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# THE VIEW FROM BEHIND THE VEIL

YVONNE RIDLEY

**LONDON – I USED TO LOOK AT VEILED WOMEN AS QUIET, OPPRESSED CREATURES – UNTIL I WAS CAPTURED BY THE TALIBAN.**

In September 2001, just 15 days after the terrorist attacks on the United States, I snuck into Afghanistan, clad in a head-to-toe blue burqa, intending to write a newspaper account of life under the repressive regime. Instead, I was discovered, arrested and detained for 10 days. I spat and swore at my captors; they called me a “bad” woman but let me go after I promised to read the Quran and study Islam. (Frankly, I’m not sure who was happier when I was freed – they or I.)

Back home in London, I kept my word about studying Islam – and was amazed by what I discovered. I’d been expecting Quran chapters on how to beat your wife and oppress your daughters; instead, I found passages promoting the liberation of women. Two-and-a-half years after my capture, I converted to Islam, provoking a mixture of astonishment, disappointment and encouragement among friends and relatives.

Now, it is with disgust and dismay that I watch here in Britain as former foreign secretary Jack Straw describes the Muslim niqab – a face veil that reveals only the eyes – as an unwelcome barrier to integration, with Prime Minister Tony Blair, writer Salman Rushdie and even Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi leaping to his defence.

Having been on both sides of the veil, I can tell you that most Western male politicians and journalists who lament the oppression of women in the Islamic world have no idea what they are talking about. They go on about veils, child brides, female circumcision, honour

killings and forced marriages, and they wrongly blame Islam for all this – their arrogance surpassed only by their ignorance.

These cultural issues and customs have nothing to do with Islam. A careful reading of the Quran shows just about everything that Western feminists fought for in the 1970s was available to Muslim women 1,400 years ago. Women in Islam are considered equal to men in spirituality, education and worth, and a woman’s gift for childbirth and child-rearing is regarded as a positive attribute.

When Islam offers women so much, why are Western men so obsessed with Muslim women’s attire? Even British government ministers Gordon Brown and John Reid have made disparaging remarks about the niqab – and they hail from across the Scottish border, where men wear skirts.

**When I converted** to Islam and began wearing a headscarf, the repercussions were enormous. All I did was cover my head and hair – but I instantly became a second-class citizen. I knew I’d hear

from the odd Islamophobe, but I didn’t expect so much open hostility from strangers. Cabs passed me by at night, their “for hire” lights glowing. One cabie, after dropping off a white passenger right in front of me, glared at me when I rapped on his window, then drove off. Another said, “Don’t leave a bomb in the back seat” and asked, “Where’s bin Laden hiding?”

Yes, it is a religious obligation for Muslim women to dress modestly, but the majority of Muslim women I know like wearing the hijab, which leaves the face uncovered, though a few prefer the niqab. It is a personal statement: My dress tells you that I am a Muslim and that I expect to be treated respectfully, much as a Wall St. banker would say that a business suit defines him as an executive to be taken seriously. And, especially among converts to the faith like me, the attention of men who confront women with inappropriate, leering behaviour is not tolerable.

I was a Western feminist for many years, but I’ve discovered Muslim feminists are more radical than their secu-

lar counterparts. We hate those ghastly beauty pageants, and tried to stop laughing in 2003 when judges of the Miss Earth competition hailed the emergence of a bikini-clad Miss Afghanistan. Vida Samadzai, as a giant leap for women’s liberation. They even gave Samadzai a special award for “representing the victory of women’s rights.”

Some young Muslim feminists consider the hijab and the niqab political symbols, too, a way of rejecting Western excesses such as binge drinking, casual sex and drug use. 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? In Islam, superiority is achieved through piety – not beauty, wealth, power, position or sex.

I didn’t know whether to scream or laugh when Italy’s Prodi joined the debate by declaring it is “common sense” not to wear the niqab because it makes social relations “more difficult.” Nonsense. If this were the case, why are cellphones, landlines, email, text messaging and fax machines in daily use? And no one switches off the radio because they can’t see the presenter’s face.

Under Islam, I am respected. It tells me I have a right to an education and that it is my duty to seek out knowledge, regardless of whether I am single or married. Nowhere in the framework of Islam are we told women must wash, clean or cook for men. As for how Muslim men are allowed to beat their wives – it’s simply not true. Critics of Islam will quote random Quranic verses or hadith, but usually out of context. If a man does raise a finger against his wife, he is not allowed to leave a mark on her body, which is the Quran’s way of saying, “Don’t beat your wife, stupid.”

It is not just Muslim men who must re-evaluate the place and treatment of women. According to a recent National Domestic Violence Hotline survey, 4 million American women experience a serious assault by a partner during an average 12-month period. More than three women are killed by their husbands and boyfriends every day – that is nearly 5,500 since 9/11.

Violent men don’t come from any particular religious or cultural category; one in three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime, according to the hotline survey. This is a global problem that transcends religion, wealth, class, race and culture.

But it is also true that in the West, men still believe that they are superior to women, despite protests to the contrary. They still receive better pay for equal work – whether in the mailroom or the boardroom – and are still treated as sexualized commodities whose power and influence flow directly from their appearance.

And for those who are still trying to claim that Islam oppresses women, recall this 1992 statement from Rev. Pat Robertson, offering his views on empowered women: Feminism is a “socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practise witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”

Now you tell me who is civilized and who is not.

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WASHINGTON POST

## Face the facts: The full-face veil makes women faceless, literally

CATHY YOUNG

Britain has been in turmoil over veils after a school in Yorkshire suspended a Muslim teacher’s assistant for wearing niqab – a form of the traditional veil that leaves only a slit for the eyes.

Further stoking the flames, House of Commons leader Jack Straw revealed that in meetings with constituents, he had asked niqab-wearing women to remove their veils for better face-to-face interaction.

The niqab controversy has focused on thorny questions of cultural integration and religious tolerance in Europe. However, it is also a debate about women and Islam.

For Westerners, the veil has long been a symbol of the oppression of women in the Islamic world. Today, quite a few Muslims regard it as a symbol of cultural and religious self-assertion and reject the idea that Muslim women are downtrodden.

In our multicultural age, many liberals are reluctant to criticize the subjugation of women in Muslim countries and Muslim immigrant communities, fearful of promoting the notion of Western superiority.

At the other extreme, some critics have used the plight of Muslim women to suggest Islam is inherently evil and even to justify bashing Muslims.

Recently, these tensions turned into a nasty academic controversy in the United States, as the Chronicle of Higher Education has reported.

In June, Hamid Dabashi, an Iranian-born professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature at Columbia University, published an article in the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram attacking Azar Nafisi, Iranian emigre and author of the 2003 bestseller *Reading Lolita In Tehran*.

Nafisi’s memoir is a harsh portrait of life in Iran after the Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic revo-

lution, focusing in particular on the mistreatment of women, who were stripped of their former rights and harshly punished for violating strict religious codes of dress and behaviour.

Complaining that Nafisi’s writings demonize Iran, Dabashi branded her a “native

*“Their choice helps legitimize a custom that is imposed on millions of women around the world who have no choice.”*

informer and colonial agent for American imperialism.” In a subsequent interview, he compared her to Lyndie England, the U.S. soldier convicted of abusing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

While Dabashi’s rhetoric is extreme, it is not unique. Even in

academic feminist groups on the Internet, criticisms of the patriarchal oppression of women in Muslim countries are often met with hostility unless accompanied by disclaimers that American women, too, are oppressed.

A more thoughtful examination of Islam and women’s rights was offered earlier this month at a symposium at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

The keynote speaker, Syrian-American psychiatrist Wafa Sultan, who also spoke in Montreal last week, an outspoken critic of Islam, described an “honour killing” of a young Middle Eastern woman that occurred with the help of her mother.

In a later exchange, another participant, Libyan journalist Sawzan Hanish, argued it was unfair to single out Muslim societies, since women suffer violence and sexual abuse in every society, including the United States.

Sultan pointed out a major dif-

ference: In many Muslim cultures, such violence and abuse are accepted and legalized.

Yet the symposium’s moderator, scholar Michael Ledeen, rejected Sultan’s assertion Islam is irredeemably anti-woman. He noted the idea that some religions cannot be reformed runs counter to the history of religions.

Several panelists spoke of Muslim feminists’ efforts to reform Islam and separate its spiritual message from the human patriarchal baggage.

Some of these reformers look for a lost female-friendly legacy in early Islam; others argue everything in the Quran that runs counter to the modern understanding of human rights and equality should be revised or rejected. These feminists have an uphill battle to fight, and they deserve all the support they can get.

Meanwhile, using the language of tolerance to justify oppressive practices is a grotesque

perversion of liberalism. The veiling debate is a case in point.

No amount of rhetorical sleight of hand can disguise the fact the full-face veil makes women, literally, faceless.

Some Muslim women in the West might choose this garb (which is not mandated in the Quran), but their explanations often reveal an internalized misogynistic view of women as creatures whose very existence is a sexual provocation to men.

What’s more, their choice helps legitimize a custom that is imposed on millions of women around the world who have no choice.

Perhaps, as some say, women are the key to Islam’s modernization. The West cannot impose its own solutions from the outside – but, at the very least, it can honestly confront the problem.

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