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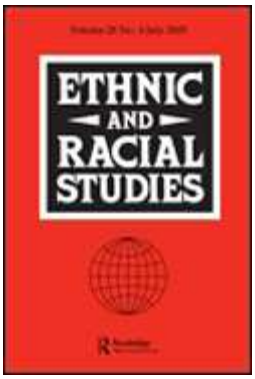

Can I see your hair: choice, agency and attitudes: the dilemma of faith and feminism for Muslim women who cover

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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"

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Abstract

This paper argues that the current climate of Islamaphobia 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; Islamaphobia; Hijab; Orientalism; identities

In the context of violence and Islamaphobia 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

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sides losing sight of the global sisterhood of women and the need for solidarity across differences and divides.

If we glance over the 20th century experiences of many Muslim women in the Middle East we note an early and fierce opposition to the hijab dating from the previous century and continuing throughout to an equally fierce defence of the hijab in the 21st century. To gain an understanding of the problems we need to separate out imposed dress code regulations, such as those imposed by the Iranian and Saudi governments, from elected one such as the choice to wear the hijab in the West. We also must separate out the latter from the constructed images of an oppressed submissive Muslim women forced, not only by the laws of the land but by the regulation of her community and king group to cover to satisfy the honour of ever jealous and vigilant menfolk .

It is the contention of this paper that the latter generalisation mirrors 19th century discussion about the exotic harem ladies of pleasure forever doing the belly dance and offering their bodies to a replete Pasha; something that was not rooted in reality then and is not now. However the new climate of Islamaphobia has otherised the Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular in a way that exemplifies aspects of what Edward Said termed Orientalism.

Orientalism

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

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East. He argued that the work of imperialists, though rigorous in many ways, was rooted in the limitations of their experiences of the East. They used these to construct "an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness" (Said 1995: 5–6.) The Orient was seen as essentially ancient, exotic and absurd; the land of despots and mystics; populated by a backward population of supine men and subordinated and silent women. Life experiences in general and those of women in particular were assumed to have been fundamentally different, not only in terms of faith and culture but also and particularly in terms of intellectual calibre. It was assumed that the Oriental mind was distinct and different from that of the Occident. This is not merely a historical view on the 11th of November 2006 as part of "Any Answers" a caller told Jonathan Dimbelby that his experience of living in the Middle East for 10 years has taught him that Muslims were simply not equipped intellectually to consider their own positions. They blindly followed their religious leaders did not have the ability to think for themselves and could not be trusted to do so!

Such processes of otherising were categorise the oriental as members of "a subject race", (Said 1995: 206–7) that had to be ruled for their own good, but only to the level of their limited intellectual capacity. The static torpor of the East had to be conquered by the dynamism of modernity of the West to benefit the West and perhaps edge the Orient towards Occidental levels of civilisation. The problem the West faced, then as now, was the

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unwillingness of the Oriental subjects to yield willingly to this project.

This resistance was and still is projected as yet more evidence of inability of the oriental to grasp Western concepts and meanings. Orient was understood as being an inferior and uncivilised and the Oriental women was assumed to be alluring, be-witching and extremely dangerous (Stott 1992). Often these understandings were constructed by scholars and painters who had no access to the lives of women and chose to present their own fantasies as true images of the Orient. This otherising in turn resulted in a deeply rooted belief that the Orientals could only progress, within their limited abilities only if they looked to the Occident.

Over the decades scholars have considered the ways that this process of otherisation has misrepresented and caricaturised the Oriental Other in terms of sex, gender, race, ethnicity and religion (Zubaida 1995, Lewis 1996, Prasch 1996, Amstutz 1997, Maria-Dolors et al, 1998, Mazrui 2000, Jeyifo 2000, Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins 2002). Most attribute the labelling of the entire Orient as the other a direct result of the power of the imperialists to frame scholarship and understanding of the West about the rest. Many argue that the disparities of power was central in this process

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of otherisation (Musallam: 1979, Minear :1980). These arguments remain true to the current construction of the Islamaphobic identity of minority Muslims in the West as well as the majority living in the Middle East.

It remains true that the vast Orientalist literature had simply ignored the dynamic millennial interactions between the Orient and the West that, then as now, impacted on, shaped and reshaped ideas, philosophise, art, literature and destinies of both (Akhavi 2003, Afary &Anderson 2005, Moallem 2005, Najmabadi 2005). It is therefore of interest to consider how the more recent otherisation of Muslims repeats the misconceptions of the past paves the way to a conflictual future that could be avoided by a less myopic view of both the past and the present.

Islamaphobia

Clearly Orientalism is not merely part of a forgotten past; it remains very much at the core of the current history of race and gender in the West and current wars in the Middle East. Islamaphobia which maybe defined as 'unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims' (the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia Runnymede Trust report 1997). It defines Islam as being monolithic, separate and other without any common values with other cultures and as being essentially barbaric and sexist. Muslims

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are therefore essentialised, otherised and imagined as being fundamentally uncivilised, and unwilling to conform to the values of the West (The Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia Runnymede Trust report 1997).

> [Muslims] are backward and evil, and if it is being racist to say so then I must be and happy and proud to be so. (Robert Kilroy-Silk The Daily Express 15 Jan 1995)

A view shared by surprising 79% of Spaniards

:(El 79% de los españoles cree que los musulmanes son intolerantes y el 68 % dice que son violentos Minutos.es http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamophobia#_)

It is assumed that therefore there must be a clash of civilisations between Muslims and the West that could only harm the latter (Huntington 1993).

> We have a fifth column in our midst... Thousands of alienated young Muslims, most of them born and bred here but who regard themselves as an army within, are waiting for an opportunity to help to destroy the society that sustains them. We now stare into the abyss, aghast. (Melanie Philips *The Sunday Times* 4 November 2001)

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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But in ascribing alienation, anger and hatred to Islam and disregarding the array of institutional Islamaphobic practices, we only exacerbate the situation and possibly propel it to further excesses. As early as June 2004 the Commission on British Muslims and Islamaphobia warned that

> Persistent and unshackled Islamophobia in the UK could lead to 'time-bombs' of backlash and bitterness... Since the 11 September attacks, communities had experienced greater hostility, including increased attacks against individuals and mosques, http://www.honestreports.com/islamophobia.asp

Not something that could be attributed to the religion Islam. The Commission came to view that if there was alienation then it had been created through negative social interactions:

> The cumulative effect of Islamophobia's various features... is that Muslims are made to feel that they do not truly belong here – they feel that they are not truly accepted, let alone welcomed, as full members of British society. On the contrary, they are seen as 'an enemy within' or 'a fifth column' and they feel that they are under constant siege. This is bad for society as well as for Muslims themselves. Moreover, time-bombs are being primed that are likely to explode in the future – both Muslim and non-Muslim

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> commentators have pointed out that a young generation of British Muslims is developing that feels increasingly disaffected, alienated and bitter. It's in the interests of non-Muslims as well as Muslims, therefore, that Islamophobia should be rigorously challenged, reduced and removed. The time to act is now, not some time in the future. www.insted.co.uk/islam.html

Sadly about the same time that such reports were warning against Islamaphobia, world leaders such as George Bush were declaring that there is

> no neutral ground in the fight between civilization and terror ... because there is no neutral ground between good and evil, freedom and slavery, and life and death. (*New York Times* 20th March 2004).

The Muslims in general and the Middle East in particular were burdened with the labels of terrorism, evilness and enslavement (the latter is particularly interesting since, despite the myth of white slavery, enslavement has been a very specific feature of North American economic development!)

> European Muslims are regarded as representing a unified culture quite different from European culture, one that is strongly linked to certain non-European countries. These perceptions are part of the process of labelling Islam as Europe's "other."(Rudiger, 2004.)

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

> We can and should try to understand the nature of the force that we need to defeat. The driving force behind today's terrorist threat is Islamist fundamentalism. The struggle we are engaged in is, at root, ideological. (Speech to the Foreign Policy Centre 24th August 2006)

Perhaps the clearest pathological statement is that made by Will Cummins:

> All Muslims, like all dogs, share certain characteristics. A dog is not the same animal as a cat just because both species are comprised of different breeds. An extreme Christian believes that the Garden of Eden really existed; an extreme Muslim flies planes into buildings - there's a big difference. (*The Sunday Telegraph* 25 July 2004)

Melanie Phillips fears being overrun

> from the 1990s, Islamist radicals had been given free rein in Britain in a "gentlemen's agreement" that if they were left alone,

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> they would not turn on the country that was so generously nurturing them. The result was "Londonistan", as Britain became the hub of al-Qaeda in Europe... in the past few days ... no fewer than 1,200 Islamist terrorists are biding their time within British suburbs. Yet does Britain even now fully understand the nature of the threat it is facing, let alone have the will to deal with it? trained 'Afghan Arab' warriors made their way instead to Britain, attracted, they said, by its 'traditions of democracy and justice'. But they had now been trained to be killers. They had discovered jihad. And the radical ideology they brought with them found many echoes in the Islamism and seething resentments that, by now, were entrenched in British Muslim institutions. (*The Observer* 28 May 2006)

Nor is Islamaphobia limited to the UK. As Ziauddin Sardar notes

> from Germany to the Netherlands, onwards to Belgium and finally into France - the object of much recent attention - I meet people all too ready to describe Muslims in the colours of darkness. Islamophobia is not a British disease: it is a common, if diverse, European phenomenon. It is the singular rock against which the tide of European liberalism crashes. (*The Listener* 5th December 2005)

The fears engendered by Islamaphobia have led to political backlash on both sides and can play into the politics of groups such

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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

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technicality that requires of citizens at the age of 18 to make a positive decision to be French was used by the Minister of Interior Nicolas Sarkozi to order the arrest and "sending back home" of young Muslims to countries that may not have even visited before (*New York Times* November 10, 2005). French born and bred Muslims suddenly found themselves branded as 'scums', 'foreigners' 'young hooligans' (*The Observer* November 6, 2005) and the 'enemy within'. As a matter of fact, those who had rioted had done so to gain equality, not Islamic laws (Paris Reuters November 17 2005). Nevertheless they were to be 'expelled from the country, regardless of whether they [we]re in France legally or illegally' *(New York Times* November 10, 2005).

The plight of the French is merely one example of the difficulties that Muslims are experiencing in the West. 9/11 led to spiralling levels of insecurity for Muslims. It may be that Islamaphobia became an almost 'respectable' prejudice?

> Officially, all right-thinking people have forsworn racism ... Islamophobia is the half-open door through which it makes its triumphal re-entry into respectable society (Seabrook: 2004)

By November 2005 an estimated 800,000 Muslims were imprisoned across the world accused of 'terrorism'. Some were

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shifted to countries that permitted torture in order to extract information from them (*The Guardian* 18 November 2005). Many have had no access to lawyers or entitlement to due process. It is not unusual at gatherings of Muslims to find that the majority have had friends or relatives, or have themselves been stopped and searched or arrested. The assumption is that it is 'Muslims' specifically who have been the target of regressive measures in the West. This fear was intensified in February 2004 when the French government decided to ban the head scarf from schools and bar access to education to anyone wearing a religious insignia. Since these measures were introduced in the name of equality, it was perhaps unavoidable that the Muslims youth would in the long run protest; as they did, to seek their elusive equal citizenship rights. In the UK the situation became daunting after 7/7 and the realisation that there was a shoot to kill policy that could threaten anyone assumed to have been "a Muslim terrorist" (*The Guardian* 14 September 2005).

The combination of these measures locates Muslims in general and young Muslim men and women in particular as, sometimes-unwilling, emblems of combative Islam at the cross fire between faith and state policies. It is at such points of crisis that some Muslims hanker back to the days of Islamic glory and find the call for the supranational identity of umma to be alluring

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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 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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nation (Jankowski.& Gershoni 1987) the project failed precisely because it was not able to accommodate diversity and build trust (Hashem Talhami 2001). Umma could only exist in historical contexts where the relationship between caliphs and the melliats were mediated by suzerains who were rooted in the communities and in contexts where the relations of power were flexible, permeable and consensual.

In Britain the call for British Muslims to discard their nationality in favour of their faith is unifying and empowering for a group that has been marginalised and labelled as 'terrorists' by the media and too often by neighbours and acquaintances as well. However men and women are likely to respond differently to the call for unity, not only because by and large terrorism is imagined to be the domain of men, but also because there is a gendered perception of Islam and umma. Demands for politicised radical Islam, in terms of the prescriptions that it makes, are rooted in the failure of many Western democracies to respond effectively to the problems of institutionalised Islamaphobia. Furthermore there is a highly gendered aspect to Islamic radicalism which may well be understood differently by Muslim women, including the *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 11th there were an average of 3.8 attacks a day on Muslims, mainly women, *(The Guardian* December 8th 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 8th 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 *mohajebeh*, 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

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> effect, inspiring lascivious thoughts they are designed to stifle. (*The Guardian*, October 5, 2001.)

Such fears have been central in shaping government policies banning the scarf from the schools in France. As Marieluise Beck (2004) the German Green politician in charge of immigrant affairs, notes there has been a 'demonisation' of the headscarf across Europe. The result is that many women who have for long worn a head scarf can no longer function in the societies where they have lived for a considerable time. What one of participant in our conversations with Muslim women across Britain told us was typical of many similar stories:

> My mum wears the hijab. She's a little old lady in her sixties. She lives in a white area. Now young kids are throwing things at her – bottles and cans – every time there's something in the media about Muslim extremism (*She Who Disputes* 2006: 8)

A young woman explained:

> We don't walk alone [since 7/7] because of attacks on Muslim Asian women (Murtuja 2006)

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Even Jack Straw, who is an elected representative of a constituency that has a considerable number of Muslim voters, discovered a latent fear of the nighab.

He declared that he needed face to face contact in this age of communication by e mails and text. He expressed his opinions by writing in the local paper and talking on the radio. The irony of the situation seems to have escaped his notice.

It is therefore time to consider why British born, British educated young, articulate and intelligent women would actively chose to cover, despite the intense pressures on them to take off the hijab? Is it the case that a ban on headscarves in schools has pushed "Muslim women into the hands of Islamic fundamentalist" (Beck 2004)? There is much evidence to indicate that it is a choice. As participants in our year long conversation with Muslim women said:

> I choose to wear the hijab, I'm not forced. My dad would ideally like me to wear Western clothes to avoid all the hassle, but I choose to wear the hijab! (*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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If it is a choice then is it a personal, a religious or a political choice? Of course the reality is that it one and all of these. As Fareena Alam (2004) the editor of *Q-News*, Europe's leading Muslim magazine states

> Modesty is only one of many reasons why a woman wears a scarf. It can be a very political choice too. I began wearing it at the age of 21, against the wishes of my family, while serving as president of the United Nations Students' Association at university. I wanted to assert my identity and counter common stereotypes about Muslim women. A woman who wears a hijab can be active and engaged, educated and professional... Does this democratic society have any room for a British-Muslim woman like me who chooses to wear the hijab on my own terms?

According to some Muslim feminists the fundamental reason why women's veiling is important to the question of women's rights is because pit represents freedom of choice (Afshar 1998). In particular, the ability to choose whether to veil or not, in accordance with the Muslim feminist's own personal interpretation of Islamic faith and morality, is at the very heart of what Islam represents to Muslim feminists: the basic Koranic ethic of the sovereign right of both women and men as human beings who have 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 20th 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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structures that followed firmly excluded women from the domain of law.

Whereas remarkable women such as Khadijeh, the first wife of the prophet, who was the first convert to Islam, and Ayisha were central to the development of the faith, women were surprisingly rapidly sidelined: the laws that were formulated on the whole did not deliver the rights that the Koranic text had given them. A major change came after the defeat of the Persians and the gradual infiltration of some of 'the less egalitarian Persian customs' into Islamic practices. Leila Ahmed sums up this process by arguing that:

> The moment in which Islamic law and scriptural interpretations were elaborated and cast into the forms considered authorative to our own days was a singularly unpropitious one for women (1992:100).

But, though not at the forefront, women have not been absent. Elite women in particular have throughout retained a toehold in the apparatus of power. Mernissi (1993) has outlined the histories of nine forgotten Queens of Islam who ruled over the faithful. In the case of Iran we find that, though secluded, women of the Ghaznavid dynasty, 10th and 11th centuries:

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Were politically important and active, although this activity took place behind the scenes" (Scott Meisami 2003:82).

They continued to exercise influence and play a part. By the 16th century women of the political elite were 'present and active during military campaign' and some royal princess took charge of directing state affairs (Szuppe 2003:154). By the 19th century Iranian women were at the forefront of rebellions and resistance and active partners in the 1911 constitutional revolution (Afshar 1991).

With the extension of literacy and the decision of many religious leaders and eminent families to educate their daughters (Bamdad 1977, Afshar 1991,) women began understanding their own Koranic rights and in the late 19th and much of the 20th century many embarked on a quest to understand and explain the text of the Koran for themselves. The battle for taking charge of tafsir, interpretation, continues, in face of strong opposition: not because it is illogical, but because feminist interpretations are feared to threaten the authority of men. However what is certain is that it is no longer possible to ask of educated believers to blindly submit to the rule of a male caliph or jurisconsuls.

At the core of the arguments presented by women is the contention that Islam requires submission only to God; since God

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addresses the believers directly and since it is a requirement that all Muslims should pursue knowledge, then it is a duty for women to become learned and scholars. Furthermore if da'wah is understood in its true meaning of contestation, then there has to be an analysis of the texts that allows for differing understanding to emerge. The definition of contestation and debate is at the core of disagreement between some men and women and between the religious establishment and many intellectuals (Shariati n.d.). By the late 20th century the arena and the language of the debate has moved to the West where a new discourse, conducted in English and published largely on the Web, has been flourishing .

Muslim women have focused on several areas of contestation ranging from the well known and for many as yet unresolved discussions about the veil (Mernissi: 1975 and 1991, Gole: 1996, El Guindi: 1998) to the practicalities of wrenching power and authority away from men in the domains of politics and law and claiming agency in the domestic sphere (Afshar: 1988, Kandiyoti: 1991, Mir-Hosseini: 1993 and1999, Karam: 1997, Mirza: 2000, Sardar Ali: 2002). Many have rejected the limitations placed on the believers by the various man made schools of law. The views that were formulated earlier in the century in the Middle East (Karam 1997) are developing there and in the West (Franks 2001). It is argued that it would be both illogical and impracticable to ask of them to submit to any man and do what they personally

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consider to be inconstant with the essence of their faith. It is particularly unreasonable to ask them, to change their dress codes to accommodate the public gaze. Surely what is required is careful and considerate discussions rather than confrontation.

Conclusion

Given the dynamic intellectual engagement of Muslim women in interpreting the text of the Koran and defining their rights, it seems rather uninformed to brand them as submissive, oppressed or subjugated. Many are in fact seeking rights and entitlements that mirror the demands of feminists the world over (Afshar 1998) it is time for feminist and others to recognise, respect and celebrate the communalities and differences rather than categorise a large minority in the West as 'the other' or the 'enemy within'. Women from ethnic minorities, particularly the mohajebeh, may have more in common with their 'white' British-Muslim sisters than their male cradle-Muslim brethren. Thus despite the experiences of Islamaphobia, for Muslim women are not impermeable to feminists' demands for active political participation at all levels. For Muslim converts the decision to wear the hijab in the West is a public political assertion of the right to belong to the community of Muslims, but, particularly for convert women, it is not a rejection of home and hearth and kinship relations with their non-Muslim families and parents. Within liberal democratic states and feminist

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contexts their decision to wear the hijab is a matter of faith and identity and a political act of solidarity, but not one that alienates them from their kin and communities. Hence *hijab* becomes part of the fluid identity that is inclusive rather than one that delineates boundaries between Muslims and non Muslims. What is needed is trust and cooperation

> However, the government's counter terrorism legislation and rhetorical stance are between them creating serious losses in human rights and criminal justice protections…they are having a disproportionate effect on the Muslim communities in the UK and so are prejudicing the ability of the government and security forces to gain the very trust and cooperation from individuals in those communities that they require to combat terrorism. (Blick et al 2006:6)

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