

Canadian academic Tarek Fatah discusses the myths of the hijab in Chapter 13 of his book **'Chasing a Mirage: the Tragic illusion of an Islamic State'** published in 2008.



Hijab—Islamic Piety or Political Islam?

IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S soul-piercing novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the character Nana, a poor unwed mother, tells her five-year-old daughter, Mariam: "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam."

Hosseini's novel is about life in Afghanistan, but in the thirty words above he sums up the way men govern the lives of women across most of the Muslim world. Like Mariam, millions of Muslim girls are told very early in life by their mothers that their place in society is one of submission; submission, not to God, but to Man. No other institution confers this status of submission and possession more than the *hijab*—the two-metre-long cloth that today stands as the universal defining symbol of Islam. Failure of Muslim women to submit to wearing the hijab can lead to serious consequences, especially if they are under statutory requirements to do so in an Islamic State.

An example of this came in a chilling letter from the Palestinian Islamist group Swords of Islamic Righteousness, to TV newscasters in the Middle East. "You are without shame or morals," the letter said. The jihadis were addressing their "sisters" who work for Palestinian Television in Gaza. Demanding that the women start wearing the hijab, the group threatened that if they did not see heads covered, the Swords of Islamic Righteousness would "cut throats, from vein to vein, if needed to protect the spirit and morals of this nation."

The threat was sent as a text message to Lana Shaheen, a prominent TV host. Even though the incident rattled her, Shaheen remained defiant. "I am taking the threats very seriously, but I will not start wearing the hijab,"

she told reporters. However, that was June 2007. Within a month, Gaza fell to the gunmen of the fundamentalist Hamas movement, and the agenda of Swords of Islamic Righteousness came into effect. As this book goes to press, few women appear publicly in Gaza without a hijab.

What is it about this piece of cloth that triggers so much self-righteous angst among Islamists? What is it about a women's hair, the most inanimate part of her body, that arouses so much passion among some Muslim men? Moreover, why would so many Muslim women, educated and supposedly enlightened, submit to the dictates of the men in their lives—their husbands, brothers, sons, and of course, the clerics and male scholars who have laid down the law for these females for centuries? How could the covering of a woman's head—a requirement that does not merit explicit mention in the Quran—end up as the most defining symbol of Islam? And what is the rationale behind this Islamist obsession? Will God really be offended if a woman shows a bit of her bangs?

In Muslim-majority countries, where Islamists have a free hand—if not in the political arena, definitely in the theological—jihadis do not mince their words or actions. However, in the West, the Islamist tactics are deceptively employed to generate support from liberal-left segments of society—even from feminists—without appearing to be coercive. In North America and Europe the mantra is an easily marketable word—“choice.” It's a matter of choice, they say. A woman may choose whether or not to wear a hijab. Who can argue against a woman's right of choice, a word that has a ring of liberation associated with the early days of the feminist struggle.

Though carefully concealed, the true agenda of Islamists is to promote fear among young Muslim girls about not wearing the hijab. This was very evident during the infamous tae kwon do controversy in Quebec in the spring of 2007. At the start of the tournament, a team of young Muslim girls sponsored by the Muslim Community Centre of Montreal mosque refused to participate unless they were allowed to wear the hijab under their helmets. The organizers insisted that the rules of the event did not permit anything other than the prescribed helmets, and since the helmets covered the girls' hair more than the hijab, there was no need for the hijab. In addition, officials said the decision was taken for security reasons. They pointed out that tae kwon do is a martial art that involves mainly kicking and throwing, and expressed fear that part of the hijab could come loose during a bout.

The parents of the young girls, as well their coach from the mosque, refused to allow the girls to participate. The team, made up of girls between

the ages of eight and twelve, went home following the decision. One team member, Bissan Mansour, told reporters, “I feel very sad because we practised so hard. We pulled out for a useless reason.”

The next day the news was on the front pages of all Canadian newspapers. Islamist groups sounded exhilarated. The incident had given them one more opportunity to drive home the propaganda among vulnerable Muslim youth that Canada is essentially an anti-Muslim country and that Muslim youth are the targets.

What went unreported by all the newspapers was the fact that even under the harshest interpretation of the sharia, Muslim girls below the age of puberty are not required to cover their heads. Here was an eight-year-old girl being forced to wear a hijab, and not a single reporter or columnist dared to challenge the parents or the mosque. The Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC) took up the case and issued a statement expressing “concern and disappointment that the hijab is once again being used as a political tool by Islamists to further their agenda in Canada.” The statement said:

The helmets were sufficient substitutes for the hijab. However, the parents of these very young girls—who are not required to wear the hijab even according to the strictest interpretations of Quranic injunctions—decided to turn this into a political statement of Muslim identity.

There was another twist to the story that also went unreported. The fact the mosque in question was a hotbed of pro-Hezbollah activity in Montreal was not relevant to the hijab story. What went unreported was the warning from the mosque to the young girls that if they discarded the hijab, they risked getting raped. In a message posted on its website, the mosque declared that if the young girls took off their hijab, they could end up having “illegitimate children.” One can only imagine the trauma of a ten-year-old girl being warned of possible rape. Is this how Islamists offer choice?

The mosque website listed the “Advantages of Observing Hijab,” which included “guarding oneself from the lustful looks of men.” The mosque also listed “The Disadvantages of *Discarding* the Hijab.” These included:

- divorce, adultery, rape, and illegitimate children
- stresses, insecurity and suspicion in the minds of husbands, ultimately disturbing the familial harmony
- instigating young people to deviate towards the path of lust and immorality.

If the threat of rape and the fear of illegitimate children were not enough, these pre-teen girls were told that if they took off their hijab, they would cease to be Muslims. The website said: “By removing your hijab, you have destroyed your faith. Islam means submission to Allah in all our actions. Those who refuse submission cannot be called Muslims.” Little wonder then, that the girls walked away from the taekwon do tournament rather than remove their hijab.

And if the threats of eternal damnation were not enough, the mosque then told the girls that the consequence of removing their hijab would be that all of society would suffer. It said young men might resort to criminal activity, including armed robbery and murder, and that on the Day of Judgement they, the girls, would have to bear the full responsibility of these young men’s crimes. Here is part of the message to young Muslim women, as posted on the mosque’s website:

Then Allah commanded our sisters to observe Hijab, it was because of the universal damages that would be caused by refusing to observe It. It is not a matter of individual behavior, as many people may think. A woman going out exposing her charms attracts men, which sets off a chain of undesirable events, causing lot of harm to several people. Discarding Hijab will harm not only one’s own self but also millions of others. Exposure of physical charm of our women may destroy many homes and cause innumerable rapes and murders for which we all are responsible. It is pertinent to relate one of the several heart-breaking stories caused by discarding Hijab: A young innocent man, who saw the photograph of an attractive woman, was immediately infatuated by her physical charm. Unfortunately, he had neither wealth nor position to get closer to her. To fulfill his desire, he thought of getting money quickly by any means and resorted to stealing. Finally, he ended up in prison for robbing a few people and killing one. Who is to be blamed for all the consequences but the person who caused them? Had that woman observed Hijab and refrained from displaying her attractions, these crimes would not have taken place.

The belief that women are to blame for bringing sexual assault and rape on themselves has unfortunately gained wide acceptance among Islamists as well as the leadership of conservative Muslim women’s groups. These women have been duped into believing that sexual offences committed by men are their own fault, rather than an outcome of the rapists’ pathological tendencies. Sadly, feminist groups in Canada, the United States, and Europe have abandoned their duty to confront the growing acceptance of misogyny

in Islamist circles. It seems that as long as US troops occupy Iraq and the likes of George W. Bush occupy the White House, feminist groups will unwittingly give free rein to mosque leaders like the one in Montreal in the name of multiculturalism, a philosophy which has of late come to be adopted with absolutist zeal.

MUSLIM WOMEN AS THE GUARDIANS OF MUSLIM HONOUR

It was shortly after midnight on Saturday, September 1, 2007. A twenty-four-year-old Muslim woman was working all alone in the chemistry laboratory at Carleton University in Ottawa. She had been alone for a few hours. Suddenly she heard the sound of the door opening. As she turned, she saw a broad-shouldered, bald white male, about five-feet eight-inches tall, carrying a white plastic bag, enter the lab. As the two exchanged a few words, she realized he had been drinking. The clean-shaven twenty-something, who spoke English without an accent, did not have chemistry on his mind that Labour Day weekend. Before the woman could grasp the danger he posed, the young man in the blue hoodie sweatshirt was all over her.

The two grappled, but she was no match for the predator. With a swift blow, he broke the victim's jaw, dislocated her shoulder, and knocked her unconscious before removing her clothes and sexually assaulting her. Newspapers report that when the student was brought to the hospital, she was in a state of shock and not fully conscious.

The young Muslim woman went through a horrifying trauma with physical injuries and emotional scars that she may never be able to get rid of. However, what happened in the days following this incident tells the true story of the terrible burden that Muslim men and Islamic society have placed on the backs of Muslim women.

Four days after the sexual assault, the student told Christine Baker, a sexual assault nurse examiner at the Ottawa Hospital, that although she had been sexually assaulted, she had not been raped. The student reportedly expressed concern that if the rape was not denied, the "incorrect information would destroy her future." This young woman, who did not wish to be identified, said she was making the clarification in an effort to save herself grief as an unmarried Muslim woman. She said that in Islamic countries, victims of rape are considered unclean by potential future husbands. The sexual assault examiner would later tell the media: "As part of her culture, being a virgin is very important and, if, all of a sudden, everybody looks

at her and says she's not a virgin, she's a lot less desirable as a wife." In an unprecedented statement, Baker then added: "There was no penetration of her body, and for her, that's a huge distinction that has to be made."

By any standards this was an outrageous development. The victim of sexual assault had to explain herself as if she was guilty of the crime, not the assailant. The fact is that it is not just in "Islamic countries" that victims of rape are considered guilty. The feeling seems to exist inside the community in Canada. Why else would the woman go to such lengths "to clear her name"? The reaction of Muslim leaders in Ottawa made it obvious that this viewpoint is widely held by conservative and fundamentalist circles. Read the words of the president of the Ottawa Muslim Association. He said he supported "the woman's decision to clear her name." *Clear her name!* She didn't do anything wrong; she shouldn't have to clear her name. Another sentence uttered by Mumtaz Akhtar, president of the Ottawa Muslim Association, gave away the prevalent mindset in the community. He said, "Who are we to judge somebody else, especially if a person is innocent?" Which begs the question: Had she been raped, she wouldn't have been innocent?

While Western society has a long way to go before it can claim to have truly introduced gender equality, one cannot deny that in the last hundred years we have made huge progress and women are no longer considered the chattels of men or the source of sin. Unfortunately, the followers of a religion that gave women the right to property and divorce have failed to keep up. Only a few brave souls have dared to criticize the Islamic institutions of concubinage and polygamy that lie at the heart of gender apartheid and its various manifestations, including the *niqab*,* the hijab, and the refusal to acknowledge the right of women to stand in the front rows of a mosque.

When the young Canadian woman was sexually assaulted, she was a victim of two attacks. For the first—the crime of sexual assault—the assailant will get caught and face justice. However, the second crime committed against her—making her feel guilty for no fault of hers—will go unpunished. The people responsible for creating the climate where victims of rape fear reporting it are doing more damage to the Muslim community than the sick men who rape helpless young women. These are the imams and sheikhs who have perpetuated the myth that a woman is essentially the source of all sin.

In October 2006, an Australian imam of Lebanese descent, the country's most senior Muslim cleric, triggered outrage when he described women

* *Niqab*: Face-covering veil that can be part of a body outfit (a.k.a. burka).

who dress immodestly (in his view) as “uncovered meat” who invite sexual attacks. Sheikh Taj Aldin al-Hilali, the so-called Mufti of Australia, condemned women who he said “sway suggestively,” wear makeup, and do not wear the hijab. The idea that women are to blame for rape is preposterous, but that is what the sheikh suggested while delivering a sermon during the month of Ramadan. Not a single member of the congregation protested or challenged the imam. Later, the imam apologized for his comments, but his apology reflected the deep-seated attitudes among many clerics of Islam about women. He told reporters, “I had only intended to protect women’s honour.” During the sermon, al-Hilali had said:

If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside on the street, or in the garden, or in the park, or in the backyard without cover, and the cats come to eat it . . . whose fault is it—the cats’ or the uncovered meat? The uncovered meat is the problem. If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred.

Women, al-Hilali said, were “weapons” used by “Satan” to control men.

If Sheikh al-Hilali of Australia believes that women are Satan’s weapons against men, he is relying on the long history of interpreting the Quran in a particularly misogynistic manner. These interpretations that place women as sexual objects are not just the work of medieval scholars, but the leaders of the contemporary 20th-century Islamist movement. Such leaders include the late Abul Ala Maudoodi, who worked closely with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Maudoodi’s writings are widely read and believed as absolute truths in Islamic schools and mosques in North America and Europe. Maudoodi gives a nod to the rape of non-Muslim women who are captured in war, and yet few Muslim women have stood up to condemn an ideology that gives religious sanction to rape. Little wonder that Pakistani troops in the Bangladesh war had no hesitation raping Bengali women after clerics had declared these Muslim women as non-Muslim enemies of Islam. The same theology today gives religious license to the Janjaweed Arab militia in Sudan to rape Darfuri women—their very own Muslim sisters.

Maudoodi’s commentary on one verse of the Quran demonstrates the kind of liberties that Islamists have taken with the Muslim holy book to serve their sexual perversion and legalize sex slaves for Muslim soldiers. In his commentary, he uses convoluted language to permit the rape of captured non-Muslim female prisoners of war; their slavery; and the right of Muslims to buy and sell non-Muslim women. Here is how verse 24 of chapter 4 of the Quran actually reads:

Also (prohibited are) women already married, except those whom your right hands possess: Thus hath Allah ordained (Prohibitions) against you: Except for these, all others are lawful, provided ye seek (them in marriage) with gifts from your property, desiring chastity, not lust, seeing that ye derive benefit from them, give them their dowers (at least) as prescribed; but if, after a dower is prescribed, agree Mutually (to vary it), there is no blame on you, and Allah is All-knowing, All-wise.

The way Maudoodi sees it, this verse gives him the liberty to institutionalize sex slavery and the treatment of women as commodities that can be bought and sold. The following commentary by Abul Ala Maudoodi on the above verse comes from his six-volume translation and interpretation of the Quran, *Tafhim ul Quran*:

Those women who become prisoners of war, while their *kaafir* [non-Muslim] husbands have been left behind in *dar ul harb* [the non-Muslim country with which Muslims are fighting, or the “home of war”], are not prohibited to you [for sexual intercourse]. The reason is that as soon as these women crossed over from *dar ul harb* to the *dar ul Islam* [the Muslim country], their marriage contract with their husbands became null and void. You can either marry such women or, if your right hand possesses these women, you can also have sexual relations with them. However, there is a difference of opinion among the scholars in case both husband and wife are captured together. Imam Abu Hanifa says that the marriage of the [non-Muslim] husband and wife will remain intact, while Imam Maalik and Imam Shafi’i say their marriage contract is void. As there are many misunderstandings exist in the minds of people concerning taking advantage* of [having sexual intercourse] with slave-girls captured as prisoners of war, the following principles must be carefully understood:

1. It is not lawful for a soldier to have sex with a captured woman as soon as she falls into his hands. According to Islamic law such women should be first handed over to the government, which then has the right to set them free; ransom them; or exchange them for Muslim prisoners of war in enemy hands. Or, if the government so wishes, it can distribute these

* In the original Urdu-language version of Maudoodi’s book, he uses the word *tamatto*, the literal meaning of which is “to complete delight.” The word has been deleted from the English translation of his work.

non-Muslim women among the Muslim troops to serve as their sex-slaves. However, a soldier can have sex with only that woman who has been formally given to him by the government.

2. After taking possession of this woman, a soldier should not have sex with her until after she has had her monthly periods and it is clear that the woman is not pregnant. To have sex with the captured woman prior to her periods is *haraam* [prohibited].
3. It does not matter whether the female prisoner of war belongs to “people of the book” [Christian or Jew] or not. No matter what her religion, the soldier has the right to have sex with her if he has been given possession of her.

Elsewhere in the same commentary, Maudoodi writes: “The proprietary rights over a slave, male or female, as given to a person by the government, are transferable, like all other proprietary rights.”

Unfortunately, until 2007 only men had translated the Quran and interpreted it. The very idea of a woman translating the holy book offends Islamists. Take for example the reaction to the first-ever translation by a woman—Laleh Bakhtiar’s *The Sublime Quran*.

Mohammad Ashraf, secretary general of ISNA-Canada, a branch of the Indianapolis-based Islamic Society of North America, told *The Toronto Star* that he would not permit *The Sublime Quran* to be sold in the ISNA bookstore. “Our bookstore would not allow this kind of translation,” he said. “I will consider banning it.” He claimed his objection was not because Laleh Bakhtiar is a woman, but because “she was not trained at an academic institution accredited in the Muslim world.” He cited the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia as one such a place, but apparently failed to disclose to *The Toronto Star* reporter that this Saudi university, which is the world centre of Wahhabi ideology, refuses to admit female students, let alone accredit them! Instead, he went on to claim: “This woman-friendly translation will be out of line and will not fly too far.”

What had Laleh Bakhtiar done to deserve the punishment of having her translation of the Quran banned from ISNA’s Islamic bookstores? Her fault in the eyes of Islamists is that she believes the Quran does not condone spousal abuse, as claimed by Islamists. It took Bakhtiar seven years to write her English translation of the Quran, a version that she says was written from a woman’s point of view. She says of the ninety thousand words she translated, there is just *one*—in chapter 4, verse 34—that led to sharp criticism and controversy. It’s from the section on women and describes how to deal with a wife who is disobedient. All translations of the Quran by men

claim the Quran sanctions the beating of a wife. Laleh Bakhtiar, however, discovered what it seems no male Islamic scholar wanted Muslims to know: that this is not what the Quran says.

“When I got to chapter four I had to really look at this carefully,” Bakhtiar told *The Toronto Star*. She concluded that the Arabic word *idrib*, which literalists and Islamists say means “to beat,” could have twenty-six different meanings. She feels the Quran asks husbands “to go away” or “to leave,” not “to beat.” For suggesting an end to religiously sanctioned wife-beating and for standing up to centuries of misogyny, it appears that Laleh Bakhtiar paid the penalty: ISNA—the organization that champions the introduction of sharia law in Canada, runs a large Islamic school, and has received funds from Saudi-based sources—banned her Quran from their Islamic bookstore.

WHAT IS THE HIJAB?

It is not just non-Muslims who ask what the hijab is. Most non-Arab Muslims had not been exposed to the word or its application until they arrived in North America or Europe, or went to work in the Middle East. Even in the most conservative parts of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the obsession of tucking every little piece of hair under an elastic sort of a wrap was unheard of before the 1970s oil boom. The *dupatta* or the *sari-pallu** would loosely be thrown over the head at times of prayer or in the presence of elders. In Somalia and much of sub-Saharan Muslim Africa, the term “hijab” did not exist and the head cover was colourful attire, more a fashion statement than a symbol of piety. Today, the resurgence of the hijab seems both a rise of Islamic fundamentalism and a visible way for Muslim women to show that they do not wish to identify with the West. In imitating the custom of the Middle Eastern hijab rather than wearing the South Asian dupatta, the women indicate that the issue is not one of hiding hair, but one of reaffirming their identity as “authentic” Muslims (as opposed to ones tainted by their Indianness).

So what exactly is the hijab? There is no denying that covering the head is a cherished part of Muslim social custom, tradition, and heritage for women. A Muslim woman should have the right to wear a hijab. But Islamists take it a step further, a giant step further, and state that the hijab is compulsory attire and that women who do not wear it are not Muslims at all. The hijab has become more of a political statement than an act of piety.

* The *dupatta* and the *sari* have been the head cover and dress of choice among Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Muslim women for centuries.

What Islamists do not admit is that the custom of the veiling of women in early Islam was not part of the dress code until Muslims conquered Persia and the Byzantine territories in the 7th century. It was only after this assimilation of the conquered cultures that head covering and veiling were viewed as appropriate expressions of Islamic practice. Since the veil was impractical attire for working women, a veiled woman was a sign that she belonged to the upper class and that her husband was rich enough to keep her idle.

Ibrahim B. Syed, a professor at the University of Louisville, Kentucky, and president of the Islamic Research Foundation, writes that hijab literally means a “curtain,” “partition,” or a “separation.” According to Syed, when pre-Islamic Arabs went to battle, Arab women on seeing the men off to war would bare their breasts to encourage them to fight, or they would do so at the battle itself. This changed with Islam, when the Prophet received a Quranic revelation asking women to cover their breasts with the garment the Quran refers to as the *khimar*, worn by Arab women as a head covering.

The respected Polish Islamic scholar Muhammad Asad, commenting on this verse of the Quran (24:31), writes:

The noun *khimar* (of which *khumur* is plural) denotes the head-covering customarily used by Arabian women before and after the advent of Islam. According to most of the classical commentators, it was worn in pre-Islamic times more or less as an ornament, and let down loosely over the wearer’s back. In accordance with the fashion prevalent at the time, the upper part of a woman’s tunic had a wide opening in the front, and her breasts were left bare. Hence, the injunction to cover the bosom by means of a *khimar* does not necessarily relate to the use of a *khimar* as such. Rather, it is meant to make it clear that a woman’s breasts are not included within “what may decently be apparent” of her body, and should not, therefore, be displayed.

The Quran itself does not state explicitly either that women should be veiled, or that they should be kept apart from the world of men. On the contrary, the Quran is insistent on the full participation of women in society, and in the religious practices prescribed for men. The Lebanese scholar Nazira Zain Ad-Din argues that self-control is far better a moral standard than the practice of draping women from head to toe.

In her book *As-sufur wa’l-hijab*, Zain Ad-Din proves it is not an Islamic duty of Muslim women to wear the hijab. She adds that in enforcing the hijab, society becomes a prisoner of its own customs and traditions. Zain

Ad-Din argues that imposing the veil on women is the ultimate proof that men are suspicious of their mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters. This means that men suspect “the women closest and dearest to them.”

It is difficult to say exactly when the head cover and the face mask became part of Islamic law. What we do know is that the laws that emerged as sharia were first developed during the 8th and 9th centuries, when the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad were ruling Islamdom. The “lawyer-theologians of Islam,” as Professor Ibrahim Syed refers to these clerics, operated in a religious environment with a self-imposed duty of formulating Islamic law and code of morality. It was these theologians who interpreted the Quranic rules on women’s dress in increasingly absolute and categorical terms, reflecting the practices and cultural assumptions of their place and age.

Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan sociologist and feminist, in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, writes that the sayings of Prophet Muhammad and the Quranic teachings have been manipulated by a male elite whose power could only be legitimized by religion. She says the Prophet’s sayings were fabricated to protect the privileges of men, while denying women full participation in Islamic societies. Mernissi attacks the age-old conservative focus on segregation of women. She argues that this is achieved by way of manipulation of the sacred texts, “a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies.”

In Canada, feminist Farzana Hassan, author of *Islam, Women and the Challenges of Today*, has been a vocal critic of the Islamists who prescribe the hijab head cover as a mandatory dress code for Muslim women. For speaking her mind, she has received death threats and accusations that she is an enemy of Islam, an apostate deserving of death. Addressing the meaning of the word “hijab,” she says: “The Quran speaks mostly of modesty when it enjoins ‘hijab.’ . . . Besides, hijab is more a state of mind. The modesty recommended in the Quran has more to do with modesty in conduct and demeanour.”

Elsewhere she writes, “the Quran remained silent as to the specific apparel to be worn [by women] . . . except for the occasion where it specifically suggested covering the bosom with a *khimar* . . . this was specifically designed to discourage the practise of earlier times when women dressed scantily with their bosoms remaining exposed.”

If Allah wanted women to cover their heads or their hair, why was he not explicit about it in the Quran? After all, nothing would have prevented

him from sending a Quranic revelation, saying to Muslim women, “cover your heads,” but he did not. The Arabic word for “chest” is *gayb*, which is in the verse 24:31, but the Arabic words for head (*raas*) or hair (*shaar*) are not part of the verse. The commandment in the verse is clear: Cover your chest or bosom. But, because of the fabrication of medieval scholars and the cowardice of contemporary translators who do not wish to appear as transgressing these scholars, Muslims are being told that the Quran prescribes the covering of one’s head or hair.

Asma Barlas, professor of politics at Ithaca College, is also of the view that the head-covering hijab is not a mandatory dress code for Muslim women. She believes that “Conservatives read these Ayat [verses] as giving Muslim males the right to force women to don everything from the *hijab* ... to the *burka* ... They justify such forms of veiling on the grounds that women’s bodies are pudendal, hence sexually corrupting to those who see them; it is thus necessary to shield Muslim men from viewing women’s bodies by concealing them.” Barlas writes that while none of these ideas about the female body derives from the Quran, conservative Muslims continue to cling to them.

Fatima Mernissi points to another meaning of the word *hijab* in the Quran, where it depicts a veil that “hides God from men,” describing the inability of certain individuals to perceive God. In yet another occurrence in the Quran, she points out that the word *hijab* is “something that diminishes human intelligence.” Mernissi believes that sometimes the meaning of the word *hijab* takes on “an eminently negative significance.”

In one Toronto bookstore, the title of a gaudy glossy paperback screamed at passersby: *Women Who Deserve to Go to Hell*. The book, which is also widely available in British libraries and mosques, lists the type of women who will face eternal damnation. Among them are:

- The Grumbler . . . the woman who complains against her husband every now and then is one of Hell.
- The Woman Who Adorns Herself.
- The Woman Who Apes Men, Tattoos, Cuts Hair Short and Alters Nature.

The book is not an isolated attempt by a zealot, but part of a growing trend. Mernissi writes that new editions of medieval books on women, Islam, and the veil are being mass-produced by religious authorities who she sarcastically says are “concerned for the future of Islam”; these books

state in their introductions that their aim is to “save Muslim society from the danger represented by change.” She writes that at a time when the Arab publishing industry is in the doldrums, it is indeed surprising to find new editions of old texts in luxurious gilded bindings at astonishingly low prices. In particular, she points to the latest edition of the medieval classic by 13th-century scholar Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1257), *Kitab ahkam al-nisa* (Stutory Provisions Concerning Women) published in Egypt.

Women such as academic Asma Barlas, author Amina Wadud, sociologist Fatima Mernissi, and activists Farzana Hassan and Raheel Raza (who led the first women-led Muslim prayer service in Canada) are vocal and courageous, but they have the powerful Islamist elite lined up against them. Two other women, authors Irshad Manji (*The Trouble with Islam Today*) and Asra Nomani (*Standing Alone in Mecca*), have thrown a more robust challenge to the Islamic establishment, but instead of being debated on the merits of their case, the two were unfairly dismissed as attention-seeking apologists for the West. Other Muslim writers treat the subject very cautiously so as not to be seen to be offending the women who wear the hijab. They ask the tough questions that may lead to some soul-searching, but avoid answering the questions. An example of this is in Syed Osman Sher’s book *Religion, God and Islam*. Sher, a retired senior civil servant of Pakistan, now settled in Canada, writes:

Can the women now be protected from molestation simply by wearing an outer garment, or by being recognized as Muslims? . . . Are the Muslims living in the dark streets of Makkah and Medina of those days that they need protection through such contrivances? If a veil is prescribed for the streets, is it applicable also when a woman is inside a building among the family members, close relatives and friends? Does it become obligatory for a woman to cover herself from head to foot, sometimes only to bare the eyes?

The most troubling aspect of the hijab controversy is that it is not only men but also ultra-conservative Muslim women who have taken the lead in promoting the head cover or the face mask as a mandatory obligation of Islam. The defence of the hijab has become the defence of Islam, as if Islam and the hijab are one and the same. However, the defenders cannot explain why the only legitimate covering of the head has to be one that originates from among the Muslim Brotherhood followers in Egypt and Palestine, and not the head covers worn in Bangladesh or Somalia. Perhaps these young women know that what they wear on their heads is a political symbol, not religious, one that says, “I am hereby rejecting what the West stands for, and in doing so, I will also reject my own heritage, my mother’s,

and my grandmother’s and mimic an adopted identity of an Islamist activist working for the Muslim Brotherhood.”

WHY ARE WOMEN WEARING THE HIJAB?

Notwithstanding the fact that there is ample evidence—both historical and theological—that the head covering is not mandatory attire for Muslim women, the reality is that a rising tide of hijab mania has been sweeping the Muslim middle class. The question is, why are Muslim women falling for this fad when the Quran does not require them to do so?

In 2003 the Canadian Council of Muslim Women invited scholars in the fields of anthropology, history, Islamic studies, and sociology to carry out a systemic study of the issues surrounding the resurgence of the hijab in Canada.

Reem Meshal, then a PhD student at the University of Toronto, was one of the scholars who studied the reasons why women adopted or rejected the hijab. The results may provide some idea why so many women are wearing the hijab despite evidence that it is not an obligation. Meshal writes that when asked “what sources most influenced their position on *hijab*,” an overwhelming number of hijabi women said the Quran or the hadith. However, when asked to identify the text that mandates the wearing of the hijab, they were not able to provide these references. Commenting on her findings, Meshal writes:

Despite protestations to the contrary, the women in our survey had only a vague grasp of the Quranic verses that have been interpreted as prescribing *hijab*. Here are a few sample remarks made by them [*hijabi* women] concerning Islamic scriptural references to *hijab*:

- I know it’s in the Quran, but I don’t know where
- In the verses everyone talks about
- Ask an *alim* [a Muslim scholar]

Meshal concludes that the respondents had little familiarity with Islamic texts, thus reinforcing the idea that religious knowledge for these women was primarily coming from oral transmission and the filtration of religious dogma through family and the mosque.

Meshal’s report found that Canadian mosques promote the hijab as the ideal for a Muslim woman. From the mosques, the message is that Muslim women who do not wear the hijab are shameful or weak in faith. Unfortunately, women then internalize this dogma and carry it with them

to educational institutions and national Muslim organizations. Meshal writes:

The message that our informants claim is being propagated by mosques has also found its mark in national and campus organizations, which are also largely pro-*hijab* . . . One Edmonton woman reported the following incident during “Islam Awareness Week” at her campus: “[T]he women in our [Muslim campus] association were informed by the male students that any woman not wearing the *hijab* was not welcome to sit at the [information] table.”

Another respondent noted the pressure she had from her family to don the *hijab*. “My father refused to come to my graduation ceremony if I did not wear it,” the young woman told Meshal.

At times one is left scratching one’s head, wondering how so many Muslims could treat the *hijab* as a central pillar of Islam. What would make a father boycott his daughter’s graduation ceremony simply because her head was not covered? And what about the woman convicted of welfare fraud, who filed a lawsuit for damages because the police asked her to take off her *hijab* while she was in their custody?

Meet Souhair Khatib of Santa Ana, California. Khatib and her husband, Amro, were convicted of welfare fraud in 2006 and sentenced to three years’ probation and thirty days of community service. Not at all embarrassed at her conviction for welfare fraud, Souhair Khatib told the *Los Angeles Times* that when jail officials forced her to remove her head scarf for eight hours, it caused her “extreme mental and emotional distress.” She told the newspaper that wearing the *hijab* “is an obligation,” and being without it is embarrassing because a woman’s head and neck are exposed to strange men in the courtroom and to male deputies in jail. Apparently, she felt no such urge to adhere to Islam’s teachings when she was committing welfare fraud. She also disclosed that while living in Lebanon, she had never covered her head, but after coming to the United States, she had ended her “sin.”

The above incident also gives a rare insight into the minds of the Islamists. What went unsaid in the above story is the belief among many Islamists that laws created by mere mortals—congress and parliaments—are not applicable to Muslims. As such, it is no big deal to violate California laws against welfare fraud. But when it comes to the *hijab*, well that is another story, since many women mistakenly believe and are told by men that it was God who wrote the law on head coverings.

HIJAB AS A MATTER OF CHOICE?

Then there is the argument that the hijab is a matter of choice. Of course, no one can deny the right of a woman to wear a hijab, but the argument of choice espoused by non-Muslim feminist defenders of the hijab falls flat. The same Muslim women who demand the right to choose hijab refuse to accord the same right of choice to their sisters who refuse to wear it.

This double standard was evident when in 1999 I interviewed Merve Kavakci for the *Muslim Chronicle* TV show. Kavakci is the Turkish–American Islamist who was elected to the Turkish parliament, but claims she was not allowed to take her seat because she refused to take off her hijab. The Turkish government for their part said Kavakci was barred because she was an American citizen and thus was not permitted to sit in the Turkish parliament. During the interview, I empathized with her situation, but asked her: “If you demand that the Turkish parliament should not bar women MPs who wear the hijab, are you also willing to demand that the Iranian parliament not bar women who *do not* wear the hijab?” Her response startled me. She defended the Iranian parliament for making the wearing of the hijab compulsory. She said Iranian women MPs who do not wear the hijab must respect Iranian laws, which she said were Islamic. The irony of her statement was lost on her. For a second I was at a loss for words. When I pointed to her double standards, she was mildly offended, but unshaken in her belief that wearing the hijab should be enforced in Iran.

Merve Kavakci is not alone. This double standard is widespread among Islamist women. On a freezing Canadian winter morning—Saturday, January 17, 2004—I joined about a hundred young women protesting the French ban on the hijab. Even though I am opposed to the headress as an Islamic dress requirement, I fully support the right of a woman to wear it. Some see this as a contradiction, but I don’t. Exposing and opposing a religious myth does not mean I would agree to legislation banning the hijab. Myths cannot be outlawed.

The young hijabi women and their “brothers” stood shivering outside the French consulate, waving placards and raising slogans. However, as I marched in solidarity with my fellow Muslims, I couldn’t help but realize that our reaction to the French initiative was not based on universal principles. The French law may have been foolish, if not outright racist, but our outrage left the door open for others to accuse Muslims of double standards.

If Muslim Canadians feel governments have no business dictating what their citizens should or should not wear, we need to apply this principle

to all governments, not just the French. If Muslims considered the French law against the hijab offensive, then the Saudi and Iranian laws enforcing compulsory wearing of the hijab should also be condemned because they take away a woman's right to choose. While the French law has banned the wearing of the hijab in school, Saudi and Iranian laws bar women from appearing in public without the hijab.

In the most atrocious application of the Saudi law, fifteen schoolgirls perished in March 2002 when they were not permitted to flee their burning school in Mecca because they were not wearing so-called proper Islamic dress. Why then were these hijabi Muslim women protesting outside the French consulate, not challenging the hijab laws of Saudi Arabia and Iran? Why were they not protesting outside the Saudi and Iranian consulates? Why is it that Muslim anger is directed against the French alone? Is it because Saudi Arabia and Iran are Muslim countries that claim to be true representations of the fabled Islamic State?

I asked a number of people that freezing Saturday outside the French consulate whether they were willing to stage a similar protest against Saudi Arabia and Iran. While some agreed with my rationale, many more answered my questions with empty stares or a flat refusal to have such a discussion. The fact is that the situation of Muslim women in Saudi Arabia and Iran is far more serious than the problems their sisters face in France. Yet most of the young female Muslim protesters were quite comfortable turning a blind eye to oppression in Muslim countries. It was deeply disappointing to see them oblivious to the double standard they were practising.

In an animated exchange with one articulate hijabi student from Toronto, I showed her an article by a French Muslim writer, Mouna Naim, who had written a month earlier in *Le Monde* about a thirteen-year-old Saudi girl who asked, "Why was I born a girl? This is a country of men, and I wish I was one." The *Le Monde* correspondent wrote that while many Saudi women voluntarily wear the head cover, many others "find the wearing of the garment intolerable because they see it as embodying the raft of restrictions they have to endure, which include the requirement that the slightest patch of flesh must remain covered, reducing women to formless, uniform shadows."

I asked the Toronto hijabi what she had to say to her Saudi sister. The response I got was the same lazy rhetoric I find spouted by so many Islamists. "This is nothing more than French propaganda. I think *Le Monde* is a Zionist newspaper," she said as she shrugged her shoulders and walked away to join the orchestrated chant.

In the days leading up to the Toronto demonstration outside the French consulate, there was considerable debate on the Internet about whether

the French and Saudi laws were flip sides of the same argument, that is, state enforcement of citizens' dress codes. Judy Rebick, former head of Canada's National Action Committee on the Status of Women, and currently a professor at Ryerson University in Toronto, supported the protest outside the French consulate, but said demonstrating only against France without at the same time criticizing Saudi Arabia would send the wrong message. She wrote:

I have heard similar concerns expressed by women's groups from the Middle East. If we lived in France it would be a different story, but since we are protesting the action of a foreign government, I think we should protest both sides of the problem. I think if we are going to protest against a state forcing woman not to wear the *hijab*, we should also protest forcing women to wear the *hijab*.

Rebick went on to say: "In France, it is racism and Islamophobia. In Saudi Arabia, it is fundamentalism and sexism. I think it is a good time to make the point that we are for freedom from oppression everywhere."

Muslim women advocates of the hijab would be well served if they took Rebick's suggestion to heart. Failure to apply the principle of universality, and the refusal to double-critique our positions, has seriously hurt Muslim credibility.

When we Muslims demand that others respect our rights, we need to be courageous and honest enough to recognize the oppression within our own community and speak out against it. However, for Islamists, human rights are not universal principles based on reason, rational argument, and equality of all humans. When they invoke human rights, they do so to protect the medieval misogyny they have packaged falsely as divine revelations. One does not have to imagine how these attitudes would play out in a state run by Islamists. One has to only look at the state of women inside Iran and Saudi Arabia, two alternative models of the Islamic State, one Shia, the other Sunni, at loggerheads with each other, yet unified in their conviction that women are divinely ordained to be subservient to men.

MUSIC BAN

The Islamist obsession with head coverings is matched only by their contempt for music. This was quite evident in the summer of 2004, when SoundVision, a Chicago-based Islamist bookstore and publisher that sells Maudoodi's works and has close ties to Saudi Arabia, announced plans for what it called a "MuslimFest" in Toronto. Supposedly this was to be a festival of culture

and art where Muslim youth could participate and show off their talent. However, no sooner had the “Call for Talent” notice gone out than it was clear that far from festivities, this was one more attempt by Islamists to spread their message under the cover of culture.

Three clauses buried in the “Submission Guidelines” gave away the true agenda and the misogynist nature of the event. Instead of stating unambiguously “No Women Singers Allowed,” the guidelines carried a convoluted instruction that read: “Songs performance can be male voices only,” leaving one wondering if recent transvestites with male voices would be permitted.

And if the message about the Islamist nature of the event was not clear enough, the guideline carried the explicit warning: “All submitted artwork must be compliant to the boundaries set by *Shariah*.” The organizers of the event also made it clear that no musical instruments would be permitted at the MuslimFest except for the Saudi camel-skin drum known as the *daff*—and even that, only “if needed.” To clarify what they meant by sharia-compliant art, the organizers said in a footnote: “No hand drawn faces. Silhouettes may be acceptable in some cases . . . Photographs of people will be allowed *if they* conform to the contents allowed by *shariah*.”

Few people noticed the sharia clause or the no-women-allowed-to-perform instructions buried in fine print. Later, many Muslim artists would discover that their entries were rejected without explanation. Asma Arshad, a Toronto artist whose multimedia installations have been on display at the Royal Ontario Museum, wanted to enter her work, but she told *The Globe and Mail* that she didn’t do so because she was uncomfortable with the “narrow interpretation of Islamic culture that excludes the depiction of faces in artwork, sitar and guitar music, and even clapping.” Bewildered by the restrictions, the mother of two said, “What is un-Islamic material exactly . . . Why do they call it MuslimFest when their interpretation of Islam is so narrow?”

What was particularly disturbing about the exclusion of women at the MuslimFest was the fact that it was young women who were given the task of implementing the “no women” and “no musical instruments” policies and were made to believe that in enforcing their own second-class status, they were empowering themselves.

MuslimFest is now a regular feature in the Toronto-area Islamist calendar. However, this exclusion of women, enforced by women, did not go unchallenged. In the 2005 MuslimFest, Zuriani (Ani) Zonneveld, a Grammy Award-winning Muslim singer from Los Angeles who would like to have been part of the festival, received a cold shoulder from the organizers. She told *The Globe and Mail*, “I feel discriminated against.” Zonneveld accused the

MuslimFest organizers of “misrepresenting what Islam is about.” Referring to the ban on female performers, the singer asked, “Where does it say this in the Koran?”

Zonneveld disclosed to the *Globe* reporter that festival organizers SoundVision of Chicago had declined to sell her CD through their website. She wrote them a letter, complaining that they were perpetuating what she called a “male chauvinist” version of Islam.

There is a relentless and continuous attack by Islamists on all aspects of spontaneous happiness and merriment. Whether it is the destruction and burning of video rental stores in Islamabad or the ban on the sitar and guitar at Toronto’s MuslimFest, the ascending forces of puritanism are depicting any expression of joy as a satanic act. Today it is not uncommon to witness a complete ban on the clapping of hands at exclusive Muslim events. Invariably, a young man will stand up at the first hint of spontaneous applause and start yelling, “*Takbeer . . . Takbeer*” to drown out the sound of clapping, followed by a quick reprimand from the Red Guards of the new Islamic Cultural Revolution who will descend on you like hawks to say, “Brother, it is forbidden to clap . . . Allah is not pleased with the sound of clapping.”

The Islamist contempt for singing and musical instruments is perplexing, considering the fact that there is not a single word of censure against music in the Quran. In fact music was, and still is, an indispensable part of Arab social life.

Islamists who despise music and singing should pay heed to Ibn Khaldun, the great Muslim philosopher and sociologist of the 14th century. In listing the hierarchy of professions, he categorized music and writing as the highest ranking crafts in a society. In his 1377 classic, *The Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun said the disappearance of music from a community is one of the signs of its decline. He wrote, “The craft of singing is the last of the crafts attained to in civilization . . . It is also the first to disappear from a given civilization when it disintegrates and retrogresses.”

A PLEA TO MY SISTERS

Originally a reflection of modesty, the hijab has now become a political tool. All women have, at some time in their lives, chosen to wear a head cover, whether in a snowstorm or freezing rain. At times, the covering of the head, irrespective of what religion one practises, is crucial to one’s survival. In the deserts of Arabia, whether one is a Muslim or a pagan, the covering of one’s head and face is an absolute necessity—not just when facing a blistering sandstorm, but any time one steps out of the home into the searing sunshine.

But what is essentially attire for a particular climate and weather has been turned into a modern symbol of defiance and, at best, a show of false piety by Islamists and orthodox Muslims.

As discussed in this chapter, there is not a single reference in the Quran that obliges Muslim women to cover their hair or their face, or to lower the voice. The only verse that comes close to such a dress code (Sura 24, “The Light,” verse 31) directs believing women to cover their bosoms. Yet, in the past few decades, Islamists and orthodox Muslims have made the covering of a woman’s head the cornerstone of Muslim identity.

It is true that through history some Muslim women have chosen to wear the hijab for reasons of modesty. Today, however, some wear it for the opposite reason. “Young women put on a hijab and go dancing, wearing high heels and lipstick. They wear tight jeans that show their bellies,” seventy-five-year-old Nawal Al-Saadawi, Egypt’s leading feminist, noted recently, adding that “The *hijab* has nothing to do with moral values.”

Beyond fashion, however, this supposed symbol of modesty has assumed a decidedly political and religious tenor, dominating the debate on civil liberties and religious freedoms in the West. Any opposition to the hijab is viewed as a manifestation of Islamophobia.

It should be noted that the khimar, the head scarf that pre-dated the hijab, was worn by Arab women before the Quran’s stipulations on modesty of dress and demeanour. Verse 24:31 did not introduce the garment, but modified its use when it said that Muslim women should “wear their Khimar over their bosoms”—previously, breasts were left bare, although bedecked with jewellery and ornaments.

Therefore, to turn the hijab or khimar into a religious and political issue belies its original intent. Muslim women who so vociferously defend its use should consider its history before deciding whether they must wear it. Islamists have turned the hijab into the central pillar of Islam. The odd thing is that one could try as much as one wants to, but it is virtually impossible to see a single Muslim women in hijab also wearing the khimar! If these women are invoking the Quran to cover their heads, why are they not wearing the khimar as explicitly mentioned in the Quran?

Islamists consider Muslim women who do not cover their heads—the majority—as sinners or lesser Muslims. They ban the books of women who stand up to spousal abuse and depict Muslim feminists as women of questionable character. As despicable as this blackmailing is, it pales in comparison to the fact that these men in robes are using young Muslim girls as shields behind which they pursue a political agenda. Can God be fooled?