

Burka - The Afghan blues

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

Advocates of veil say it earns women respect. But women have been punished, killed, flogged and insulted even under burka. Last year, the 'Swat video' shamelessly aired by Pakistani TV channels, showed a girl pinned to ground and flogged by Taliban. She was wearing burka!

A week ago on my way home from work, in one of Kabul's dusty and unclean streets I saw a little girl clad in a blue burka. She was hardly six and the burka was especially tailored to fit her size. She was playing with other children and was proudly displaying her burka. Her cute demeanor attracted my attention. I kept watching her for a while. The manner she was conducting her movements inside the burka made me smile. As I was leaving, the thought of this child's future made me sad too. She and millions in her age will be most likely forced under burka as me and my generation was. The situation has not changed for my generation radically US' claims notwithstanding. This little girl reminded me my childhood as well. Every time my mother would receive women guests, we had extra burkas in our home. It provided my siblings and cousins a chance to have enough burkas to play different games. We used burkas to play hide and seek. We used burkas for role-playing. In the absence of playgrounds, toys and recreational activities the burkas used to be fun for us growing up in Refugee Camps outside of Peshawar in Pakistan.

It was fun also because we would play with the burkas and cast them off when bored. My mother or other women in the family would remind us: 'don't worry, soon you will have to wear it then you will know how it really feels!' Back then it did not make any sense to me. Years later when Taliban were in control of Kabul, I was traveling to Afghanistan from Pakistan. Now I was an activist. In the first place, my family did not impose burka on me. Secondly, I would have resisted it. But to enter Afghanistan, I had to disappear under the infamous blue shroud associated with Afghanistan. On my way to border town of Torkham, I had my burka folded in my lap. I was wondering all the way if I would be able to manage wearing burka? Would I be able to walk and see properly so that I don't attract Taliban's attention? As soon we reached Torkham, my travel companion told me that from Torkham onwards, I was not allowed to go without burka. It was a hot summer day. Like other women, I disappeared under the blue bag. It was suffocating. My visibility drastically reduced. It was indeed difficult to walk. I recalled the warning: 'don't worry, soon you will have to wear it then you will know how it really feels!'

We the poor Afghan women have to remain under burka all our lives. Even if we are about to die, we are still not allowed to cast the blue bag off. A few days ago, my mother was accompanying one of her relatives to a doctor. A young mother of two, this relation of my mother was pregnant yet again. She was indeed suffering. We all thought she would die. On her way to doctor, she had forgotten about her kids owing to the pain she was suffering from. But she did not forget to wear burka as she left home. She knew if she did not wear it, her husband and other men in the family would be angry. It doesn't matter if a woman is sick, if one is allergic to burka, one has problem with her eye sight, all this is woman's issue. Men's issue is burka. It protects their "honor" !

Today in Afghanistan more than 95 percent of women, for different reasons (security, family

tradition, imposition by men in family) have to wear burka. Unfortunately, burka has arrived parts of Afghanistan it was absent historically until fifteen years ago. In Noristan, for instance, where women were often working in fields, they never dressed themselves in burka. It was under Taliban's rule, even Noristani women were driven under burka. If they did not cover themselves, they were punished.

During my long stay in Pakistan, I often would come across strange arguments. (veil), I was informed by Pardah enthusiasts, earns women respect. But in our society women have been punished, killed, flogged and insulted even under burka. Last year, the 'Swat video' shamelessly aired by Pakistani TV channels, showed a girl pinned to ground and flogged by Taliban. She was wearing burka!

I have been asked many times by my Afghan sisters and when depressed I myself sometimes wonder if something is wrong with us, are we such a shame that we must be concealed so that we are not seen! No, like my sisters here in Afghanistan, I know there is nothing wrong with us. It is our society, our traditions, Afghan laws and patriarchy that is wrong.

Burka we know is a tool to control women. But for Afghan woman, it is a sad reality that burka enables her to go out for education or work and offers a refuge from insults hurled by men on the streets. The blue shroud is paradoxically Afghan woman's prison as well as an intangible liberator too. This is why out of 10 women, for example even in Kabul, one finds nine in burka. They don't feel safe outside their homes without burkas. For activist women, particularly on the countryside and in small towns, burka has its own 'importance'. It was and is a tool of struggle. During Taliban's time and even now, burka offers protection as women would carry books, cameras and other documents under their blue burkas. For us in Afghanistan, wearing or not wearing a burka is not as simple a debate as in the West. Though I personally hope and wish there soon is a chance for Afghan women to be free from this head to toe bag yet I also understand how much has to be done in the fields of education, security, culture and development before we can get rid of burka.

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* From Viewpoint online issue no. 12, August 6, 2010:

<http://viewpointonline.net/fullstory.php?t=The%20Afghan%20blues&f=full-15-aug-6.php&y=2010&m=august>



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