

Deconstructing Burqa

Friday 6 August 2010, by [KHALIQ Bushra](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2010).

On 13 Jul, 2010 the parliament of France, on the eve of Bastille Day, voted 335 to one in favor of preventing Muslim women wearing a full face-covering veil in public. According to French daily, *Le Monde*, the new law was strongly supported by the right, while Socialist Party, Communist Party and Green Party abstained.

According to the new law anyone who chooses to wear a face covering on religious grounds now faces a fine of 150 Euros or a "citizenship course". There is also a year in prison and a fine of 30,000 Euros for anyone found guilty of forcing a woman to wear a veil, a penalty which is doubled if the "victim is a minor".

It is pertinent to mention that the number of women in France wearing a complete veil, or a niqab, is only a few hundred. Figures range from less than 400 to a maximum of 2000, according to police data - in a French population of about 64 million inhabitants and about four million Muslims. It shows that the huge majority of the Muslim population, in fact, rejects burqa but feel that the law against a minority stigmatizes the whole Muslim community.

In recent years the question of burqa has emerged as mainstream debate among feminists and the Western governments, creating complexities around the subject. A careful deconstruction of the topic confirms that concept of burqa or Hijab has different connotations in western and eastern societies, especially in Muslim countries. To fully understand this question it is imperative to deconstruct and dissect the notions of patriarchy, private ownership, religiosity and dynamics of capitalistic system.

According to some western feminists, ban on burqa is violation of fundamental human right to choice for dress. To them the law does not aim at defending Muslim women rights but restricting the same. The burqa ban is, in fact, liberticide, they argue. And it will not defend women dignity but increase racist aggression against Muslim women wearing veils.

Those who argue that this law has political motives, carry weight. Sarkozy government badly lost recent regional polls. The social crisis is there with inequalities and discriminations are increasing in French society. It is easier to use a scapegoat and there is no denying the fact that the "burqa ban" seems an attempt to win back right wing votes.

Despite these facts, it is hard to digest all those arguments in favor of Burqa. There may be dozens arguments to oppose Sarkozy government decision, but there may be few to support burqa in the pretext of right to freedom of choice. Beyond oppose or support, there are other relevant aspects too should be taken into account to evaluate the question of burqa in the context of social oppression, patriarchy and religiosity in Muslim societies.

Before quick jumping onto the subject of burqa better we understand the cultural aspect as well. Social assimilation is a problem with Muslim immigrants in Europe and west. Therefore, assertion of religious identity is perceived as only option for many. Since modern Western civilization is dominating phenomenon, leaving little space for rest of the cultures and civilizations to claim their space, therefore retaining and promoting religious identity is considered as last ditch effort to resist

western civilization.

Another important point to understand is the direct conflict between the typical religious mind set and capitalistic projection of gender, which has left no stone unturned to exploit the women beauty and its physical appearance for corporate profiteering. The frequent and exploitative projection of woman body by the corporate and capitalistic greed, in fact, provides right stuff for arguments in favor of necessity for burqa and concealment of women through Hijab or veil.

In Pakistani society, at least I can say burqa is not a matter of choice at all for women, rather an imposition by an oppressive society driven by decadent social and religious taboos. Burqa is not a dress in itself rather an additional piece of cloth to further cover the body in maximum way, which women generally not cherish. Free choice to normal dress for women does not exist even, and this choice is subject to approval of parents and husbands. Thus the women physical appearance in most of the cases is determined by men.

Since the typical societal frame of thought about women is shaped by the centuries-old concepts of private property, symbol of honor and patriarchy, therefore man-woman relationship is generally perceived as predator-prey relationship. In this context male dominated thought process is more focused on maximum protection of woman by restricting her mobility and concealing her from men through methods of Hijab and Burqa. Muslim societies, may be with few exceptions, are true reflection of this mind set, which refuses to rise above this instinctive paradigm.

"This very concept reflects the notion that male have a barbaric nature against female and instead of curtailing this unbridled nature, let us conceal the female". We never think other way round to create an environment where male "frame of thought" about female be changed by subjecting it to strict societal laws and healthy moral values. Instead of developing more women-conducive societies, Muslim thought mainly focused on concealing the weaker vessel. Thus instead of seeing any improvement in gender relations, women are becoming weaker and weaker in these societies.

In our part of the world through centuries-old oppressive social systems women have been incorporated with this idea that by covering themselves they can better defend themselves against possible attack on their modesty and honor. This concept is popular among Muslim women and sometimes they have currency to their logic as well, because incidents do happen which proves this logic sometimes true. However, we should not forget that such "truths" are the creation of chronic historical and social wrongs and lies.

The debate on burqa needs paradigm shift as real question behind this whole debate should not be "women protection" rather "women empowerment". This paradigm shift is imperative to further this debate. We feminists must be cautious not to give ground to those, who want to roll back the historic achievements of feminist movements by magnifying the minor issues.

No doubt burqa draws a symbolic line for women to wage struggle for right to choice for dress, but real question is something else. What about those women who do not wear burqa and still unable to understand the true dynamics of hurdles, erected by the oppressive mind set of society. Accepting or rejecting burqa is not manifestation of any ideology. I personally know women who wear burqa without having any logic to defend it. Similarly there are women who took off burqa without having any true gender consciousness.

Historically speaking, societies have corrected themselves by enacting laws to create social equilibrium acceptable for all sections of society. Legislations have been vital to secure due rights of marginalized sections. Therefore, we cannot deny the fact that pro-women legislations have played role in enhancing women struggles for just causes.

Obviously, we cannot keep ourselves aloof from this debate as we understand that Burqa is not mere a piece of cloth to cover woman body but a dangerous tool to control women freedom of thinking. Therefore, our fight should not solely be against burqa rather it should be merged within the grand struggle for gender equality at all levels in all societies by forging global gender unity.

Such grand struggle must aim at breaking all barriers in the way of women; patriarchy, feudalism, religiosity and predatory capitalism. I do agree that microscopic and scattered victories in different parts of the world count but these small victories, with the passage of time, are consumed by exploitative nature of the capitalistic methods. The theory of constant internationalist struggle for gender justice may be right strategy.

For the purpose, we have to create a new comprehensive framework of progressive thought and action having inconformity with global social justice that ensures true freedom for women. We have not only to challenge the Burqa with clear conscious but stand up against all those hurdles which curtail women freedom to think and act.

French government decision to ban burqa though aimed at political scoring and it may trigger and give rise to anti-west hatred among Muslim societies but even then, it is hard to oppose this decision. We should not and cannot support anything that check women emancipation process and burqa, in no way, helping women struggles anywhere.

At the same time I think if West is sincere with true emancipation of Muslim women it must stop supporting dictatorships and kingships in Muslim world and help transform Muslim societies by backing real democracies, social and women movements in those countries.

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P.S.

* From * From Viewpoint online issue no. 12, August 6, 2010: :
<http://viewpointonline.net/fullstory.php?t=Deconstructing%20Burqa&f=full-14-aug-6.php&y=2010&m=august>



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