

The burqa debate: “Burqa got a befitting French kiss”

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Before reading this argument on recent Burqa-ban by France, you need to know who I am. Raised in an orthodox Muslim Deobandi family, I’ve been educated in Pakistan’s Punjab where urban middle class used to be too sensitive about purdah in 1980s and 90s – the decades when I went to school and then university. Being first generation migrated out of the village in a big city, my father was a part of purdah sensitive educated middle class professional class. But my mother, raised and educated in a secular and Sufist Sindh, fought against Burqa throughout her life in order to save me from this ‘curse’ as she would put it.

Mom succeeded in this battle to the best of my luck and now no one expects her or me in Burqa or purdah in general. Despite being thoroughly religious, mildly ritualistic and overwhelmingly humanist in her viewpoint, I never saw her observing strict purdah. She would cover her head, although, while meeting with my father’s friends and serve them tea – a practice completely absent in my orthodox and backward paternal family. It’s because of her struggle that the family elders were never able to impose either Burqa or hijab – or even a chaddar – on me. All they required of me was to cover my head with traditional dopatta when I stepped out of house. My honest confession: I often cheated on them by just wearing it in their presence. But seeing my aunts and grandmother, I kept wondering all through my childhood, how must it feel to be continually imprisoned in a horrible thing called Burqa.

It has been and is my biggest relief to be among people who are sane enough to be against this practice of subjugating women through veil. But finding so many friends and fellow rights’ activists among those protesting France’s ban on Burqa is shocking and disappointing both. The anti-ban crowd comprises a range of viewpoints – from ardent Islamic, to moderate, to new-age Islam, to seculars, to antitheists and so on. Most heard argument from almost all of them has been their unflinching ‘concern’ for women’s choice and freedom to choose what they want to wear.

To me, this strong sounding argument remains flawed, inconsistent and self-contradictory. How could a choice to commit suicide be that widely accepted? If your suicidal tendency is the result of certain frame of mind, experiences in life, is self-destructing and criminal, so is Burqa. When the society conditions your mind to willingly get subjugated and considering yourself ‘safe’ by hiding behind the veil, how is it a ‘free choice’? Most of the women passionately protesting the Burqa ban

are heard saying they do it of their own free will because they feel safe. Well you can feel safe in Guantanamo Bay if you're conditioned to feel safe that way.

It is a slap on the face of a society where a woman can only feel safe if she hides herself, if she is invisible from public eye, if she conceals herself from the male eye. Stepping on the soil of any Muslim country in a dress of your choice save Burqa, is herculean for any woman. You want to wear a sleeveless top on a hot summer day and go out on the streets of Lahore or Dhakka, it would be appalling if not impossible like it is in most of middle eastern countries. Things would, however, be starkly different in Khatmandu, Kandy or Mumbai even if you put east versus west argument.

There's a wide gulf between for and against Burqa arguments within Islamic scholars. Major disagreements exist on whether or not Burqa is an injunction of Quran. Even if it proves to be in the holy scriptures, it needs to be reviewed in the context of modern world where men are expected to have at least little hold on their libido, where women are not just sex objects whose unveiled presence in society would be dangerous for public morality.

At the risk of sounding Islamophob or racist against Muslims in west, I would strongly suggest to those who seem too concerned about women's "freedom" to choose Burqa for themselves, to kindly go back to their countries of origin and fight for women's choices there. A lot of women in these countries don't have right to choose their spouse or profession let alone dress. Let us all fight for a free Muslim world where women are free to not wear Burqa. A polite reminder to all the women's rights activists, of sickening bars on women's choices in Muslim countries where they are coerced into adopting a life style no sensible male would ever choose for himself. Burqa can never be a free choice of anyone. Had it been, this choice would have been available to men also.

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P.S.

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