

Honor, shame and the politics of sexual embodiment among South Asian Muslims in Britain and beyond: An analysis of debates in the public sphere¹

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Europe seems to be tangibly signalled by an increase in women and young girls wearing the Muslim veil, the hijab. In France, this has led to the legal banning of all headscarves and other religious symbols in state schools, in the name of French secularism. Yet, although inspired perhaps by the same sort of global Islamic rhetoric that moves the extremists, veiled Muslim women in the UK are often responding to local pressures that have arisen as they begin to develop a generational consciousness that sets them apart from their parents. In Britain, the issue of veiling at school has been settled pragmatically, within the framework of a multi-faith, multicultural society. The politics of embodiment surrounding the Muslim community in Britain are, however, equally acute. "Honor" killings and "forced" intercontinental marriages capture media headlines, and these have led to a public debate in the press and media, and in the speeches of politicians, regarding the right of an older generation of South Asians to control the sexuality and reproductive powers of young people, particularly younger women's bodies, in the name of "honor and shame". The paper considers these issues comparatively, within the broader context of ongoing debates on multiculturalism.

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The politics of embodiment

The rise of radical Islamic movements in the Muslim world and their global reach has raised questions regarding the loyalty of Muslim citizens to the European states in which they have settled (see Werbner, 2004a). The rise seemed to be tangibly signalled by an increase in Muslim societies at universities and, above all, by women and young girls wearing the Muslim headscarf, the *hijab*.

Although inspired, perhaps, by the same sort of global Islamic rhetoric that moves the extremists, the *hijab* wearers are the children of postcolonial migrants, the majority of whom had no links to Islamist or even Muslim reformist movements. Nevertheless, some of the problems associated with the integration of these earlier generation of migrants into Britain have become more prominent in media and public discourse as their children reach marriageable age in very large numbers. In Britain, unlike France, these problems are usually cast as the product of “backward” Muslim or Asian “traditions”, rather than the recent rise in Islamic radicalism. Nevertheless they feed on a perception of Muslims in particular as a problematic minority refusing to integrate.

To consider some of these issues, arising out of the politics of embodiment within Muslim diasporic communities in Europe, they need to be seen as part of a more complex cultural dynamics generated by international migration. My interest in this topic has been triggered by the French headscarf affair, and more particularly, by the French over-reaction (seen from a British point of view) to the growing number of girls wishing to wear the *hijab* to school. In Britain the wearing of Muslim head coverings to school has been treated pragmatically and integrated in most cases into the school uniform, a point to which I return below. While the growing number of girls wearing *hijabs* still represents a significant movement in Britain, perhaps even a social movement, it is not, on the whole, imbricated in legal issues as in France, nor is it seen as a threat to national identity, as in the French case.²

Despite this, the politics of embodiment concerning the Muslim community in Britain have also been the subject of public debate in the media and speeches by politicians. Like the veil itself, these politics are embedded in customary notions of honor and shame, which surround the right to control the sexuality and reproductive powers of young people, particularly younger women’s bodies, specifically by men and more generally by an older generation of migrants. The wearing of a head covering signals respect within this honor and shame symbolic complex. It is a sign of sexual modesty and cannot be understood apart from it. Broadly speaking, notions of honor and shame are located at the point where familial politics and the politics of religion, tribe and

2 For insightful analyses of the 1989 and recent French scarf affairs, the responses and events leading to them, see Moruzzi (1994) and Bowen (2004).

nation meet. Their significance is thus inevitably ambiguous, dynamic and shifting. Indeed, although notions of honor and shame are widely prevalent across feudal and tribal societies in the Mediterranean and Asia, the social context in which the honor and shame symbolic complex is played out can create radical shifts in meaning.³ This is particularly evident in the case of the Islamic scarf, but also more broadly, in the way in which notions of honor and shame are tolerated and respected in different social contexts.

Honor and shame in Pakistan

Honor and shame, defined as the need to guard female sexuality, appears in extreme forms in some Muslim societies, in which women are expected to veil before a wide range of men defined as strangers. In the Punjab, however, and among overseas Muslim Punjabis, veiling⁴ until recently was not particularly extreme. Most Pakistani women, and indeed Asian women more generally, wore a light chiffon scarf, a *dupatta*, loosely draped around their necks, as part of an integrated and often fashionable set of clothes. Women covered their heads in front of some older male relatives, strangers or when praying, using the *dupatta* in a subtle play on degrees of veiling to signal differing degrees of intimacy, distance and respect (Khan, 1976). Alternatively, Pakistani women may wear a *chador*, a very large shawl which is draped around the head and upper part of the body. Both types of head covering are “ethnic” and assert an ethnic identity.

While veiling in the Punjab is not particularly strict, women who commit adultery or pre-marital sex could be – and still can be in Pakistan – killed by a relatively wide range of close male kin with impunity. *Ghairat*, meaning honor, jealousy, courage, modesty and shame, is a complex concept which applies to both men and women, and stands opposed to *be-ghairat*, shamelessness, without a sense of honor. Writing about Northern Pakistan, Aase (2002:93) spells out the relationship between *ghairat* and *izzat*, reputation, respect or merit. Defending familial honor in feuding relations and protecting the chastity of its women endows a person as he grows older with *izzat*:

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- 3 It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the debate on honor and shame in the Mediterranean, but there, too, the stress has been on nuance, positioning and interpretation (see Coombe, 1990; Herzfeld, 1980). Elsewhere, as in Turkey, for example, the recent debate on honor and shame has been approached from a feminist perspective, which stresses patriarchal domination and violence within the family, and the inability or unwillingness of the wider society to intervene in the “private” domain (see Sev’er and Yurdakul, 2001).
 - 4 I use “veiling” here and throughout generically, to include all forms of head covering, including the *hijab*, which has particular connotations as a “modern” form of veiling, using a thick cloth to cover the hair entirely while leaving the face exposed.

political influence, power and authority.⁵ The code of honor applies throughout the Punjab and includes Sikhs and Hindus as well.

This stress on female sexuality disguises, however, the fact that domestic violence against women has many different and complex causes, not all of them related to adultery, a fact highlighted by the British press. Over time, there has been increased publicity given to incidents of domestic violence, bride murders and forced marriages.

In Pakistan, honor and shame (*ghairat*) is regarded as a tribal or “village thing”. In the imagination of the urban middle classes, villages are dangerous places in which murders and vendettas are common. In Britain, it appears that many – but by no means all – incidents of violence and murder against women occur within close-knit neighborhood, village and kinship networks. Where Pakistanis live in concentrated residential clusters, control is exerted through gossip and scandal that affect family reputation (*izzat*; see Shaw, 2000). Codes of modesty and sexuality differ radically for men and women (see Lien, 2002). Studies of young Pakistani women (e.g., Alexander, 2000; Jacobson, 1998) indicate that those who attend college are subject to control regarding clothing and conduct not only by brothers, but by young Asian men more generally.

It is evident that even in Britain honor killings in the different Asian communities – Sikh, Muslim and Hindu – do occur, although their incidence is relatively infrequent. Nevertheless, they receive wide press coverage, including by South Asian newspapers (such as *Eastern Eye*). A notorious case which forced the issue into the public domain occurred in 1999, when a 19-year-old woman from Derby was murdered by her mother and brother for “shaming her family” by demanding a divorce and returning to the man by whom she was pregnant. The mother and brother were convicted of murder (Siddiqui, 2003:68). One case widely reported in the press, which occurred in Manchester, involved a 69-year-old father of ten, a devout Muslim, who came home to find his daughter, a 24-year-old college student, with her Pakistani boyfriend, a university student. The boy jumped from the window and the father stabbed his daughter at least 20 times with a kitchen knife. In justification he told the police “this is our religion”.

The limits of the “sexual” honor and shame model

The anthropological honor and shame model, to the extent that it focuses exclusively on female sexual transgression, is arguably limited in several important senses. Above all, violence against women in Punjabi society takes many different forms and is the

5 On “crimes of honor” in Muslims societies, see the report by CIMEL, 2001. In 2004, the government of Pakistan finalized the draft of a bill against honor killing, equating it with murder punishable by the death penalty or maximum 25-year imprisonment, but no less than 14 years. The bill also bars the handing over of women relatives in marriage to offenders as part of a feud settlement (WLULM, 2004).

outcome of a wide range of complex conflicts inside the family and between different family members, affines and kinsmen. Second, "honor" (*izzat*) is a very broad concept: it refers to caste and class status, to public reputation, and to symbolic capital accumulated through generosity towards guests and inferiors. Since it covers a wide range of issues of which the politics of sexuality and reproduction or alliance is only one, its use for analytic purposes is misleading.

In the migration context in Britain, reputation and honor (*izzat*) among Punjabi immigrants from all the different faith communities, like violence against women, is deeply embedded in the politics of marriage and the (extended) family (*rishtedar*, *biradari*), but also in the politics of community. This is not simply a question of patriarchal domination but of inter-generational power relations. Moreover, as in the Punjab, in Britain too violence against women takes many different forms and is related to complex intra-familial relations, often involving the extended family, parents-in-law, sisters-in-law and other affines. Yet it seems evident that reputation and loss of face, as well as fear of violence from family members who feel their "honor" has been attacked, are important factors for the parental migrant generation when they consider the marriage options open to their sons and daughters. At present the younger generation, whose parents arrived in Britain in the late 1970s, is reaching marriageable age in large numbers, and hence the argument about the pros and cons of arranged marriage both within and beyond the community has intensified considerably.

As the number of violent incidents surrounding the politics of arranged marriages has multiplied, these have become the topic of debate in the press and pronouncements by politicians. The pictures of young girls murdered or kidnapped, and stories of their rescue by boyfriends or the Foreign Office's special unit in Pakistan, regularly make the headlines in Britain, underlining the problematics of immigrants who refuse to integrate, and their backward, repressive and violent attitude to women. In many cases, there is considerable ambiguity about the causes of violence against women. In one murder case of a bride on her wedding day, which occurred in Birmingham, it was unclear whether this was an honor killing or not, and in what sense. The girl was marrying the man of her choice with her father's consent. It appears that a cousin who may have wanted to marry her himself enlisted an older relative to murder her on the day of her wedding.

"Honor" and "shame" (*ghairat*, *izzat*, *sharm*) can be rhetorical devices for eliciting obedience from recalcitrant or rebellious children who refuse to marry according to parental choices. Increasingly in Britain arranged marriage is being scrutinized, criticized and modified by a range of officials, parliamentarians and by young people themselves. Although officially children still accede to their parents' marriage arrangements, in practice, as the number of unsuccessful marriages leading to divorce multiplies, the perception is growing that arranged marriages in Britain based on parental choices no longer "work". As children become less willing to accept their parents' judgement, conflicts within the family have multiplied and have led, in extreme cases, to publicity

in the local and national press. Young people seek alternative ways of finding a match, even using the internet. Recent research in Scotland, the Incompatible Marriage Project (IMP), found that “Forced and Incompatible Marriages is a serious and growing issue which needs to be tackled head on. It is estimated that 50% of the newly married in Scotland, where one party is from abroad, fall into this category” (CBP[S], 2004:11). Among these, the report concludes, the plight of male victims is mostly ignored.

Forced and incompatible marriages occur across a wide range of communities, not only among Muslims. They lead to high levels of physical and mental abuse (CBP[S], 2004:9) and often to self-harm or even suicide (Siddiqui, 2003:68). Generally speaking, arranged marriages are seen as acceptable, although archaic and somewhat bizarre, by the British public, but there is broad consensus that young people should not be forced into marriage against their will. As British citizens, they have the right to choose whom and when they want to marry. Yet the line between arranged and forced marriages is a fine one, as young people do not wish to cause their parents distress (Siddiqui, 2003:70).

Hence, the public debate in Britain has focused on “forced marriages”. In some of these, girls are taken to the Punjab, apparently on holiday, and then forced to marry relatives. They are essentially abducted and kept locked up in some remote village. In many cases, psychological pressure is exerted on young men as well as women to agree to marriages. A recent report for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Samad and Eade, 2002) found that parents see marriage as a solution to the “problem” of sons and daughters whom they feel are out of control: some may have boyfriends or girlfriends, some may be taking drugs or involved in petty crime. Yet marriage may simply multiply such problems. Similarly, the IMP report suggests that “[s]uch marriages are often the result of a family reaction to what may be seen as inappropriate behavior on the part of the child or an attempt to preserve their cultural identity in the face of perceived alien culture”, and goes on to warn that “[t]he serious error of assuming that what worked for the parents will also work for their children, especially in the Scottish context, can in many cases lead to incompatible relationships” (CBP[S], 2004:5).

The transnational connection

After lengthy procrastination,⁶ the Foreign and Commonwealth office has set up a special Community Liaison Unit in Pakistan to detect and rescue kidnapped brides. According to *The Guardian*, the Unit helped repatriate 75 young British people sent abroad for marriage between 2000 and 2002 and dealt with 440 cases over that same

⁶ According to Siddiqui (2003:72), this was due in part to the ambiguity arising from dual (Pakistani and British) citizenship, even for young people born in Britain, and partly to what Southall Black Sisters regard as misguided multicultural policy of non-interference.

period. In 2003 the Unit dealt with 250 cases, including 50 emergency repatriations (CBP[S], 2004:14). In 2002, a 22-year-old Pakistani woman, Narina Anwar, was awarded a CBE for campaigning against forced marriages, having been subjected to one herself and subsequently ostracized by her family when she escaped. In Pakistan a court annulled the marriage of a young English Pakistani woman forced into marriage in a landmark case in which she gave evidence to the high court in Islamabad. There are said to be between 1000 and 2000 forced marriages a year occurring in the UK.

Marriage in Britain

Despite the tensions surrounding arranged marriages, most researchers have found continued high rates of intercontinental and intra-caste marriages (over 50%) between British Pakistani spouses and brides or grooms in Pakistan (Charsley, 2003; Shaw, 2001). Pressure is apparently exerted by close relatives in Pakistan who use marriage as a route for their children to migrate legally to Britain. Recent research has shown, however, that inmarrying spouses often suffer isolation, and have poor employment prospects (Charsley, 2003). Most Pakistani children are compliant and agree, however reluctantly, to cousin and intercontinental marriages (Jacobson, 1998). Home Office statistics show an influx of 15,000 prospective marriage partners (male and female) from the Indian sub-continent arriving in Britain in 2001 alone, the vast majority arranged by parents for their British-born children. Charsley (2003) reports that, in 2000, there were 10,000 inmarrying spouses, both men and women, from Pakistan. Islam permits marriage with a wide range of close kin and affines, and it seems that the majority of Pakistani marriages continue to take place within the *biradari*, a local agnatic lineage and, more widely, an ego-focused kindred of traceable affines and consanguineous kin. The notion of *biradari* mediates between kinship, locality and *zat* (caste), and *biradaris* are ranked and reflect class and caste status.

Under the circumstances, in which there are real inter-generational differences or cultural disparities between spouses, physical and psychological violence against women is widely reported. In Britain there are South Asian women's refuges which have been set up in different parts of the country. Young girls and battered wives go into hiding. Women's campaign groups advocate for the rights of Asian women suffering from violence in the home. Among these, Southall Black Sisters is the oldest and best known organization.⁷ The media and press report on "bounty hunters" sent to recover escaped daughters or wives.

7 For a detailed account of the Southall Black Sisters' campaign against forced marriages and other honor crimes, see Siddiqui (2003), who presents accounts of some tragic cases.

A critique of this type of reporting, and of pronouncements against intercontinental and forced marriages by politicians such as David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, and Ann Cryer, MP for Bradford South, has come not only from community leaders denying the extent of the problem (Siddiqui, 2003), but from some South Asian women scholars. Hence, in a recent book, Farzana Shain speaks of the emergence of a racialized discourse of “cultural pathology”, which implies that “something is inherently inferior in the familial and cultural background of [minorities]” (2000:2; see also Brah, 1996). Yet according to Siddiqui, a meeting organized by Southall Black Sisters between the Home Office Working Group and survivors of forced marriage was “highly emotional... The women made clear that community leaders did not speak for them” (2003:78). Ultimately, Siddiqui resigned from the Home Office Working Group over the issue of mediation, which the organization rejected (ibid:81). Clearly, however, the public and media debate in Britain surrounding forced marriages and “honor” killings is fraught with the danger of further stigmatizing a vulnerable minority in crisis. As Siddiqui says, “There is a clear and present danger of issues like forced marriage being hijacked by racists, which is why we insist on mainstreaming it in the debate on domestic violence. We find ourselves standing once again on the slippery intersection between race and gender” (ibid:91).

Domestic violence is by no means an exclusively South Asian phenomenon. Shelters for battered wives were initially set up in Britain to deal with English domestic violence. Sexual harassment, rape and child molestation or neglect are found among all ethnic groups.⁸ Nevertheless, problems surrounding so-called honor killings, forced marriages, under age “community” marriages and the like, along with riots in Northern British cities in the summer of 2001, have led to repeated calls by British politicians for Asians or Muslims to “integrate” into the community. Following David Blunkett, Peter Haines, the Europe Minister, accused the Muslim community of being “isolationist” and posing a major threat to harmony in Britain (Abul Taher, *Eastern Eye*, May 17, 2002:2-3).

Invocations of this type by British politicians have been a familiar response since the Rushdie affair, but so far there has never been any attempt to legislate in order to force so-called integration. On the contrary, politicians have repeatedly used their ministerial or prime ministerial position to stress the peaceful and tolerant nature of the “true” Islam and the contribution minorities have made to multicultural Britain. With the exception of anti-terrorist laws pertaining to foreign nationals, persuasive rhetoric rather than the law have been the chosen British way of dealing with minorities perceived to be problematic, whether religious or ethnic. The French use of the law as a symbolic tool has never been favored in Britain, and the French legal banning of religious symbols in schools, clearly targeting the Muslim scarf, has occasioned

8 Indeed, much of the public discourse in Britain surrounds pedophiles, and so far this appears to be a peculiarly English malaise.

astonishment, ridicule and derision in Britain. This points to the very different context in which religious minorities have been integrated as citizens into British society.

It is evident from the Scottish CBP(S) report that despite the apparent success of some arranged marriages, the extreme violence against women reported in the media appears to be only the tip of the iceberg. Even middle-class urban families who arrange marriages in Britain for their daughters with non-related, apparently middle-class families, may encounter severe and unanticipated problems with sons-in-law. In one such case reported to me in detail, a young wife was forced to escape from her husband's car at a traffic light and seek shelter for herself and her baby in a London pub (sic!), while the pub owner called the police and her parents in Manchester. This case is not unique. It is as though the expectations from marriage of the younger generation growing up in Britain are no longer predictable or mutually compatible as they were in Pakistan, and conflict between spouses arises on a wide range of issues.

Increasingly, children are beginning to find their own marriage partners first, before marriages are arranged by parents post-hoc. These are called "love" marriages. A recent report on Bangladeshi women in the East End (Phillipson et al., 2003) quotes many of the older generation of women as saying they would not like to force their children into an unwanted marriage in case the marriage breaks down. But there is little evidence that parents have stopped actively intervening in their children's marriage choices.

One strategy used by young Muslims in Britain to contend with these conflicts is to adopt voluntarily what seems on the surface to be an extremist Islamic ideology of veiling and *purdah* for women, beards and prayer for men. Being observant Muslims empowers these young men and women with the right to choose their own marriage partners, even against the will of their parents. They accuse their parents of being ignorant, locked into false or mistaken parochial "customs" and "traditions" of the old country, which, according to the girls, distort "true" Islam (Lyon, 1995). As Dwyer was told "They [the parents] mix up religion and culture" (1999:17). The girls argue that Islam accords equality to men and women, that it requires young people's consent to a marriage and allows them to choose their own partner, and even to associate with their fiancés before marriage. Islam also opens up a much wider marriage market for young people. At the same time, upper middle-class Pakistanis often refuse marriages for their sons with veiled girls, which indicates that wearing the *hijab* is still frequently associated for elite Punjabis with lower middle-class status.⁹

9 Not all young Pakistani school girls choose to veil. Shain's (2000) study of Muslims girls in schools in Greater Manchester found a wide range of styles adopted by school girls, some Western and others Islamic, associated with different perceptions of their "culture". Generally speaking, even religiously conservative working-class Muslim parents encourage their daughters to succeed in school and go on to higher education (Basit, 1997).

Religious “fundamentalism” and the politics of embodiment

The *dupatta* is embedded in and embodies the female code of honor in subtle and nuanced ways. But is the same true of the *hijab*? Feminists such as Nira Yuval-Davis have argued that all fundamentalist religious movements, whether Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Muslim, use the control of women’s bodies symbolically, to assert a wider agenda of authoritarian political and cultural social control. For fundamentalists, Yuval-Davis proposes, freedom for women spells “social disaster” (1992:285). Writing specifically in relation to Islam, Deniz Kandiyoti has argued that women are seen to be guardians of Islam and of the nation’s boundaries. Hence “the compelling association between women’s appropriate place and conduct, however defined, and notions of cultural authenticity is a persistent theme” (1991:7). Nationalism in Muslim societies is closely associated with movements against Western colonialism and imperialism which attempted to secularize and liberate women (see Ahmed, 1992:130; Pourzand, 1999). Yet, according to Kandiyoti (1991:8), such discourses of authenticity are really smokescreens which serve to disguise intractable class, religious and ethnic divisions in Muslim societies, with Islam a popular vehicle for the expression of alienation from a Muslim “Westernized” elite. Deploying ingenious hermeneutical logic to interpret the Koranic verse on veiling, Fatima Mernissi proposes that just as the *hijab* was first ordained by the Prophet in a year of crisis, so too it has become “...a solution for a pressing crisis. Protecting women from change by veiling them and shutting them out of the world has echoes of closing the community to protect it from the West” (1991:99).

Under these circumstances dress comes to be a symbolically laden vehicle. Writing about dress among South Asians in Britain, Claire Dwyer (1999:5) argues that it is “a powerful and overdetermined marker of difference”, an essentialized symbol of a “traditional” identity associated with being South Asian or Muslim. Such essentialist definitions are imposed by teachers and pupils, whether or not young school girls themselves want to embrace them. By contrast, European clothes are regarded as modern, secular and hence progressive. Significantly, according to Dwyer (1999:5), in the UK the wearing of headscarves is understood as an expression not of religion but of “ethnic identity”, and as such it is protected by law for women of South Asian origin. Despite its association with tradition, however, like in the rest of the Muslim world, the *hijab* in Britain expresses a “new” identity, part of a global movement. That identity is not necessarily, however, “fundamentalist”, “Islamist” or radical, since its meaning and the politics of embodiment it represents may differ widely in different contexts and even individually.

The English scarf affair

The “new” identity expressed by the *hijab* was made clear in the case of the English “scarf affair” which occurred in 1989, at the height of the Rushdie affair. Since it was instigated in Manchester, by a family I know well, I bring it here as a detailed case study. The English scarf affair began when two teenage Muslim girls (the Alwi sisters) decided to wear headscarves to school, contravening the school uniform regulations. The two girls, of Pakistani Punjabi origin, were born and grew up in Britain. At the time of the confrontation they were 14 and 15 years old. Both were pupils at Altrincham Grammar School for girls. One day, they told me, they decided to go to school covering their heads with scarves. They were suspended by the Headmistress of the school while the school Board of Governors was convened for the second time, having first rejected the girls’ request to wear scarves.

The decision to suspend the girls hit the headlines. Their home became the epicenter of a whirlwind of press and media activity. Their pictures adorned the front page of *The Times* and many other national newspapers. There were learned opinion columns about the conflict in *The Observer* and *The Guardian*, there were articles in magazines in the Arab world, while news of the dispute reached as far afield as Australia and California. The family was interviewed in their home on *BBC Newsnight*, and appeared on various other TV programs. Princess Diana, visiting an Islamic Center in London, wore a scarf – tastefully chosen, of course, to fit the general color scheme of her outfit – as an act of solidarity with the girls.

The meeting of the school Board of Governors was convened at Altrincham Town Hall, with crowds of journalists and TV reporters gathered to await the final verdict – a victory for the girls, celebrated nationally. After the victory, the family was subjected to a barrage of racist hate mail and telephone calls. The mother was away in Pakistan during the whole event but, the father told me, he was truly afraid that the girls might be attacked physically. He made sure they were escorted to school and back. The threats were reported to the police. Eventually, the matter died down.

In the Muslim community reactions were mixed. Political opponents of the father claimed he had done it all for the sake of publicity. Some parents felt it put undue moral pressure on their own daughters to wear scarves at school, a custom which they regarded as both irrelevant to religious faith and archaic. Some supported the family and admired the girls, and this included their school friends. The father himself told me he cried with relief when he heard the verdict, since he knew that Islamic extremist organizations were about to jump on the bandwagon, and that he would be accused of having deliberately fermented further trouble for Muslims in British society.

Sitting in their cosy home, late in the evening, the two vivacious, pretty, articulate, confident young teenage girls giggled and laughed, as they recalled the amazing events of that stormy month the year before. I asked them why they thought the press was so interested in what was, after all, a very local conflict? The two girls simply shook their

heads, unable to answer why they had become the superstars of this realistic TV soap opera.

A rather trivial event, perhaps. Unlike in the Rushdie affair, no-one was killed, there were no riots or protests, no books or effigies were burnt, no authors were sent into hiding, no international *fatwas* were issued. Nevertheless, examined from a social anthropological perspective, the event can help to unravel some of the complexities, beyond the stereotypes, of what it means to live in multicultural, multi-faith, multi-racial Britain.

The stereotypes were familiar: (1) Muslim women are oppressed by male fathers and husbands in a patriarchal society in which they are treated as chattels, subservient to the will of dominant males, discriminated against, prevented from having an education, of becoming public figures in their own right. (2) Pakistani immigrants are an underprivileged underclass, relegated to the margins of society, living in sub-standard housing, unemployed or having the worst jobs available, inarticulate, resentful, powerless. (3) Muslims are a fanatical, violent, primitive, irrational group who refuse to come to terms with the modern world, who deny their obligations as citizens and refuse to integrate into British society.

Undoubtedly, the press shared these stereotypes with everyone else, and especially so after the Rushdie affair. One reason, perhaps, that the British scarf affair became such big news was that it challenged those stereotypes – and in so doing, revealed some of the real underlying legal and moral complexities facing Britain as a nation-state in a world of permeable borders.

Against these stereotypes, the journalists encountered quite a different set of circumstances when they came to interview the girls. Most importantly they found that the girls had acted independently, on their own initiative, in terms of their own moral views of what they believed to be a central expression of their identity and faith. This reflects a wider, if hidden, cultural truth: Punjabi Muslim women, even village women, are often assertive and authoritative, becoming increasingly influential as their children grow up, and this is true in Britain as well (see Werbner, 2002b). More exceptionally, the family lived in a large detached house in one of the most exclusive suburbs of Manchester, overlooking green fields. The father was a distinguished retired consultant ophthalmologist in the Manchester Royal Eye Hospital, one of the foremost hospitals of its kind in Britain. A Fellow of the College of Ophthalmologists, he had been for many years a leading community activist. Although a pious Muslim, he had always been a moderate. The family's affluence was exceptional, but not remarkably so. In 1990 there were 300 Asian doctors in the North West, and a quarter of all doctors in the National Health Service were Asians. Moreover, in Manchester Asian immigrants, including Pakistanis, have been remarkably successful as entrepreneurs, particularly in the clothing and garment trade and industries, but also in food, housing, taxis and services. There are, of course, many unemployed Pakistanis, and in general Pakistani immigrants do form an extremely vulnerable population. But even in the case of

working-class Pakistanis, their houses, however modestly priced, are always well decorated and furnished. They are proud homeowners and deeply committed to their families and their well-being.

The girls were articulate, charming, clever, outspoken. Two of their older sisters were studying Business Management at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, while a third sister was completing a course in Law at the University of Manchester. All were studying alongside men. A year later two more of the sisters wore scarves, in solidarity with their sisters' protest. An older brother had studied medicine in Pakistan, having attended an exclusive public school in Britain. Ten years later, one of the girls works as a financial advisor for the Rothschild Group, one is graduating as a barrister, while the ring leader of the scarf rebellion has worked as an outstandingly competent administrator in a local authority position. The girls vary in the extent to which they do or don't veil, and those who do wear all kinds of head gear. They were, and remain, strong-willed individuals.

The journalists, encountering this un-stereotypical scenario, came down in favor of the girls. They were the victims, oppressed by a tyrannical school Headmistress and a conservative, reactionary Board of Governors. This is the stuff of which soap operas are made. Moreover, although the dispute was local and apparently trivial, it seemed to encapsulate the contemporary global conflict between Islam and the West, questions of identity, faith, integration and the limits of pluralism or multiculturalism, but on a highly personalized level, something that readers could understand and identify with. The girls won, ultimately, because it was *they* who were fighting – they were not simply the puppets of obscurantist religious parents or a reactionary religious establishment. This tells us something about what liberalism in Britain means – the fact that it stresses the individual and individual autonomy, the right of individuals to act according to their conscience in matters of faith, as long as they do no harm to others. It also tells us something about the rise of a new kind of modern Islamic movement in Britain and worldwide.

It is worth taking note of the different major institutions that became involved in one way or another in the dispute: the media and press, of course; the police, the Education Law and its interpretation, the local authority, the community, the Royal Family. Moreover, the dispute highlighted issues of gender, generation, ethnicity, race and religious belief – major foci of conflict in the modern world. These became issues of public scrutiny and debate. The victory of the girls represented a legal precedent.

What was the conflict really about? The Headmistress complained that there had been three other Alwi sisters who had gone through the school without wearing scarves. Indeed, she said, there were eighteen other Muslim girls in the school, none of whom shared the sisters' desire to wear scarves. So are we to understand this teenager cultural protest as an expression of so-called Islamic fundamentalism, an irrational return to anachronistic, ossified traditions; a denial of the equality between men and women at the heart of Islam, with the girls acting as willing victims? It is important to stress that

their protest came in the context of a rising social *movement*: a similar scarf episode had occurred in France and the girls were aware of it; their father was involved in religious activities with Muslims from Arab countries, and the scarves were not so much Pakistani but Arab-style scarves; the girls had become regular members of the Islamic Youth Foundation. Nevertheless, one cannot simply talk here of Islamic fundamentalism, but of a new kind of Islamic modernism.

Veiled meanings

The case of the Alwi sisters highlights the fact that young Pakistani girls in Britain can choose from a range of “identities”, and position themselves through clothing and lifestyle closer to their ethnic, strictly religious or Western secular poles (see Knott and Khokher, 1993; Shain, 2000). Wearing the *hijab* asserts identification broadly with the Middle East, the heartland of Islam and Arabic, the sacred language of the Koran, and thus with Islam as a universal religion, beyond South Asia. In this sense wearing the *hijab* is not particularly radical, although some young Muslim associations do deploy a radical, anti-Western rhetoric. Haleh Afshar (1994:143) has argued that the veil confers dignity and makes the girls “part of the great anti-imperialist Islamic movement”. Seen from the perspective of many of the young girls, however, voluntary membership in Islamic societies also provides opportunities to meet Muslims from a wide variety of backgrounds, including English converts, to debate on a range of intellectual and political issues, and to assume leadership positions (see Knott and Khokher, 1993:604-605).

Writing about Turkey, Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002) describes the development of a mass consumer fashion industry in *hijabs* and other Islamic apparel, no longer solely worn by the lower middle classes or peasant classes, but now designed for an upmarket, fashionable, upwardly mobile Islamic business class. Nilofar Göle argues somewhat similarly that in Turkey “behind the political rise of the Islamist movements lies the upward mobility of new social groups and their increasing social participation ...Along with the radical Islamic movements a new profile of urban and educated Muslim identity has emerged” (1996:132-133). These classes have created a new way of being “modern”.

This echoes Ernest Gellner, who famously argued that “Contrary to what outsiders generally suppose, the typical Muslim woman in a Muslim city doesn’t wear the veil because her grandmother did so, but because her grandmother did *not*” (1992:16). I cite this aphorism because it highlights the complex and shifting situational meanings veiling may have in Muslim society, both as a cultural institution and as part of the wider honor and shame complex, pointing to different, and perhaps contradictory, social and institutional processes. The *hijab* raises a series of questions about meaning, diasporic mobilization, identity, multiculturalism, cultural difference, political Islam, gender, agency, transnationalism and globalization. A uniformity of appearance (a scarf) disguises the fact that the meanings of veiling are themselves veiled (and different).

Indeed, as Clifford Geertz, in the “Pinch of Destiny” (2000: Ch. 8), suggests, the political dimensions of Muslim veiling should not blind us to the quest for personal meaning that also motivates this process.

Meanings vary according to context. In debating and passing of the law, the French have stressed the pernicious features of veiling, associated in the public imagination with violently forced veiling in Islamist countries such as Iran after the revolution and Afghanistan under the Taliban: the exploitation and subordination of women, their exclusion from education, public office and the professions. This existential degradation of women’s autonomy and freedom is highlighted by Azar Nafisi in her book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, in which she describes the terrible sense of oppression and loss of agency which forced veiling has created for westernized women intellectuals and the middle classes in Iran:

What could he think? A stern ayatollah, a blind and improbable philosopher-king, had decided to impose his dream on a country and a people and to re-create us in his own myopic vision. So he had formulated an ideal of me as a Muslim woman, as a Muslim woman teacher, and wanted me to look, act and in short live according to that ideal. Laleh and I, in refusing to accept that ideal, were taking not a political stance but an existential one. No, I could tell Mr. Bahri, it was not that piece of cloth that I rejected, it was the transformation being imposed upon me that made me look in the mirror and at the stranger I had become (2004:165).

Drawing on such extreme cases, the French see the headscarf as a straightforward sign of female oppression and the totalitarian, anti-emancipatory tendencies of Islamist groups, which also espouse terror against Western targets. They define veiling as primarily *religious*, and associate it with extremist terror groups, such as Al Qaeda.

Schools as pure spaces

This French position needs to be set in the context of a specific philosophical approach to education for citizenship. Educational theorists, according to Elaine Unterhalter (1997), are divided on the role that education should play in the making of citizens as equal but different. French education, following Kant, starts from the notion of individual subjects stripped of any divisive collective identities and affiliations. These are relegated to the private sphere. Hence French schools are conceived of as pure spaces in which subjects are free to develop their personal subjectivity, unencumbered by collective, especially religious, differences. This relates, of course, also to the historical struggle against the educational hegemony of the Catholic Church in France. By contrast, multicultural and multi-faith education in Britain, rather than regarding schools as spaces set apart from society, sees schools as spaces in which the private and public

ambiguously meet. English schools are thus conceived of as arenas in which differences ought to be taught and discussed openly from a position of neutrality, in order to educate subjects towards mutual tolerance and respect for difference.

Although the *hijab* has pernicious associations for women in some Muslim countries, its association with religiosity is at best ambiguous since it is, above all, an embodied guarantor of personal modesty.¹⁰ Yet in France, girls who wear the headscarf are seen as the vanguard of a potential and dangerous French Muslim attack on the secular institutions of the state. The scarf is grasped as the precursor of further and more extreme demands for separate institutions and special treatment, and for the predatory expansion and colonization of public spaces. This is, of course, what happened in Egypt, for example, where Islamist students took over public areas for prayer, sabotaged musicals and cafes, attacked Copts and occupied municipal buildings (Gaffney, 1994: 98-104). The French Commission that recommended a law against veiling was told by unveiled Muslim girls that they had been subjected to unacceptable pressure to veil from peers or the community at large.

In a secular context, in which religion is relegated to civil society and the private sphere, veiling may take on non-extremist meanings, and its toleration in public spaces may become a crucible of multicultural tolerance. Hence, while it is still possible to regard veiling as a public political issue, it also has subjective meanings for the girls who veil. Certainly in Britain, by asserting their command of the “true” Islam, signalled by their wearing of the *hijab*, girls are claiming that Islam accords equal rights to men and women, and are thus opening up for themselves spaces for autonomous decision-making. This includes, above all, the right to choose their own marriage partners, but also, perhaps equally importantly, the right to work, to be educated, to go to university, to move around in public unchaperoned, and much else besides. It also resolves the ambiguities of being young, British and Muslim, by signalling that some activities, such as drinking or clubbing, are out of bounds. Veiling is a mobile form of *purdah* that secludes a woman while at the same time allowing her to move around freely in public. For Pakistani girls living in encapsulated, highly conservative, immigrant residential areas, veiling is often a small price to pay for freedom of movement.

It is possible that some girls are forced to wear the veil against their will. Seen sociologically, much depends on where the girls are coming from – their ethnic or class background, the kind of neighborhood in which they live, familial social mobility or assimilation, parental secular, religious or political commitments. Dwyer (1999) and Alexander (2000) both report pressure on girls to veil. But equally, by wearing the

10 Some girls may see it primarily as a religious symbol, divorced from the code of honor and shame, which they regard as part of the “traditional” Punjabi customs they are rejecting. This became evident from the response of a *hijab*-wearing young woman to my paper, in which she denied any connection between the *hijab* and the Pakistani code of honor and shame.

hijab women students are signaling to Muslim male students that they are not available sexually to non-Muslims, and at the same time obliquely demanding that the men too behave morally and avoid playing around with non-Muslim girls. Away from their parents, these students create their own society in which they can mix freely, under the mantle of Islam. Islam thus becomes the guarantor of moral behavior in mixed social gatherings in which an approved marriage market is created away from parental supervision.

Because veiling is a protective shield against the male gaze, it is useful in preventing unwanted advances by young men, especially for girls who live in densely crowded immigrant neighborhoods or who study in mixed schools or at university. Several young Muslim women university students told me that they had tried the English "clubbing" culture, but found they were unable to participate in it because of the heavy drinking of alcohol and sexual promiscuity. Veiling was a solution which justified their avoidance of such embarrassing contexts. It similarly provides protection in rough neighborhoods where women may be vulnerable to violence. A veiled woman is signaling that she is not to be touched. In this respects it conforms with the honor and shame code of conduct and demands respect from outsiders.¹¹

Much depends on the meaning of the *hijab*. If it is merely a "symbol" of Islam, worn as a form of political protest, then unveiling does not imply shame, and the veil is not part of the politics of embodiment. It can easily be removed. If, however, veiling is a sign not merely of religion but of *modesty* (women are not obliged to veil at home or in front of other women; they only veil religiously when praying, as a sign of respect), this is surely where the human rights debate lies. It should be noted that the headscarf causes no harm, either to the wearer or the spectator. If veiling as practiced by women in secular democracies expresses their personal will, identity and subjectivity, and if it is associated with a sense of embodied integrity, modesty and piety, then a legal

11 A friend, who has recently taken to extensive veiling, referred me to the following Koranic verses:

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know naught of women's nakedness (*sura* 24, *ayat* 3; see Pickthall, n.d.).

The theme of sexual modesty is confirmed in *ayat* 60: "As for women past child-bearing, who have no hope of marriage, it is no sin for them if they discard their (outer) clothing in such a way as not to show adornment. But to refrain is better for them". Further confirmation is in *sura* 33, *ayat* 59: "Oh Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close around them (when they go abroad). That will be better, that so they may be recognized and not annoyed". This follows *ayat* 53, the focus of Mernissi's interpretation (1991, Chapter 5): "And when ye ask of them [the wives of the Prophet] anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts". The *ayat* goes on to prohibit remarriage with the Prophet's wives.

prohibition of it becomes highly problematic. The idea that an essentially political (and not religious) battle can be fought over the bodies of powerless young girls would seem to be a basic infringement of human rights. As Moruzzi argues (1994:663), young Muslims in France are being “forced to deal with a doubly constructed gender identity that [they] are not allowed to negotiate”, that of the state and that of being a marginalized immigrant minority.

In Britain, unlike France, religion is taught in schools. Indeed, in Britain there are no purely secular state schools, since all schools have religious assembly at least three times a week, and all schools teach Religious Studies as part of the national curriculum (recently, other religious groups have been allowed to convene their own assemblies). This usually includes basic instruction in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, and the pedagogical argument is that it relativizes all religions. All schools celebrate Christmas with nativity plays, while schools in immigrant neighborhoods usually celebrate Muslim, Sikh and Hindu festivals as well, depending on the composition of the school. At the same time it has been argued (e.g., by Moruzzi, 1994; recent *New York Times* article, February 2004) that, despite invocations of secularity, French schooling is implicitly Christian, while most French public holidays are saints’ days. In Britain, although Anglicanism is the established religion, other religious dignitaries are accorded public respect, while most public holidays, apart from Christmas and Good Friday, are “bank” holidays. The French defend the decision to prohibit veiling in secular schools on the grounds that they fund religious schools. These too, however, are regarded as “pure” – and hence ghettoized – spaces, but, in any case, so far there are no state-funded Muslim schools in France.

Accommodation to ethnic minorities has been negotiated piecemeal in Britain, almost entirely at local authority level, with little fanfare or public crisis. Over time, for example, Muslims have been granted *halal* meals for Muslim school children, Muslim cemeteries, mosque building sites and urban planning permission, spaces for prayer in universities and airports, voluntary-aided Muslim state schools (after quite a long struggle), and the right to wear trousers and the veil in school, as long as the trousers and veil conform to the school uniform (in France there is no school uniform).

The question is, of course, to what extent are girls in Britain or France – and their parents – being pressured into adopting the veil in response to violent threats from Islamic extremists? Moral pressure is inevitable in close-knit communities. But even if this is so, from an English perspective such pressures are perhaps best tackled through public debate and education within schools. A law is a very blunt tool and its consequences are likely to be counter-productive. It may produce a school boycott and exclusions from school. It leads to a *kultur kampff*, a cultural clash, and is likely thus to generate a Muslim backlash and a general sense of alienation and rejection, even among those Muslims who do not veil. During the year leading to the law’s implementation, diasporic Muslims throughout Europe, and not just France, began gearing up for public protest, with demonstrations in France, Belgium, Copenhagen and London. The Mayor

of London, Ken Livingstone, hosted a conference held by the Assembly for the Protection of *Hijab* (or “pro-*Hijab*”) on July 12, 2004. In his speech to the assembly he labeled the French ban the most reactionary act since the Second World War and vowed: “I am determined London’s Muslims should never face similar restrictions. It marks a move towards religious intolerance which we in Europe swore never to repeat, having witnessed the devastating effects of the Holocaust” (Al Yafai, “Livingstone attacks French headscarf ban”, *The Guardian*, July 13, 2004:4). An International *Hijab* Solidarity Day was set for September 4, 2004, the day the French school year begins. But when this date finally arrived, there were no demonstrations and the vast majority of schoolgirls complied with the law, removed their *hijabs*, encouraged by French Muslim representatives and their parents, and were quoted as saying that their education came first.¹²

The collapse of the protest¹³ raises questions about the meaning of the *hijab* for girls and their parents. Was it merely an exterior symbol of faith, to be discarded at ease? Nevertheless, resort to the law in France, and possibly in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, reveals a clear divide between French and Anglo-American legal cultures (see also Bowen, 2004). On June 29, 2004, the European Court of Human Rights upheld a Turkish prohibition on student veiling at university. Against that, members of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child sharply criticized the French law. Rather than Huntington’s clash of civilizations between Islam and Christianity, the civilizational clash appears to be between political cultures that tolerate visible pluralism and those that do not. Although the French cite the historical tradition of secularism and the turn of twentieth century battle against the Catholic Church to secure secular education as justifications for the law, this ignores the significance of subsequent historical events in Europe, not lost on Ken Livingstone, as we have seen. The historical invocation of secularism needs to be set against a historical record of racist intolerance against assimilated, invisible minorities, such as the Jews, which is still only partly acknowledged by the French and perhaps the German state. The historical legitimization for *laïcité*, and more broadly for the principles of the French revolution, rings extremely hollow pitched against that more recent record. The fact that no lessons appear to have been learnt from this shameful past points to a wider tendency towards selective historical amnesia in the construction of national histories (see R. Werbner, 1998).

Muslims have argued that the law in France is racist since it is really intended to target them specifically and attack their religion and culture under the false banner of

12 This followed the kidnapping of two French journalists in Iraq, with the kidnappers demanding that the French law be repealed. In the face of this violence French Muslims united in solidarity behind the French government.

13 Some 70 Muslim girls and 3 Sikh men throughout France refused to remove their headgear. They were subjected to counselling before expulsion from school.

secularism. Young French women claim that the veil is “part of my identity” and argue that they should be able to show “who and what we are” (Jon Henley, *The Guardian*, February 4, 2004:15). There does appear to be some truth in this claim. One also senses from remarks by French politicians that young girls’ veiling represents a deep threat to French cultural notions of sexuality, which in practice favor male sexual license,¹⁴ although the rhetoric is cast in terms of the sexual freedoms gained in France against the Catholic Church. Sexual freedom, like secularism itself, is here elevated to sacred status. This precludes any public debate on some of the more pernicious effects on young girls of sexual promiscuity, pornography and the sex industry.

Conclusion

Multiculturalists argue that educating citizens to tolerate overt public signs of difference is crucial to living together in a plural society. The banner of universalist secularism may have been appropriate to an earlier phase of nationalism. World War II proved, however, that cultural assimilation does not necessarily lead to the erasure of difference. Both in Iran after the revolution and in Nazi Germany, highly assimilated minorities were forced to bear the stigmata of their exclusion. Given this history, the rights of minorities to advertise their differences publicly would seem to be a basic human right, especially when, as in the case of the scarf, it causes no harm to others.

At the same time, as this article has shown, the traditional honor and shame symbolic complex, which accords the older generation of Muslim immigrants control over the sexuality of young women and men, and over their marriage options, and which includes veiling as a sign of modesty, clearly does have its pernicious side for young Muslims of Britain. In strengthening children’s resolve against this parental tendency, there is arguably much that can be debated in schools about the right of young people to make independent moral decisions, to own their own bodies, to choose their own partners. It is thus especially ironic, to my mind, that the French law has been applied to schools, which are the very places where citizens may be educated and where debates about clothing, beliefs and values can take place.

Multicultural education in Britain is perhaps a beacon of tolerance in an otherwise bleak picture. Since their migration, Muslims in Britain have in other respects been locked in repeated confrontation with the state, and, as I show elsewhere (Werbner, 2002a, 2004a, 2004b), since the Rushdie affair in 1988 and the Gulf War in 1990, this has led to a sense of spiraling alienation. Substantial numbers of Pakistanis and

14 This was evident in the response of a senior politician who sat on the Commission in a BBC radio interview, in which he argued passionately that, next, Muslims would demand the removal of women advertising bras in the metro, as though this would represent an unthinkable form of censorship.

Bangladeshis live in deprived regions of the country where unemployment is very high. There is evidence of a rise in the Muslim prison population, underachievement in schools, a drug culture, and most recently violent riots and support for the Taliban (in a few instances) and other terror conspiracies. Some young Muslims have joined radical anti-Western Islamic organizations, such as al Muhajiroun and Hizb ut Tahrir.

The present article has argued that despite the pragmatic accommodation to Muslim religiosity in Britain, the media and politicians continue to represent South Asian immigrants, including Muslims, in the public sphere as “problems”. For a liberal society, what seems most worrying is the politics of sexuality and embodiment, of honor and shame, that apparently continue to prevail among some sections of the migrant generation (and sometimes among their sons), evident in the way that South Asian Muslim, Sikh or Hindu parents desperately attempt to retain control of their children’s sexual and reproductive behavior and choices, and to punish them violently if they transgress, and are felt to compromise family “honor”. As I also argue, however, the law on its own cannot possibly control familial violence, just as it cannot prohibit the growing ambivalence in children’s attitudes to parental authority, or an emergent consciousness empowering young women. As this article and others highlight, the *hijab* may be used by young Muslims girls as a symbol of independence and the right to claim autonomous agency vis-a-vis their parents, while at the same time it also signals their defiance of the wider society perceived to be hostile to Islam. In a sense, then, it might be argued that the adoption of a “new” Islamic identity signalled by the veil/scarf is a cunning solution invented by young people themselves to appear to honor their parents (and to defy others in positions of authority) while nevertheless demanding the right to decide their own destiny.

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