Netherlands.”² Since then the term *burka* has not only come up time and again in the media but also in parliamentary discourse and official documents. This raises the question of why the term *burka* has been chosen when Dutch equivalents of face-veil or face-covering could have easily been used. Why has this term gained such rapid and widespread acceptance?

Rather than a coincidental use of a foreign term, it seems that *burka* has become the preferred term among politicians as well as the general public because it resonates with a particularly sensitive recent history, that is the rise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and its demise, in which, incidentally, the Dutch military has become involved. Not only has the Taliban come to represent the most repressive regime for women ever, the *burka* has been turned into the visual symbol of women's oppression par excellence. The very term has come to stand for the banning of women from schools, health care services, and employment, with harsh punishments meted out to those infringing its rules.³

Turning to the Dutch streets, it is not only evident that the number of women wearing a face-veil is exceedingly small (estimates are between 50 and 100 women in the entire country),⁴ but also that, in contrast to what one may expect from these debates, those who cover their faces generally do so with a thin piece of cloth that covers the lower part of the face and leaves the eyes visible. This is far more similar to some Arab styles of covering the face than to the so-called Afghan-style *burka*. In fact, if one were to encounter a woman wearing the latter type of *burka*, this is far more likely to be a journalist or researcher checking the reactions of the public—a style of reporting that has become a genre in itself—than someone wearing it out of religious conviction. Yet, in spite of discussions in the Dutch press about which term should be used and recognition that the term *burka* is problematic, it is this term (in its now favoured Dutch spelling *boerka*) that has become normalized.

The most often heard arguments for banning the *burka* from public space are an odd mix of references to security issues, women's oppression, and women's refusal to integrate into Dutch society. These arguments are contradictory in themselves. The refusal to integrate (in itself a questionable argument) may well be considered a form of agency rather than oppression.⁵ Moreover, the fact that the women concerned often wear a face-veil against the wishes of their family makes it even more problematic to argue that banning the *burka* is necessary to liberate women. Yet, the term *burka* in itself, evoking images of the Taliban regime and its op-

In Europe, face veils have become the ultimate symbols of Muslim “otherness.” The (presently stalled) attempts of the Dutch government to introduce a *burka*-ban highlight how misguided arguments about women's emancipation and national security are used to push a strongly assimilationist agenda. Ironically, while politicians hold on to a singly negative view of face-veils, trends in the fashion industry show that the boundaries between religion, fashion, and everyday social life are far more flexible than the political gaze is able to capture.

pressive policies against women works to conceal such contradictions.

Whereas politicians, such as Wilders, work to fixate the meaning of the *burka*, new developments in the field of fashion design, production and marketing make it ever more difficult to assume that items of dress have a unitary and fixed meaning. If in the early 1990s Turkey was one of the first countries where Islamic fashion shows were held, more recently such fashion shows of upscale, colourful and even

flamboyant yet Islamic styles of dress have drawn wide media attention in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Iran. Moreover, such imagery has gained a global presence through its widespread dissemination through the Internet. In the case of Iran, women push the boundaries of state regulations about dress and appearance by wearing more revealing clothing. At the same time, the organizers of fashion shows, including state institutions respond to this trend by developing styles of dress that intend to appeal to Iran's female population as fashionable, yet simultaneously conform to their notions of Islamic modesty.

Such a new presence of fashionable yet Islamic styles of dress is one more indication that the centres of fashion are becoming increasingly diverse. Moreover, such developments are not limited to the catwalks of Muslim majority countries. Fashion magazines such as *Marie Claire* with its December photo shoot of fashion in Dubai, have started to include reports on and pictures of Islamic fashion, while some would also point to the incorporation of “Islamic elements” in the long-established fashion capitals of London, Paris, and Milan. During the presentation of the new 2007/8 collection, Louise Goldin, for instance, sent a model down the catwalk wearing an outfit that covered everything except the eyes, and models in Milan were wearing Prada turbans. Neo-con websites have been quick to condemn this as a dangerous flirt with, in their words, “jihad chic” or “Islamofascism.”⁶ Such attempts to fix meaning, like those of the Dutch politicians mentioned before, seem first and foremost a defensive reaction to the increasingly common blurring of boundaries between fashion and religion. In a visual comment on such attempts at closure in the Netherlands, artist and fashion designer Aziz Bekkaoui in his *Times Burka Square* employs glossy billboards with elegant, playful women modelling black face veils in combination with slight adaptations of famous advertising slogans, such as “Because I'm more than worth it.”⁷ This is not to say then that fashion in itself equals emancipation; on the contrary, some Muslim women are also critical of Islamic fashion because of the pressures all fashion exerts. At the minimum, though, the imagery conveyed through fashion should unsettle the fixed notions about women and face veils as summarized in “the *burka* of the Taliban.”

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Notes

1. The elections resulted in a change of government and the new minister of integration shelved this idea.
2. Tabled on 21 December 2005 and supported by a parliamentary majority of right-wing parties as well as by the Christian Democrats. It is registered as parliamentary document 29754 no. 41.
3. See Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind, 2002, “Feminism, the Taliban, and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, 2: 339-54 and Lila Abu-Lughod, 2003, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, 3: 783-90.
4. That is 1 in every 10,000 Muslim residents of the Netherlands.
5. The irony is that quite a few of these women are Dutch converts.
6. See, for instance www.debbieschlussel.com, www.atlasshugs.com or www.jihadwatch.org (all accessed 19 March 2007).
7. This plays on L'Oréal's original and famous slogan “Because I'm worth it.”

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