The niqab debate continues

Nahid Afrose Kabir

With the banning of the Muslim women’s niqab (face veil) in France on 12 April 2011, there has been a debate within academia regarding its justification. In the USA, Professor Jocelyne Cesari, Director of the Islam in the West Program, Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University commented that some politicians in Europe ‘conflate security issues with Islam. Although, not one French parliamentarian provided proof during debate that the niqab represents a danger for public order.’ In Australia, Professor Abdullah Saeed, Director of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies remarked, ‘In France, reports suggest that only about a couple of thousand Muslims (out of 5–6 million) wear the face veil. So what is the fuss all about?’

The niqab debate has been going on for a while in western countries. In 2006 Australian Prime Minister John Howard did not quite mention the word niqab, but described the burqa, the full head covering worn by some Muslim women, as ‘confronting’, and the Australian Treasurer Peter Costello criticised Australia’s diversity as ‘mushy misguided

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multiculturalism’ and said that the migrants (Muslims) who do not share Australian values ‘should be stripped of their citizenship’.5

In the same year, the niqab debate commenced in Britain. It was initiated by British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw in Lancashire and continued with the case of Aisha Azmi in Dewsbury. On 5 October 2006 the Member for Blackburn, Lancashire, Jack Straw, whose constituency contained nearly 20 per cent Muslims, wrote in his local paper, The Lancashire Telegraph, about a Muslim woman wearing the full veil: ‘her eyes were uncovered but the rest of her face was in cloth’.6 She was accompanied by her husband (a professional man) and came to his office to discuss a problem. Jack Straw was impressed with her ‘entirely English accent, the couple’s education (wholly in the UK)’, but he had serious reservations about her use of the niqab.

On 12 October 2006 another incident occurred in Britain concerning the niqab, which intensified the debate: a 24-year-old Muslim classroom assistant, Aishah Azmi, of Gujarati-Indian background and from Cardiff, was suspended at the Headfield Church of England Primary School in the Yorkshire town of Dewsbury for refusing to remove her niqab in class. Azmi was employed as a bilingual support worker to help British Pakistani children learn English. She claimed she wore the veil only in the presence of men. It later emerged that students complained they could not hear her properly from behind her veil.7

Finally, on 17 October 2006, British Prime Minister Tony Blair remarked that the veil worn by hundreds of Muslim women in the UK was a ‘mark of separation’ which made people of other ethnic backgrounds feel uncomfortable.8

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The views of the politicians were clear: a Muslim woman’s niqab is confrontational, it goes against western values of equality and it is a security issue. In 2008, when I was in the UK conducting a research project on young British Muslim identity, I interviewed 71 Muslims (59 young Muslims, aged 15–30, and 12 Muslim leaders and social and community workers, aged 20-50) on the topic of the niqab. There was no unanimous view on the topic. One male youth worker of Indian background said, ‘I think it’s a debate that needs to take place within the Muslim community itself first as the niqab itself is a contentious issue among Muslims’. Another male respondent of Bangladeshi background commented, ‘The basic [Muslim women’s] garment is the head gear [hijab] and that is fine, you know, when you speak to someone they can see who you are. Niqab I personally think if you are back home it’s fine.’ A female respondent of Pakistani origin remarked:

About 1 per cent of Muslim women in the UK wear the niqab and yet it became headline news everywhere because of [Jack Straw’s] comments. So [Jack Straw] actually gave the green light to anybody who wanted to say this is unacceptable in British culture ... If a Muslim public figure said people shouldn’t wear miniskirts there’d be an uproar.

Muslim girls (aged 15–18) who wore the niqab gave various reasons for wearing it. Responses varied from personal choice, a home rule, a school rule and religious reasons. Some of these girls had experienced verbal and sometimes physical assaults in public places. However, for some girls, religion was more important. As one interviewee said, ‘I’m pleased in my Lord, why should it bother me what they [the critics] say to me? So it doesn’t affect me. Actually it makes me stronger, al Humdilallah [thank God]. I feel better.’

The niqab is of course a barrier to communication and inappropriate in professions such as teaching where children need to see the facial expression of teachers as they learn, but if Muslim women wear it in their private space then it should not be a major issue. When politicians use the niqab debate for their own agenda it is appalling and the ban of the niqab is over the top.

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