Hidden Features of the Face Veil Controversy

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Face veil controversies have become a common feature of public debates across Europe. Analysing a controversy unintentionally ignited by British Labour Party politician Jack Straw, the author shows that the characteristics of fervent debate do not only reproduce familiar stereotypes, but also obliterate the discussion about veiling within Muslim communities in Britain. What is left unseen is that reservations about the veil are not about British versus Muslim values but about different perspectives of British citizens.

Over the past few years a new range of Arabic words—*hijab*, *jilbab*, *niqab*—have become common currency in the British media, accompanied by images of Muslim women with various degrees of covering and culminating, in October 2006, in a veritable orgy of images of fully veiled women in response to Jack Straw's newspaper article in the *Lancashire Telegraph*.[1] Jack Straw, the ex-home secretary, and prominent Labour MP for Blackburn, (a constituency in the North of England with a large Muslim population), had written that he felt uncomfortable talking to women in face veils; that for the past year he had been asking them if they would not mind lifting their veils when they came to meet him in his office; and that he perceived the veil to be a statement of separation and difference that makes the possibility of good inter-community relations more difficult. The following day he added that he considered facial expressions an important element of communication and that whilst he would not like to be prescriptive, and opposed the French ban on hijab, he nonetheless "would rather" British Muslim women did not wear burqas or niqabs.

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The media spectacle

Straw's comments were taken by the British media as a cue for unleashing their growing stock of sensationalist photos of British Muslim women looking at their most alien, swathed in all encompassing burqas or reduced and magnified to a pair of eyes peeping through the slit of a black niqab. Ever since September 11, which had the effect of transforming all Muslims into potential objects of public paranoia, press photographers have been chasing fully veiled women, thrusting their extendable zoom lenses into deliberately hidden faces. The revelation in July 2005 that four British Muslims were prepared to kill fellow citizens "in the name of Islam" served to increase the value of such images which are used in the press as a visual shorthand for a whole variety of problems nowadays classified as "Muslim," whether these be arranged marriages, the growth of religious extremism, anxieties about faith schools, and concerns about social segregation.

Of course the West's fascination with the veiled woman is far from new. It has a long and well documented history and has left in its wake a much analyzed trail of Orientalist paintings, literary fantasies, ethnographic portraits, and exotic post cards, most of which suggest the mysterious and erotic qualities of veiled women. This desire to look *behind* and *beyond* the veil has found contemporary expression in the gigantesque proportions of the photographs in our newspapers—whole pages devoted to a woman's eyes and lashes framed in black. There are obvious hints of the old curiosity, eroticism, and desire in these images but the form, context, and interpretation are radically different. Today's covered woman wears not sensuous gauzes and embroidered silks but austere plain black accompanied by reminders of her Western identity—a pair of trainers, a carton of iced coffee, a Union Jack mug. She represents not Eastern promise in a timeless far off place but the apparent refusal of British Muslims to abide by "Western norms" in the here and now.

No less dramatic than recent images were the headlines. Overnight Straw's hesitant and context-specific reflections were transformed by every paper from the *Guardian* to the *Sun* into the generalized command "Take off the Veil!" Columns immediately filled not so much with debate on the issues raised as with a familiar set of identities and positions: the outraged liberal, the offended and defiant Muslim, the knowing feminist, and the self-satisfied racist. Some papers framed the issue in the format of a "Muslim problem page" in which a diverse range of stories involving Muslims were cobbled together and where even violent anti-Muslim attacks somehow featured as further evidence that "they" were causing trouble. Others filled with personal declarations by Muslim women about why they choose to cover and fears that Straw's comments would serve as a justification for racism—fears which soon appeared justified when a group of white youths tried to pull the veil off a woman in Liverpool. If the key themes of the Sunday papers were multicultural angst, the frustration and demands of Muslims, and feminist frustration; by Monday the focus had switched to security (news that a British terrorist had escaped under a burqa); by Tuesday, it was talk of bans (should other institutions follow Imperial College's lead in prohibiting students from wearing face veils?); and by the following Saturday, it was concerns about education and employment law (was it right that a teaching assistant had been sacked for wearing niqab in the classroom?). Suddenly the small minority practice of face veiling had become a carrier for the nation's ills.

Debate about the niqab among Muslims

But it is worth considering what is omitted from this barrage of media representations. By framing the debate as a sensationalist polemic between "us" (the reasonable Brits) and "them" ("trouble-making Muslims" *or* "victimized Muslims"), the media not only failed to engage adequately with the issues raised by Straw, but also failed to acknowledge that the niqab and burqa have long been a matter of considerable debate amongst Muslims themselves, both in Britain and elsewhere in the world. A brief glimpse into this internal debate about niqab might enable us to disentangle the recent controversy from the politically charged media hype that surrounds it.

Firstly, there is the perspective of the small minority of British Muslim women who cover their faces in public. Not surprisingly, they were largely defensive, emphasizing that they wear the niqab as a matter of choice and that this should be respected in a society that claims "freedom " as a basic value and human right. In my own conversations with *niqabi*s in London about why they cover—conversations that took place prior to the Straw controversy—the issue of personal freedom was sometimes raised, but on the whole, women were far more pre-occupied with issues of modesty and religious devotion. They felt the niqab was not a religious obligation, but that it represented an extra step in their own personal

spiritual development. It acted as a constant material reminder of their relationship with God and as a physical screen by which they were protected both from the male gaze and from other unnecessary interactions and distractions. As one woman put it in response to my question as to whether she felt the niqab created a barrier between herself and others: "Yes. In a way that is the reason why we are wearing it. It is to avoid any type of contact with men. Wearing it has also made me more restrained and less extrovert which is good because that is what I wanted."

Women recognized that the niqab could attract negative attention but many saw this as one of the sacrifices that strict religious devotion entailed. It was a test of the strength of their faith. Most were familiar with verbal insults such as "ninja" and "Bin Laden's sister," which they attributed to the ignorance of those who "know nothing about Islam." At the same time they felt that the niqab and *jilbab* (full length outer garment) to some extent "protected" them from insults, physically screening them both from verbal abuse and from what many perceived to be the increasingly immoral culture of the British streets.

The screening effects of niqab were counterbalanced for these women by the strong feelings of community and solidarity they felt with their "*niqabi* sisters." Niqab wearing was an act, which attracted like-minded people who shared the same set of values and who, they felt, elicited greater respect from men. Many argued that it was the "courage" of other *niqabis* that had inspired them to adopt it, even though this often went against the wishes of other family members.

These women were far more flexible in their clothing practices and attitudes than they looked. For example, one woman who was doing a teacher training course uncovered her face at college because she felt the niqab might make the teacher "feel uncomfortable" and because she felt the visibility of the mouth was important in a language course. Exposing her face in the classroom was a pragmatic decision she had taken without any prompting from the college. Similarly, when discussing the case of Shebina Begum, the Luton pupil, who had taken her school to court for not allowing her to wear a jilbab, I was surprised to find a group of niqab-wearing women arguing in defence of the school, saying that it was up to pupils to accept the uniform rules, and that the girl in question could always wear the jilbab when she left the building at the end of the day. As one woman put it, "We can't unscramble the world to get what we want. It is up to us to find a way of fitting in whilst not compromising our beliefs." She gave the example of her daughter who did not want to take off the niqab (in spite of her parents' suggestion that this might be a good idea) but felt awkward at the prospect of wearing it to college, and had therefore chosen an Open University degree course that she could follow from home. This way, women acknowledged the constraints that the niqab placed upon them but they also showed ways of navigating around them. Contrary to common perceptions of women wearing niqab, the women concerned were not particularly interested in politics. Their views were conservative rather than radical; their motivations, predominantly moral and religious. They shared more in common with Christian nuns than "Islamic terrorists" or "extremists."

However, as mentioned earlier, niqab-wearers are a minority within a minority and their views represent only a small proportion of British Muslim opinion. Whilst most Muslims interviewed in the press last week felt duty bound to rise to the "defence" of niqab, the reality is that many British Muslims are highly ambivalent about face veiling, particularly when practiced in a Western context. Many have told me they consider niqab-wearing an archaic practice that has no place in the modern world. They object on political and feminist grounds, often expressing both irritation and pity towards veiled women.

British Muslim objections to niqab can be summarized as material, social, religious, associative, interactive, and political though these categories are not mutually exclusive. Material and social objections focus on the notion that the niqab creates a physical barrier which makes communication difficult, and recognition impossible. This, it is argued, has the effect of denying women their individuality, barring them from participation in mainstream society, and preventing them from obtaining jobs, which in turn makes them dependent on men and is regressive. There is also fear that the niqab encourages the formation of ghettos by "stimulating prejudice" in others, which only serves to reenforce alienation and social exclusion. This links to the question of the image of niqab which many Muslims feel is justifiably associated with extremism which, they argue, reflects badly on the whole community. Some felt the niqab de-humanized women, reducing them to "alien" or "ghost-like" cloth forms. One participant in a particularly heated online debate objected that, as a Muslim man, he was having to constantly fight off the assumption made "by Westerners" that it was he and men like him who "forced" women into veils—something he found particularly galling given his personal opposition to niqab. Religious objections revolved not only around the common assertion that the niqab is unnecessary, but also that it actually works against Islam by acting as "an obstacle to *da'wah*," scaring unbelievers away from the faith rather than drawing them towards it. There are also gender-based objections concerning how the niqab affects relations between men and women. Whilst many women stress that there is no equivalent burden placed on men, some men complain that the niqab is fundamentally insulting for it suggests men are incapable of self-control. These objections are voiced with passion in a number of contexts from casual conversations to chat rooms and discussion forums on Islamic websites.

Using the veil politically

This pre-existing internal Muslim debate provides an interesting counter-point to the largely monolithic "Muslim perspective" found in the British newspapers where, with the exception of a few prominent Muslim figures renowned for their liberal views, the main perspective expressed was one of "stunned outrage" at Jack Straw's comments. What

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these debates reveal is that many of Straw's concerns were in fact under discussion amongst British Muslims before he made his opinion public. Viewed in this light his reservations about the niqab are not about British versus Muslim values at all but about the different perspectives of British citizens, a category to which many Muslims belong. Meanwhile his assertions that the niqab makes others feel uncomfortable, is a statement of separation and difference and a physical barrier to communication can hardly be interpreted as revelatory.

None of this, however, alleviates the fact in the current political climate there is a very real risk of Straw's comments (soon supported by Tony Blair) being exploited both by the far right and by radical religious extremists and there is evidence of this process occurring on both sides. In view of this inevitability, was it inappropriate for a politician of his stature to raise the issue, or does the onus lie more with the British media for stifling reflection on an issue of public concern by simply feeding the current national appetite for sensationalist polemics about Muslims and Islam?

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Note

1. This article is a revised version of the text that appeared at the website of the Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/ferguson-centre/discussion.htm. The website aims to stimulate discussions on current public issues and problems.