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Title: “It’s about freedom’: Contesting dominant representations of devout Muslim women in the space of the nation.

By Amelia Johns and Michele Lobo

Introduction: ‘Islamophobia’ is a term that has been used to describe sentiments of mistrust, hatred and fear of Muslims who have been constructed within some official and popular discourses as violent, ‘uncivilised’ and opposed to the liberal-democratic values of western societies (Allen 2010; Esposito and Kalin 2011; Helbling 212; Malik 2010). The effect of these discourses means that Muslims visible in the public space face increased racism, discrimination and hostility. Modood (2010) traces these fears to orientalist discourses emerging in the colonial period which focused on the ‘Arab’ as a racial/ ethnic category of otherness. Since the 1980s, however, these discourses have focused more centrally on the ‘Muslim’. Modood explains this as a new form of racism which doesn’t move away from earlier discourses based on biological or cultural theories of inferiority/superiority, but adds to them a new level of hostility often associated with security threats. Since September 11 these expressions have intensified, leading Muslims to feel excluded from national identity and full citizenship, and subjected to increasing racial and religious vilification in public space (Turner 2003; Dunn et al 2007; Poynting & Mason 2008; Hage 2003).

The veiled Muslim woman symbolises these tensions, with the *hijab* being read as the embodiment of a religion which oppresses women’s individual freedom and agency

(Ghumkor 2012; Al-Saji 2010). The *hijab* has also been portrayed as an expression of disloyalty— a sign of attachment to a global ‘*umma*’ over and above the national community (Bowen 2006). These tensions have been expressed in Western countries, notably through the passing of legislation in France banning Muslim girls wearing the *hijab* to school (Winter 2008; Bowen 2006). The ‘*hijab* row’ has also been a feature of Australian public discourse, in association with moral panics around ‘ethnic gang rapes’ in Sydney in 2001, the Cronulla riots and Sheik Hilaly’s reference to immodestly dressed women as ‘uncovered meat’ (Dreher & Ho 2007). Such discourses position the veiled woman as a central, and yet ironically absent, figure in debates over the limits of religious and cultural tolerance in the nation.

What we mean by this is that, while purporting to defend liberal values of freedom and gender equality—and enshrine these as Australian values— discursive constructions of veiled women close down the space from which muslim women are able to express their agency (Fernandez 2009; Ghumkor 2012; Weir 2013). Paradoxically, this reduces Muslim women “to the realm of silent subjects who are spoken for” (Ghumkor & Morsi 2013). We perceive this as an act of *disembodiment*, with the multi-faceted reasons for female participation in these practices (spiritual, cultural, personal) being reduced to a singular sign of oppression. This disembodiment robs Muslim women of the ability to assert themselves, their bodies and voices, into processes where they are made into subjects.

This is one of many types of disembodiment of the female Muslim subject almost ritually enacted in the Australian public sphere and in everyday public space. This paper draws upon two events which express this phenomenon, whilst highlighting the counter-strategies that devout Muslim women are adopting to reassert their bodies and narratives, in the national frame. The first event is a recent lecture held by ‘Hikma Way’ at Melbourne University, where, following religious custom, the seating arrangement for audience was segmented along gender lines (Ghumkor & Morsi 2013; Hussein 2013). This prompted familiar responses by politicians, journalists and academics, including feminist Sheila Jeffreys who referred to the practice as ‘gender apartheid’, and Opposition leader Tony Abbot, who termed it ‘un-Australian’ (*The Australian*, April 26, 2013). The contribution of the Muslim woman to this debate was notably absent (Ghumkor & Morsi 2013).

The second event— the Cronulla riot— identifies a more tangible, affective experience of disembodiment enacted in everyday public space, where traumatic acts of racism and intolerance literally distort Muslim womens’ sense of embodied agency and selfhood, diminishing their perceived right to exist in and inhabit the social space of the nation. In exploring these relations we will draw upon empirical interviews conducted with 3 Muslim women (2 x age 18-30, 1 x age 40) in Sydney in 2007¹.

However, beyond these acts, which are frequently experienced by Muslim women as an effacement of their selfhood and belonging to the nation, two interviewees discussed how wearing the veil challenged these habitual practices, enabling them to re-inhabit their

own bodies and public space. In particular they identified the hijab as a corporeal expression of their agency, opening up a space where forms of spirituality and subjectivity that differ from white, secular norms, can be asserted in the national frame. This act was also perceived by the women as an embodied performance of the democratic and multicultural values of the nation.

The gender segregation controversy

Before turning to these issues I will begin by looking at the way that Islamophobia has entered into Australian public discourse, operationalizing an 'Australian' identity that is positively mirrored in the image of a 'repressed' female, Muslim 'other' (Al-Saji 2010, 875). As Al Saji (2010) notes, since 9-11 negative images of the 'oppressed' Muslim woman have been the ground on which western nations have constituted themselves as the very terrain of freedom and equality. Paradoxically, however, by consigning the Muslim woman to a role 'scripted in advance' where she is a victim, voiceless and powerless, these discourses perform a racist and exclusionary function which "permits the norm of western womanhood to be constituted as 'free' of such oppression, as the only imaginable mode of female subjectivity" (Al-Saji 2010: 877).

These operations are evident in the recent media furore at Melbourne University. Two responses, in particular, highlight the way that practices of veiling and gender separation have been appropriated into a nationalist discourse which identifies them as a source of

contamination to the liberal norms of the Australian nation, and its recognizable modes of female subjectivity. The first is from Sheila Jeffries, who likened it to a:

Rosa Parkes moment... Making women sit at the back in lecture theatres is sexual apartheid. This is a new practice in Australia, whereas apartheid against black Americans was an old practice (*The Australian*, April 26, 2013).

The other is from the Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, who referred to the practice as a:

Leap back into the dark ages... I just think that it's un-Australian (*The Australian*, April 26, 2013)

In both responses Australia is constructed as a beacon of liberal values of gender equality and freedom, constituted in opposition to Islam, which is condemned as a misogynist religion still in the 'dark ages'. Sheila Jeffries goes further, comparing Muslim gender separation to histories of racial segregation in public spaces and institutions. And yet, by conflating these examples Jeffries performs a remarkable inverse racism herself, naturalizing gendered separation as a form of a priori oppression without listening to the voices of women participating in such events, for whom the meanings of these practices resist the framework Jeffries tries to fit them into.

As Sahar Ghumkor and Yasser Morsi (2013) comment, Jeffries ignores the reality that it is usually Muslim women who ask for seating arrangements in public events to be organized along gender lines for religious reasons. Here the key argument is that agency, empowerment and subjectivity are not diminished by the spatial dimensions of seating arrangements as long as these practices display two key features (Mansouri 2013). The first is that the practice is not imposed on Muslim women but rather is adopted by them reflexively and intentionally. The second even more important feature is that such a practice may engender even more bodily emancipation as it allows an escape route from both the 'white' and 'male' gaze. The interjection of authentic Muslim voices is significant, as it highlights another form of segregation that does not raise as much ire in the mainstream media, and yet which is acutely felt by Muslim women as an attack on their freedom and subjectivity; it is the segregation of Muslim women from national media narratives that shape the way they are represented in public.

This reveals the racism that still underpins mainstream debates about the uneasy visibility of Muslim women especially those wearing the hijab. In fact, some so-called liberal commentators assume "a position of knowing what constitutes the free woman" (Ghumkor & Morsi 2013), ignoring Muslim perspectives and scholarship such as the work of feminists like Mahmood (2005), Alcoff (2006) and Weir (2013) who describe how concepts of female agency and 'freedom' are negotiated in relation to different cultural contexts and meanings. Thinking in this way opens up a space from where alternative understandings of gender rights and freedom can be discussed. One such view

was posted in the comments section of an article by another western feminist, Eva Cox, in response to the event (*Crikey*, Friday, April 26, 2013). The comment read:

From my experience teaching in the Middle East women preferred to sit at the back of the classroom so the men could not stare at them. The women were more comfortable sitting separately from the males and would complain if a male contravened this seating convention.

Rambling Rose [Apr 28, 2013 at 2:07 pm](#)

This opens up the possibility from which gender segregation may be read, not as an expression of patriarchal oppression, but freedom from it; a demonstration of the agency of the female, Muslim subject to act within and on political, social and cultural spaces of power, to evade the male gaze (see Ghumkor 2012).

Debates regarding the *hijab* track a similar course to ‘segregation’ debates, with the veil being explained as a form of oppression which limits female autonomy and agency.

These representations were strongly contested by the young women I interviewed in Sydney, however, for whom the choice to wear the veil was imbued with a multiplicity of meanings, emotions and feelings which contested dominant narratives; with the veil being understood as a symbol of freedom, faith identity and belonging in the face of persistent and traumatic experiences of racism and intolerance.

As Al-Saji explains, Muslim women's public experience of racism reflects both a 'colonial' and 'patriarchal' configuration of public space which is unsettled by the sight of the veil. Referring to the work of Fanon (1986), she describes how the colonial, male gaze registers the veil as a disturbance to habitual ways of seeing gendered bodies in public space, precisely because it closes the female body off from the desiring male gaze. The veiled woman thus enters into a field of power which regards women's bodies as either open and sexually available, or as undesirable (Johns 2008). This has material effects, limiting Muslim woman's feeling of freedom and belonging, and making her aware of herself as a body "out of place" (Ahmed 2007).

Sensuous racism on the beach in Cronulla: the white, colonial gaze and the veil

The structuring power of the 'white, colonial gaze' is one that has also been discussed in Australia in relation to nationalist and spatial practices of power that legitimise racist actions toward women wearing the veil or *hijab* (Hage 1998: 26, 45). In particular, since September 11, the beach has become a space where women's bodies have become a key battleground in shaping ideas of national belonging and exclusion. Certainly, concern over the female body became elevated to a 'state of emergency' during the Cronulla riot (Dreher & Ho 2007) with the veiled woman being registered not only as 'other', but as a sign of threat to the white nation.

In describing how whiteness functions in spaces like the beach, Ahmed describes it as a force which "orientates bodies ...affecting how they take up space and what they can do"

(Ahmed 2007: 149). Thus white bodies inhabit the space in a way that feels natural, comfortable; while for non-white bodies entry to the space is registered as a disturbance to the dominant field of vision, often eliciting hostile or confused stares. Fanon (1986) describes the feelings arising from his own spatial encounters with this gaze as one of discomfort and ‘negation’, of “losing his body” (Fanon 1986, 112, Ahmed 2007, 161).

The same feeling was described by Elissar, (Sydney interview respondent) whose experience of going to the beach after the Cronulla riots was one of bodily discomfort:

I went to the Coojee beach a week or two after the Cronulla riots, but when I got there- I got those stares. I'm a really carefree person but I started to walk so that my body was scrunched [...] I started to not have eye contact with people [...] I was actually with an Anglo Saxon friend of mine—and it was particularly men that were staring at us.

The last point is significant, as Elissar identifies the stares which question her right to exist in the space as male, demonstrating the way whiteness and patriarchy overlap in the national-spatial field, positioning the veiled Muslim woman outside the national imaginary and its acceptable norms of female embodiment.

And yet, for Ayesha² and Maryam, the visibility of the veil on the beach provided an opportunity to assert themselves corporeally in the space in a way which challenged habitual ways of seeing and ‘knowing’ the Muslim woman. In particular the *burqini*[®] (a

hybrid garment between a burqua and a bikini) was worn by both women to Cronulla beach to unsettle and subvert the white gaze, and show that muslim forms of female piety (i.e. adhering to standards of modesty) do not act as a barrier to participation in Australian cultural norms and lifestyle.

For Maryam, wearing the burqini and participating in a surf lifesaving program³ demonstrated that veiled, Muslim girls were “Australian like everyone else”. She described her involvement in the program as an achievement which “reflected on society... it’s about freedom”. Maryam’s response indicates that the burqini allowed her to feel a sense of embodied agency and freedom to move outside of the limiting representational frames of western, liberal discourse.

Moreover, rather than being a personal experience, Maryam describes the burqini as having benefits which extend to all women: “you know, females who are self-conscious of their bodies ... it’s also for them”. Thus, even though wearing the garment is grounded in Muslim cultural and religious praxis, Maryam envisions it in relation to a national field of intercultural relations, where the burqini offers alternative options for women of all cultures to participate in the Australian lifestyle. This recodes the veil/burqini as a garment which has an ‘emancipatory function’ (Ghumkor 2012) that transcends culture and ethnicity.

Further, by asserting the burqini as a hybrid sign of identity (signifying a devout Muslim identity *and* a ‘modern’ Australian lifestyle) these actions challenge the notion that the

veil is a symbol of a 'backward', conservative religion opposed to 'progressive' liberal mores. Rather, veiling practices are shown to be dynamic, creative, progressive and adaptive to the challenges of living in a multi-faith, multicultural nation. This stands in stark difference to the conservative and rigid vision of Australian gendered subjectivity enacted and constructed in Cronulla.

Ayesha's decision to wear a 'Green and Gold' burqini to Cronulla beach provides another embodied performance of hybrid Muslim-Australian identity. In the climate of racism following the riots, she decided to wear the burqini to assert herself in that public space and demonstrate that her faith does not exclude her from being 'Aussie'. Ayesha stressed that this ambivalence, whilst not unusual to Muslim Australians and other minorities within the nation, often disturbed the essentialising vision of the white Australian gaze:

My take on [...] the white, Anglo-Australian attitude [...] is that a lot of people just can't take ambiguity. Like, if things are complex and they're too - like, if it's easy to identify, that's what they like, you know?

Her own performance of a Muslim-Australian identity is identified as an act which unsettles the rigid view that the white majority culture has of Muslims, a view which is ideologically framed and 'affectively attuned' to spaces like the beach.

In these examples and earlier discussions, the veil is worn as a part of a creative struggle for self-definition against the efforts of a dominant culture to 'know' and to define what

Muslim-ness is. In particular, by wearing the burqini, Ayesha and Maryam demonstrate the 'everydayness' of their faith, which is always practiced and embodied alongside a range of other subject positions, obligations and commitments (spiritual, cultural, modern, national, gendered) demonstrating an openness to otherness, that is the essence of Australian, multicultural citizenship (Zevallos 2007).

Conclusion– the body, everyday spirituality and freedom

This location of the hijab/burqini in a performance of hybrid Muslim-Australian identity is theoretically supported by a range of feminist and postcolonial readings which highlight the heterogeneous meanings of the veil in modernity (Mahmood 2005; Ahmed 2011; Abu-Lughod 2002; Ghumkor 2012; and Gole 2003). Ghumkor (2012) and Gole (2003), for example, describe the presence of the veil in secular, national contexts as an 'ambivalent sign' which expresses 'a modern and a traditional lifestyle' (Ghumkor 2012: 508). This refers to the subversive potential of the veil, which "disrupts the modern imagination", and its coercive ideas of liberty and freedom.

Mahmood (2005) and Weir (2013) regard these ambivalences as opening up new understandings of female 'freedom' and 'agency' which are able to break out of the binary models of subordination/subversion prescribed by western feminists (Mahmood 2005). Instead, Weir describes Muslim womens' piety as an embodied performance which redefines 'freedom' as a practice of 'inhabiting' connections': to god, to the body,

to community, to the environment, to nation, and which identifies these connections as relational and mutually supportive rather than an either/or prospect.

Further, Ghumkor claims that by asserting signs of spirituality into everyday life, practices of veiling and segregation disrupt the hegemonic, secular language of nationalism, allowing Muslim women to inhabit a space that does not negate faith as a lived part of social experience and identity (Ghumkor 2012: 506) but rather which integrates these identifications and social norms with other lifestyles and practices of identity: local, national, gendered.

These embodied expressions of 'everyday spirituality' are seen in the actions of Maryam and Ayesha, for whom wearing the burqini does not exclude the performance of other obligations and commitments, but rather integrates spiritual aspects of Muslim-ness (relating to female modesty) with participation in the Australian beach lifestyle. As described by Ayesha, negotiating these different ways of inhabiting the social space of the nation and participating fully in civic life is: "a necessity in life. It's not something that you need to think about, it's something that you have to do".

This paper has discussed the complex negotiations of faith, gender and national identity in the context of Muslim women's acts of piety and citizenship. The paper argued that practicing Muslim women engage with such embodied acts in their everyday life, highlighting the processes by which they are racialised and 'disembodied' from the national public sphere and everyday public space. The authentic voices of the Muslim

women reported in this paper and their strategies for contesting national dominant representations, create the possibility for reclaiming their bodies and asserting themselves and their faith into the everyday life of the nation.

¹ These interview responses have been selected from a larger sample of interviews conducted with Lebanese-Australian residents of Bankstown, Lakemba and Auburn (Sydney), and Anglo-Australian residents of Cronulla, one year after the Cronulla riots took place. The interviews were conducted by Amelia Johns, for her PhD thesis *Risk Nations: shrinking space, lost security and the rise of violent youth sovereignties in Australia's suburbs* (accepted in October, 2012). Ethics approval was granted by the Humanities and Applied Sciences Human Ethics Committee of University of Melbourne on 13/11/06. In accordance with ethics requirements individual interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms, except where subjects have requested their real names to be used. All interviewees have provided signed consent for their responses to be used for purposes of research dissemination.

² Ayesha is the designer of the Burqini, and a distributor of the garment to domestic and international markets.

³ Maryam took part in a Commonwealth government funded initiative involving Surf Lifesaving Australia 'On the Same Wave'. In a bid to address the tensions evident in the Cronulla riots, the program identified young Muslim people, male and female, and recruited them into the program to train them as surf lifesavers. The aim was for the young people involved to earn their bronze medallion and become involved in patrols on Cronulla beach. The burqini allowed Maryam, the only female participant, to be involved in the program whilst still adhering to her faith.

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