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**Can I see your hair: choice, agency and attitudes: the  
dilemma of faith and feminism for Muslim women who  
cover**

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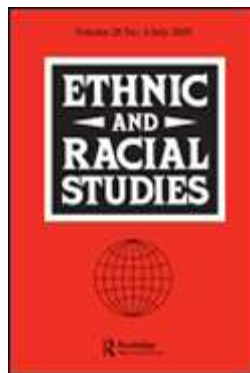
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**Can I see your hair: choice, agency and attitudes: the dilemma of faith and feminism for Muslim women who cover**

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Haleh Afshar

“Can I see your hair: choice, agency and attitudes: the dilemma of  
faith and feminism for Muslim women who cover”

For Peer Review Only

## Abstract

*This paper argues that the current climate of Islamophobia has burdened Muslim women who cover with additional problems in terms of their politics, their lived experiences and their life chances. It is the contention of this paper that the myths about the hijab have created a modern day form of Orientalism that objectifies the women who cover and otherises them as oppressed, perhaps exotic, and possibly dangerous. Such stereotypical views, at time articulated by Western feminists, create stumbling blocks that bar the way to the feminist ideal of respect unity and community of goals.*

Key words women and Islam; Islamophobia; Hijab; Orientalism; identities

In the context of violence and Islamophobia in the post 9/11 and 7/7 era Muslim women have found themselves at the centre of contestations about their identities, their nationalities and their faith and their commitment or lack of it to global feminist movements. Hijab, the Islamic cover for women has become one of the most contested arenas both amongst Muslim women and between Muslim and non-Muslim women. This paper seeks to uncover some of the imbedded assumptions made by protagonists on both sides of this argument and suggest that such views result in all

1  
2  
3 sides losing sight of the global sisterhood of women and the need  
4  
5 for solidarity across differences and divides.  
6  
7

8  
9 If we glance over the 20<sup>th</sup> century experiences of many  
10  
11 Muslim women in the Middle East we note an early and fierce  
12  
13 opposition to the hijab dating from the previous century and  
14  
15 continuing throughout to an equally fierce defence of the hijab in  
16  
17 the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To gain an understanding of the problems we need  
18  
19 to separate out imposed dress code regulations, such as those  
20  
21 imposed by the Iranian and Saudi governments, from elected one  
22  
23 such as the choice to wear the hijab in the West. We also must  
24  
25 separate out the latter from the constructed images of an oppressed  
26  
27 submissive Muslim women forced, not only by the laws of the land  
28  
29 but by the regulation of her community and king group to cover to  
30  
31 satisfy the honour of ever jealous and vigilant menfolk .  
32  
33  
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36  
37 It is the contention of this paper that the latter generalisation  
38  
39 mirrors 19<sup>th</sup> century discussion about the exotic harem ladies of  
40  
41 pleasure forever doing the belly dance and offering their bodies to  
42  
43 a replete Pasha; something that was not rooted in reality then and is  
44  
45 not now. However the new climate of Islamaphobia has otherised  
46  
47 the Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular in a way  
48  
49 that exemplifies aspects of what Edward Said termed Orientalism.  
50  
51  
52

### 53 54 55 **Orientalism**

56  
57 Edward Said (1978) coined the word Orientalism to analyse the  
58  
59 way that Western scholarship reflected a distorted image of the  
60

1  
2  
3 East. He argued that the work of imperialists, though rigorous in  
4 many ways, was rooted in the limitations of their experiences of the  
5  
6 East. They used these to construct “an accepted grid for filtering  
7  
8 through the Orient into Western consciousness” (Said 1995: 5–6.)  
9

10  
11 The Orient was seen as essentially ancient, exotic and absurd; the  
12  
13 land of despots and mystics; populated by a backward population  
14  
15 of supine men and subordinated and silent women. Life  
16  
17 experiences in general and those of women in particular were  
18  
19 assumed to have been fundamentally different, not only in terms of  
20  
21 faith and culture but also and particularly in terms of intellectual  
22  
23 calibre. It was assumed that the Oriental mind was distinct and  
24  
25 different from that of the Occident. This is not merely a historical  
26  
27 view on the 11th of November 2006 as part of “Any Answers” a  
28  
29 caller told Jonathan Dimbleby that his experience of living in the  
30  
31 Middle East for 10 years has taught him that Muslims were simply  
32  
33 not equipped intellectually to consider their own positions. They  
34  
35 blindly followed their religious leaders did not have the ability to  
36  
37 think for themselves and could not be trusted to do so!  
38  
39

40  
41 Such processes of otherising were categorise the oriental as  
42  
43 members of “a subject race”, (Said 1995: 206–7) that had to be  
44  
45 ruled for their own good, but only to the level of their limited  
46  
47 intellectual capacity. The static torpor of the East had to be  
48  
49 conquered by the dynamism of modernity of the West to benefit  
50  
51 the West and perhaps edge the Orient towards Occidental levels of  
52  
53 civilisation. The problem the West faced, then as now, was the  
54  
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2  
3 unwillingness of the Oriental subjects to yield willingly to this  
4  
5 project.  
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10  
11 This resistance was and still is projected as yet more  
12 evidence of inability of the oriental to grasp Western concepts and  
13 meanings. Orient was understood as being an inferior and  
14 uncivilised and the Oriental women was assumed to be alluring,  
15 be-witching and extremely dangerous (Stott 1992). Often these  
16 understandings were constructed by scholars and painters who had  
17 no access to the lives of women and chose to present their own  
18 fantasies as true images of the Orient. This otherising in turn  
19 resulted in a deeply rooted belief that the Orientals could only  
20 progress, within their limited abilities only if they looked to the  
21 Occident.  
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41 Over the decades scholars have considered the ways that  
42 this process of otherisation has misrepresented and caricaturised  
43 the Oriental Other in terms of sex, gender, race, ethnicity and  
44 religion (Zubaida 1995, Lewis 1996, Prasch 1996, Amstutz 1997,  
45 Maria-Dolors et al, 1998, Mazrui 2000, Jeyifo 2000, Kahani-  
46 Hopkins & Hopkins 2002). Most attribute the labelling of the entire  
47 Orient as the other a direct result of the power of the imperialists to  
48 frame scholarship and understanding of the West about the rest.  
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60 Many argue that the disparities of power was central in this process

1  
2  
3 of otherisation (Musallam: 1979, Minear :1980). These arguments  
4  
5 remain true to the current construction of the Islamophobic identity  
6  
7  
8 of minority Muslims in the West as well as the majority living in  
9  
10 the Middle East.  
11

12  
13  
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15  
16 It remains true that the vast Orientalist literature had simply  
17  
18 ignored the dynamic millennial interactions between the Orient and  
19  
20 the West that, then as now, impacted on, shaped and reshaped ideas,  
21  
22 philosophise, art, literature and destinies of both (Akhavi 2003,  
23  
24 Afary &Anderson 2005, Moallem 2005, Najmabadi 2005). It is  
25  
26 therefore of interest to consider how the more recent otherisation of  
27  
28 Muslims repeats the misconceptions of the past paves the way to a  
29  
30 conflictual future that could be avoided by a less myopic view of  
31  
32 both the past and the present.  
33  
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### 38 **Islamaphobia**

39  
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41  
42 Clearly Orientalism is not merely part of a forgotten past; it  
43  
44 remains very much at the core of the current history of race and  
45  
46 gender in the West and current wars in the Middle East.  
47  
48 Islamaphobia which maybe defined as ‘unfounded hostility  
49  
50 towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’  
51  
52 (the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia  
53  
54 Runnymede Trust report 1997). It defines Islam as being  
55  
56 monolithic, separate and other without any common values with  
57  
58 other cultures and as being essentially barbaric and sexist. Muslims  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 are therefore essentialised, otherised and imagined as being  
4  
5 fundamentally uncivilised, and unwilling to conform to the values  
6  
7 of the West (The Commission on British Muslims and  
8  
9 Islamophobia Runnymede Trust report 1997).

10  
11  
12 [Muslims] are backward and evil, and if it is being racist to  
13  
14 say so then I must be and happy and proud to be so. (Robert  
15  
16 Kilroy-Silk The Daily Express 15 Jan 1995)  
17  
18  
19

20  
21  
22 A view shared by surprising 79% of Spaniards

23  
24 :(El 79% de los españoles cree que los musulmanes son  
25  
26 intolerantes y el 68 % dice que son violentos Minutos.es  
27  
28 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamophobia#\\_](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamophobia#_)  
29  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 It is assumed that therefore there must be a clash of  
35  
36 civilisations between Muslims and the West that could only harm  
37  
38 the latter (Huntington 1993).  
39  
40

41  
42 We have a fifth column in our midst... Thousands of  
43  
44 alienated young Muslims, most of them born and  
45  
46 bred here but who regard themselves as an army  
47  
48 within, are waiting for an opportunity to help to  
49  
50 destroy the society that sustains them. We now stare  
51  
52 into the abyss, aghast. (Melanie Philips *The Sunday*  
53  
54 *Times* 4 November 2001)  
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It is the contention of this paper that it is specifically the Orientalists roots of Islamaphobia that make it so easy to denounce the Muslims as the enemy within. It may be that Islamaphobia dates back to the 1990s, with the shift in forms of prejudice from race-based prejudice to discrimination based on culture and religion. Murtuja, argues that even though there has been a marked decrease in the physical security of Muslims, the attacks on the Towers and the underground did not cause Islamaphobia but rather became the catalyst, allowing Islamaphobic tendencies and perspectives public, and an arguably justifiable, free reign (Murtuja 2005: 82).

In the post 9/11 and 7/7 Islamaphobia has gained a momentum of its own creating a ravine between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West. The fear of Muslims as a category is firing the fuels of Islamaphobia and making it extremely difficult for many to live their everyday lives. Some are driven to adopt Western names and pretend not to be Muslims at all. Others emphasise their Asian-ness in order to draw clear boundaries between themselves and the threatening mobs of Islam. In this discourse of hate covered women are singled out as the living example of backwardness and fearful subordination.

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6 But in ascribing alienation, anger and hatred to Islam and  
7  
8 disregarding the array of institutional Islamophobic practices, we  
9  
10 only exacerbate the situation and possibly propel it to further  
11  
12 excesses. As early as June 2004 the Commission on British  
13  
14 Muslims and Islamophobia warned that  
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21 Persistent and unshackled Islamophobia in the UK could lead to  
22  
23 ‘time-bombs’ of backlash and bitterness... Since the 11  
24  
25 September attacks, communities had experienced greater  
26  
27 hostility, including increased attacks against individuals and  
28  
29 mosques, <http://www.honestreports.com/islamophobia.asp>  
30  
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32

33  
34 Not something that could be attributed to the religion Islam. The  
35  
36 Commission came to view that if there was alienation then it had  
37  
38 been created through negative social interactions:  
39  
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42  
43 The cumulative effect of Islamophobia’s various features...  
44  
45 is that Muslims are made to feel that they do not truly  
46  
47 belong here – they feel that they are not truly accepted, let  
48  
49 alone welcomed, as full members of British society. On the  
50  
51 contrary, they are seen as ‘an enemy within’ or ‘a fifth  
52  
53 column’ and they feel that they are under constant siege.  
54  
55 This is bad for society as well as for Muslims themselves.  
56  
57 Moreover, time-bombs are being primed that are likely to  
58  
59 explode in the future – both Muslim and non-Muslim  
60

1  
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3 commentators have pointed out that a young generation of  
4  
5 British Muslims is developing that feels increasingly  
6  
7 disaffected, alienated and bitter. It's in the interests of non-  
8  
9 Muslims as well as Muslims, therefore, that Islamophobia  
10  
11 should be rigorously challenged, reduced and removed. The  
12  
13 time to act is now, not some time in the future.  
14  
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16  
17 [www.insted.co.uk/islam.html](http://www.insted.co.uk/islam.html)  
18  
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20  
21 Sadly about the same time that such reports were warning  
22  
23 against Islamaphobia, world leaders such as George Bush were  
24  
25 declaring that there is  
26  
27

28  
29 no neutral ground in the fight between civilization and terror ...  
30  
31 because there is no neutral ground between good and evil,  
32  
33 freedom and slavery, and life and death. (*New York Times* 20<sup>th</sup>  
34  
35 March 2004).  
36  
37

38  
39 The Muslims in general and the Middle East in particular were  
40  
41 burdened with the labels of terrorism, evilness and enslavement  
42  
43 (the latter is particularly interesting since, despite the myth of white  
44  
45 slavery, enslavement has been a very specific feature of North  
46  
47 American economic development!)  
48  
49

50  
51 European Muslims are regarded as representing a unified  
52  
53 culture quite different from European culture, one that is  
54  
55 strongly linked to certain non-European countries. These  
56  
57 perceptions are part of the process of labelling Islam as  
58  
59 Europe's "other." (Rudiger, 2004.)  
60

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3 The 7/7 attacks on the underground exacerbated the situation  
4  
5 and the language of warmongers flourished. According to the  
6  
7 leader of the opposition in the UK, David Cameron, the threat from  
8  
9 extremist Islamist terrorism must be countered at all costs  
10  
11

12  
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15  
16 We can and should try to understand the nature of the force that  
17  
18 we need to defeat. The driving force behind today's terrorist  
19  
20 threat is Islamist fundamentalism. The struggle we are engaged  
21  
22 in is, at root, ideological. (Speech to the Foreign Policy Centre  
23  
24 in is, at root, ideological. (Speech to the Foreign Policy Centre  
25  
26 24th August 2006)  
27  
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30

31 Perhaps the clearest pathological statement is that made by Will  
32  
33 Cummins:  
34  
35  
36  
37

38 All Muslims, like all dogs, share certain characteristics. A dog is  
39  
40 not the same animal as a cat just because both species are  
41  
42 comprised of different breeds. An extreme Christian believes  
43  
44 that the Garden of Eden really existed; an extreme Muslim flies  
45  
46 planes into buildings - there's a big difference. (*The Sunday*  
47  
48 *Telegraph* 25 July 2004)  
49  
50  
51  
52

53  
54 Melanie Phillips fears being overrun  
55  
56  
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58 from the 1990s, Islamist radicals had been given free rein in  
59  
60 Britain in a "gentlemen's agreement" that if they were left alone,

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2  
3 they would not turn on the country that was so generously  
4 nurturing them. The result was “Londonistan”, as Britain  
5  
6 became the hub of al-Qaeda in Europe... in the past few days ...  
7  
8 no fewer than 1,200 Islamist terrorists are biding their time  
9  
10 within British suburbs. Yet does Britain even now fully  
11  
12 understand the nature of the threat it is facing, let alone have the  
13  
14 will to deal with it? trained ‘Afghan Arab’ warriors made their  
15  
16 way instead to Britain, attracted, they said, by its ‘traditions of  
17  
18 democracy and justice’. But they had now been trained to be  
19  
20 killers. They had discovered jihad. And the radical ideology  
21  
22 they brought with them found many echoes in the Islamism and  
23  
24 seething resentments that, by now, were entrenched in British  
25  
26 Muslim institutions. (*The Observer* 28 May 2006)  
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Nor is Islamaphobia limited to the UK. As Ziauddin Sardar notes

41 from Germany to the Netherlands, onwards to Belgium and  
42 finally into France - the object of much recent attention - I  
43  
44 meet people all too ready to describe Muslims in the  
45  
46 colours of darkness. Islamophobia is not a British disease: it  
47  
48 is a common, if diverse, European phenomenon. It is the  
49  
50 singular rock against which the tide of European liberalism  
51  
52 crashes. (*The Listener* 5th December 2005)  
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The fears engendered by Islamaphobia have led to political  
backlash on both sides and can play into the politics of groups such

1  
2  
3 as the far-right British National Party (BNP) who capitalise on the  
4 fears of “the other”. At the same time restrictive policies that  
5 specifically target Muslims are fuelled by measures such as the US  
6 Patriot Act and the UK Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act  
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as the far-right British National Party (BNP) who capitalise on the fears of “the other”. At the same time restrictive policies that specifically target Muslims are fuelled by measures such as the US Patriot Act and the UK Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 and the French emergency measures.

The government’s tendency to hold the whole of the Muslim community accountable for the actions of the few – within an already tense climate of Islamophobia and alienation – has had the effect of driving a wedge between the Muslim community and the rest of British society, rather than between the extremists and everyone else.  
(Briggs et al 2007:41)

Events such as the unwarranted dawn raid on a Muslim household in Forest Gate

played into a growing sense of alienation and victimhood among many Muslims, who interpret them against a backdrop of growing Islamophobia and an increasingly vocal minority within their own community that advocates separatism driven by anti-western feelings. (Briggs et al 2007:79)

In November 2005 in response to riots in the suburbs of Paris there were wholesale arrests of rafts of Muslims. A legal

1  
2  
3 technicality that requires of citizens at the age of 18 to make a  
4  
5 positive decision to be French was used by the Minister of Interior  
6  
7 Nicolas Sarkozy to order the arrest and “sending back home” of  
8  
9 young Muslims to countries that may not have even visited before  
10  
11 (*New York Times* November 10, 2005). French born and bred  
12  
13 Muslims suddenly found themselves branded as ‘scums’,  
14  
15  
16 ‘foreigners’ ‘young hooligans’ (*The Observer* November 6, 2005)  
17  
18 and the ‘enemy within’. As a matter of fact, those who had rioted  
19  
20 had done so to gain equality, not Islamic laws (Paris Reuters  
21  
22 November 17 2005). Nevertheless they were to be ‘expelled from  
23  
24 the country, regardless of whether they [we]re in France legally or  
25  
26 illegally’ (*New York Times* November 10, 2005).  
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34 The plight of the French is merely one example of the  
35  
36 difficulties that Muslims are experiencing in the West. 9/11 led to  
37  
38 spiralling levels of insecurity for Muslims. It may be that  
39  
40 Islamophobia became an almost ‘respectable’ prejudice?  
41  
42  
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45

46 Officially, all right-thinking people have forsworn racism ...  
47  
48 Islamophobia is the half-open door through which it makes  
49  
50 its triumphal re-entry into respectable society (Seabrook:  
51  
52 2004)  
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56  
57 By November 2005 an estimated 800,000 Muslims were  
58  
59 imprisoned across the world accused of ‘terrorism’. Some were  
60



1  
2  
3 shifted to countries that permitted torture in order to extract  
4 information from them (*The Guardian*, 18 November 2005). Many  
5  
6 have had no access to lawyers or entitlement to due process. It is  
7  
8 not unusual at gatherings of Muslims to find that the majority have  
9  
10 had friends or relatives, or have themselves been stopped and  
11  
12 searched or arrested. The assumption is that it is 'Muslims'  
13  
14 specifically who have been the target of regressive measures in the  
15  
16 West. This fear was intensified in February 2004 when the French  
17  
18 government decided to ban the head scarf from schools and bar  
19  
20 access to education to anyone wearing a religious insignia. Since  
21  
22 these measures were introduced in the name of equality, it was  
23  
24 perhaps unavoidable that the Muslims youth would in the long run  
25  
26 protest; as they did, to seek their elusive equal citizenship rights. In  
27  
28 the UK the situation became daunting after 7/7 and the realisation  
29  
30 that there was a shoot to kill policy that could threaten anyone  
31  
32 assumed to have been "a Muslim terrorist" (*The Guardian* 14  
33  
34 September 2005).  
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46 The combination of these measures locates Muslims in  
47  
48 general and young Muslim men and women in particular as,  
49  
50 sometimes-unwilling, emblems of combative Islam at the cross fire  
51  
52 between faith and state policies. It is at such points of crisis that  
53  
54 some Muslims hanker back to the days of Islamic glory and find  
55  
56 the call for the supranational identity of umma to be alluring  
57  
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## The Umma

The recent calls by Hizb ut-Tahrir and others for fraternity of the umma are specifically constructed as a reaction to a crisis. The call is primarily addressed to young men, and constructs an ideal state with Muslims of a single overriding political identity. Groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir call for a supranationality that they argue is rooted in the history of Islam. Muslims belong to the single community of the umma that, according to the teachings of the Prophet, recognises no divisions by race, class or nationality (Roy 2003). It is ruled by the laws of God and protected by a caliph who acts as Vice-Regent of God on earth. In Britain Hizb ut-Tahrir seeks the re-establishment of such a caliphate and defines its own politics as one that:

works within the Ummah and with her, so that she adopts Islam as her cause and is led to restore the Khilafah and the ruling by what Allah (swt) revealed... Its aim is to resume the Islamic way of life and to convey the Islamic da'wah to the world. This objective means bringing the Muslims back to living an Islamic way of life in Dar al-Islam and in an Islamic society such that all of life's affairs in society are administered according to the Shari'ah rules, and the viewpoint in it is the halal and the haram under the shade of the Islamic State, which is the Khilafah State.

(<http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/english.html>)

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The demand for Muslims to recognise themselves primarily in terms of their faith makes an assumption about uniformity of the faith that is far from the truth. Though a powerful call, that maybe appealing in theory, from the very inception of the faith the umma has been, and has remained, more of an ideal than a reality. In practice it has never been a form of government that excluded people of other faiths. The millennial Islamic rule of caliphate over three continents succeeded precisely because it was not exclusive. Muslim caliphs had advisors, wazirs, that were non Muslims and the caliphate accepted and accommodated the needs of all religious groups. Umma was a concept that facilitated participation without imposing debilitating practical constraints. The empire of Islam did not demand of its people to make a choice between their nationality and faith; indeed it accommodated a vast diversity of faiths and nations under its melliat governance that allowed for peaceful co-existence and respect between people of different colours and creeds. The melliat system recognised and respected the different faiths and national group identities and accommodated their needs.

But the last vestiges of caliphate disappeared in the 1920s. With the emergence of nation states in the Middle East it is virtually impossible to return to the idea of umma as a practical political framework. As a matter of fact in the 1950s and 60s when countries such as Egypt, Libya and Syria envisaged the reconstruction of an Arab umma in terms of the creation of an Arab

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3 nation (Jankowski.& Gershoni 1987) the project failed precisely  
4  
5 because it was not able to accommodate diversity and build trust  
6  
7  
8 (Hashem Talhami 2001). Umma could only exist in historical  
9  
10 contexts where the relationship between caliphs and the melliat  
11  
12 were mediated by suzerains who were rooted in the communities  
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14  
15 and in contexts where the relations of power were flexible,  
16  
17 permeable and consensual.  
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21  
22 In Britain the call for British Muslims to discard their  
23  
24 nationality in favour of their faith is unifying and empowering for a  
25  
26 group that has been marginalised and labelled as 'terrorists' by the  
27  
28 media and too often by neighbours and acquaintances as well.  
29  
30 However men and women are likely to respond differently to the  
31  
32 call for unity, not only because by and large terrorism is imagined  
33  
34 to be the domain of men, but also because there is a gendered  
35  
36 perception of Islam and umma. Demands for politicised radical  
37  
38 Islam, in terms of the prescriptions that it makes, are rooted in the  
39  
40 failure of many Western democracies to respond effectively to the  
41  
42 problems of institutionalised Islamaphobia. Furthermore there is a  
43  
44 highly gendered aspect to Islamic radicalism which may well be  
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46 understood differently by Muslim women, including the  
47  
48 *mohajabehs*.  
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### **The mohajabehs**

With the rapid rise of a virulent new form of Islamaphobia, women who cover find themselves at the heart of the hatred and are targeted both in the media and in the public domain at large.

According to one estimate after September 11<sup>th</sup> there were an average of 3.8 attacks a day on Muslims, mainly women, (*The Guardian* December 8<sup>th</sup> 2001) . Strikingly, this number is only a reflection of those assaults that had been reported to the authorities; many of the violent assaults - hammer attacks, petrol bombs – remained unreported to. A human right activist who had received obscene phone calls noted: ‘It's as if there is no confidence in the authorities to stop it’ (Chrisafis *The Guardian* December 8<sup>th</sup> 2001). Muslim women had already been defined as clear examples of the barbarism of Islam ; Kilroy –Silk had already announced that

Muslims everywhere behave with equal savagery. They behead criminals, stone to death female - only female - adulteresses, throw acid in the faces of women who refuse to wear the chador, mutilate the genitals of young girls and ritually abuse animals ... they are backward and evil, and if it is being racist to say so then I must be and happy and proud to be so (*Daily Express* 15 January 1995)

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Embedded in these statements were the assumptions that the West and its warriors must rush to liberate the Muslim women from the chains imposed on them by their faith. Such an analysis, by its very nature, made the *mohajebah*, women who cover, into an object of pity if not fear. One that had been forced to cover and must therefore be liberated; even if this has to be done at the expense of closing the doors of schools to them. Feminists of all shades were urged to step forward to ‘save’ the Muslim woman from her plight. Many forgot that if feminism is about anything it is about celebrating difference and respecting the choices that women make. Commentators who could imagine that the very act of veiling may imply that some element of choosing to be publicly labelled as Muslim, saw this very action not only as “threatening to the very fabric of society” (Barry: 2006:26) but also an act of desperation and thus a dangerous deed (Moore 2006).

In this discourse of hate covered women were singled out as the living example of backwardness and fearful subordination. Islam was considered to have defined itself ‘through disgust for women's bodies’ (Polly Toynbee *The Guardian* September 28, 2001). Toynbee in fact lashed out announcing that that the veil arouses lasciviousness

More moderate versions of the garb - dull, uniform coat to the ground and the plain headscarf - have much the same

1  
2  
3 effect, inspiring lascivious thoughts they are designed to  
4  
5 stifle. (*The Guardian*, October 5, 2001.)  
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8  
9 Such fears have been central in shaping government policies  
10  
11 banning the scarf from the schools in France. As Marieluise Beck  
12  
13 (2004) the German Green politician in charge of immigrant affairs,  
14  
15 notes there has been a ‘demonisation’ of the headscarf across  
16  
17 Europe. The result is that many women who have for long worn a  
18  
19 head scarf can no longer function in the societies where they have  
20  
21 lived for a considerable time. What one of participant in our  
22  
23 conversations with Muslim women across Britain told us was  
24  
25 typical of many similar stories:  
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31 My mum wears the hijab. She’s a little old lady in  
32  
33 her sixties. She lives in a white area. Now young  
34  
35 kids are throwing things at her – bottles and cans –  
36  
37 every time there’s something in the media about  
38  
39 Muslim extremism (*She Who Disputes* 2006: 8)  
40  
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44  
45 A young woman explained:  
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50 We don’t walk alone [since 7/7] because of attacks on  
51  
52 Muslim Asian women (Murtuja 2006)  
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3 Even Jack Straw, who is an elected representative of a  
4 constituency that has a considerable number of Muslim voters,  
5  
6 discovered a latent fear of the nighab.  
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11 He declared that he needed face to face contact in this age  
12 of communication by e mails and text. He expressed his opinions  
13  
14 by writing in the local paper and talking on the radio. The irony of  
15  
16 the situation seems to have escaped his notice.  
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20  
21 It is therefore time to consider why British born, British  
22 educated young, articulate and intelligent women would actively  
23  
24 chose to cover, despite the intense pressures on them to take off the  
25  
26 hijab? Is it the case that a ban on headscarves in schools has  
27  
28 pushed “Muslim women into the hands of Islamic fundamentalist”  
29  
30 (Beck 2004)? There is much evidence to indicate that it is a choice.  
31  
32 As participants in our year long conversation with Muslim women  
33  
34 said:  
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40 I choose to wear the hijab, I’m not forced. My dad  
41  
42 would ideally like me to wear Western clothes to  
43  
44 avoid all the hassle, but I choose to wear the hijab!

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*(She Who Disputes 2006: 5)*

Another told us

People tell me that I’m oppressed by men into covering my  
hair – but it’s my choice to do so *(She Who Disputes 2006:*  
5)



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2  
3 If it is a choice then is it a personal, a religious or a political  
4 choice? Of course the reality is that it one and all of these. As  
5  
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8 Fareena Alam (2004) the editor of *Q-News*, Europe's leading  
9  
10 Muslim magazine states

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15  
16 Modesty is only one of many reasons why a woman wears a  
17  
18 scarf. It can be a very political choice too. I began wearing it at  
19  
20 the age of 21, against the wishes of my family, while serving as  
21  
22 president of the United Nations Students' Association at  
23  
24 university. I wanted to assert my identity and counter common  
25  
26 stereotypes about Muslim women. A woman who wears a hijab  
27  
28 can be active and engaged, educated and professional... Does  
29  
30 this democratic society have any room for a British-Muslim  
31  
32 woman like me who chooses to wear the hijab on my own terms?  
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39 According to some Muslim feminists the fundamental reason  
40  
41 why women's veiling is important to the question of women's  
42  
43 rights is because it represents freedom of choice (Afshar 1998). In  
44  
45 particular, the ability to choose whether to veil or not, in  
46  
47 accordance with the Muslim feminist's own personal interpretation  
48  
49 of Islamic faith and morality, is at the very heart of what Islam  
50  
51 represents to Muslim feminists: the basic Koranic ethic of the  
52  
53 sovereign right of both women and men as human beings who have  
54  
55 the freedom of self-determination.  
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### Women's approaches

This interpretation of the Koranic text is a relatively new phenomena. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship had been almost exclusively the domain of men even though there is nothing in the text of the Koran that prohibits women from reading and understanding the Koran for themselves.

The absence of women from the process of interpretation of the holy text, tafsir, has resulted in man made laws that have been detrimental to them and their interests. With the death of the Prophet, Muslim women lost their most important champion. The Caliph Omar (634-44) was harsh to women and promulgated a series of ordinances which included stoning for adultery and confinement of women to their homes (Ahmed 1992:60). Although initially Ayisha retained a degree of authority, she lost ground after the death of the third Caliph, Uthman (656). Ayisha decided to raise an army to fight against Ali. She was defeated and this may be sited as the first step towards exclusion of women from the public domain. Nevertheless Ayisha was a close companion of the Prophet and without a doubt she remains one of the most reliable sources of hadith that is a corner stone of Sharia laws for many Islamic schools of jurisprudence. Thus she has made an important contribution to the building blocks of Islamic law. Nevertheless the

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3 structures that followed firmly excluded women from the domain  
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5 of law.  
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10 Whereas remarkable women such as Khadijeh, the first  
11 wife of the prophet, who was the first convert to Islam, and Ayisha  
12 were central to the development of the faith, women were  
13 surprisingly rapidly sidelined: the laws that were formulated on the  
14 whole did not deliver the rights that the Koranic text had given  
15 them. A major change came after the defeat of the Persians and the  
16 gradual infiltration of some of 'the less egalitarian Persian  
17 customs' into Islamic practices. Leila Ahmed sums up this process  
18 by arguing that:  
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34 The moment in which Islamic law and scriptural  
35 interpretations were elaborated and cast into the forms  
36 considered authoritative to our own days was a singularly  
37 unpropitious one for women (1992:100).  
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46 But, though not at the forefront, women have not been  
47 absent. Elite women in particular have throughout retained a  
48 toehold in the apparatus of power. Mernissi (1993) has outlined the  
49 histories of nine forgotten Queens of Islam who ruled over the  
50 faithful. In the case of Iran we find that, though secluded, women  
51 of the Ghaznavid dynasty, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries:  
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3 Were politically important and active, although this activity  
4  
5 took place behind the scenes” (Scott Meisami 2003:82).  
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10 They continued to exercise influence and play a part. By  
11  
12 the 16<sup>th</sup> century women of the political elite were ‘present and  
13  
14 active during military campaign’ and some royal princess took  
15  
16 charge of directing state affairs (Szuppe 2003:154). By the 19<sup>th</sup>  
17  
18 century Iranian women were at the forefront of rebellions and  
19  
20 resistance and active partners in the 1911 constitutional revolution  
21  
22 (Afshar 1991).  
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30 With the extension of literacy and the decision of many  
31  
32 religious leaders and eminent families to educate their daughters  
33  
34 (Bamdad 1977, Afshar 1991,) women began understanding their  
35  
36 own Koranic rights and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and much of the 20<sup>th</sup>  
37  
38 century many embarked on a quest to understand and explain the  
39  
40 text of the Koran for themselves. The battle for taking charge of  
41  
42 tafsir, interpretation, continues, in face of strong opposition: not  
43  
44 because it is illogical, but because feminist interpretations are  
45  
46 feared to threaten the authority of men. However what is certain is  
47  
48 that it is no longer possible to ask of educated believers to blindly  
49  
50 submit to the rule of a male caliph or jurisconsults.  
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58 At the core of the arguments presented by women is the  
59  
60 contention that Islam requires submission only to God; since God

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3 addresses the believers directly and since it is a requirement that all  
4  
5 Muslims should pursue knowledge, then it is a duty for women to  
6  
7 become learned and scholars. Furthermore if da'wah is understood  
8  
9 in its true meaning of contestation, then there has to be an analysis  
10  
11 of the texts that allows for differing understanding to emerge. The  
12  
13 definition of contestation and debate is at the core of disagreement  
14  
15 between some men and women and between the religious  
16  
17 establishment and many intellectuals (Shariati n.d.). By the late  
18  
19 20<sup>th</sup> century the arena and the language of the debate has moved to  
20  
21 the West where a new discourse, conducted in English and  
22  
23 published largely on the Web, has been flourishing .  
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32 Muslim women have focused on several areas of  
33  
34 contestation ranging from the well known and for many as yet  
35  
36 unresolved discussions about the veil (Mernissi: 1975 and 1991,  
37  
38 Gole: 1996, El Guindi: 1998) to the practicalities of wrenching  
39  
40 power and authority away from men in the domains of politics and  
41  
42 law and claiming agency in the domestic sphere (Afshar: 1988,  
43  
44 Kandiyoti: 1991, Mir-Hosseini: 1993 and 1999, Karam: 1997,  
45  
46 Mirza: 2000, Sardar Ali: 2002). Many have rejected the limitations  
47  
48 placed on the believers by the various man made schools of law.  
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50  
51 The views that were formulated earlier in the century in the Middle  
52  
53 East (Karam 1997) are developing there and in the West (Franks  
54  
55 2001). It is argued that it would be both illogical and impracticable  
56  
57 to ask of them to submit to any man and do what they personally  
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3 consider to be inconstant with the essence of their faith. It is  
4  
5 particularly unreasonable to ask them, to change their dress codes  
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7  
8 to accommodate the public gaze. Surely what is required is careful  
9  
10 and considerate discussions rather than confrontation.  
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### 13 14 15 **Conclusion**

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20 Given the dynamic intellectual engagement of Muslim women in  
21  
22 interpreting the text of the Koran and defining their rights, it seems  
23  
24 rather uninformed to brand them as submissive, oppressed or  
25  
26 subjugated. Many are in fact seeking rights and entitlements that  
27  
28 mirror the demands of feminists the world over (Afshar 1998) it is  
29  
30 time for feminist and others to recognise, respect and celebrate the  
31  
32 communalities and differences rather than categorise a large  
33  
34 minority in the West as 'the other' or the 'enemy within'. Women  
35  
36 from ethnic minorities, particularly the mohajebeh, may have more  
37  
38 in common with their 'white' British-Muslim sisters than their  
39  
40 male cradle-Muslim brethren. Thus despite the experiences of  
41  
42 Islamaphobia, for Muslim women are not impermeable to  
43  
44 feminists' demands for active political participation at all levels.  
45  
46 For Muslim converts the decision to wear the hijab in the West is a  
47  
48 public political assertion of the right to belong to the community of  
49  
50 Muslims, but, particularly for convert women, it is not a rejection  
51  
52 of home and hearth and kinship relations with their non-Muslim  
53  
54 families and parents. Within liberal democratic states and feminist  
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3 contexts their decision to wear the hijab is a matter of faith and  
4  
5 identity and a political act of solidarity, but not one that alienates  
6  
7 them from their kin and communities. Hence *hijab* becomes part of  
8  
9 the fluid identity that is inclusive rather than one that delineates  
10  
11 boundaries between Muslims and non Muslims. What is needed is  
12  
13 trust and cooperation  
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20 However, the government's counter terrorism legislation  
21  
22 and rhetorical stance are between them creating serious  
23  
24 losses in human rights and criminal justice  
25  
26 protections...they are having a disproportionate effect on  
27  
28 the Muslim communities in the UK and so are prejudicing  
29  
30 the ability of the government and security forces to gain the  
31  
32 very trust and cooperation from individuals in those  
33  
34 communities that they require to combat terrorism. (Blick et  
35  
36 al 2006:6)  
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