
POWER DRESSING¹

Farzana Haniffa

‘You don’t look like a Muslim.’ This has been told to me in the past few years by neighbours, shopkeepers, sales persons and my driving instructor. Looking at my jeans and T-shirt and my uncovered head what they were really saying, of course, was that I didn’t dress like a Muslim.

It is certainly true that many Muslims today look and dress like Muslims. The veil or the hijab, with its corollary of the beard and Kurtha clad male, has taken over the landscape and made Muslim identity codefiable and identifiable through a particular form of dress. Since its introduction to this country in the early 1980s the hijab has mutated from an unbecoming table cloth like garment worn by a few zealots to an elegant costume with flowing lines that allows for endless variations of colour, shape and style. There are many thousands who wear it today and there are now shops dedicated solely to the sale of Abhaya and scarves. The irony of course is that there are hundreds and thousands of Muslims who are very clear about their identity as Muslims that do not subscribe to the new form of dress. However, they, and I think they are in the majority, are invisible and not the subject of today’s exposition.

The Sinhala nationalism and Tamil separatism of the 1980s saw the concomitant rise of extreme Islam in the country. In addition, the open economic policies of the late 1970s caused huge social disruptions and upheavals, chief amongst them the exodus of both skilled and unskilled Muslim labour to the middle east. During this time the Iranian and Saudi Arabian embassies provided funding for Islamic events and gifted Qurans to Islamic groups and schools. Together with the move to transform Islamic dress, people began to practice segregation of the sexes, abolish all “rituals” as unquranic and purge customs of “outside” influences. For instance, the thali was considered Indian and no longer relevant to Sri Lankan Muslims. Birthdays were not observed. Photography was said to be haram and idolatrous. There were groups who would visit the houses of “lapsed” Muslims and advise them on proper Islamic conduct. Finance company owners were urged to seek different avenues of business. Muslims were discouraged from working in banks.

Internationalized Islamism

Though the fervour of the late eighties and early nineties has subsided somewhat, Islamism has institutionalised itself in parts of the community. The very real threats to Muslim life and limb that took place in the north and east, the permanently displaced community in Puttalam only exacerbated many Muslims’ move towards reasserting their own identity. Dress remains the most visible of its manifestations and Hijab has many forms. Some

wear it as a signature scarf worn with everyday attire that cover wrists and ankles. Others wear the scarf with the Abhaya or cloak in different colours. The most orthodox wear the black cloak with a black headscarf and face veil. Whatever its permutation the “look” is very particular, the manner in which a scarf is worn clearly marks the Muslimness of the wearer. Today it has become a regular feature of Muslim life. Families that are otherwise quite liberal, or on the fence with regards to many practices of the new Islam, make the token gesture of having female members of their household wear the scarf.

The appeal that women personally feel towards the hijab is formidable. Several women I spoke to felt that, by wearing hijab they were contributing to the maintenance of Muslim society’s moral order. They also felt they were making a great personal sacrifice by cloistering their bodies for the sake of Islam.² Many conservative commentators on Islam have been very emphatic that hijab is in place to circumvent the possible damage to society posed by rampant sexuality. To the women who wear the Hijab this is a perfectly legitimate justification of their practice. One woman, Homa, an accounts assistant, told me that women were responsible for preserving the morality of the social order and that therefore it was up to them to refrain from throwing temptation in the way of men. Nisa, a teacher, stated that in matters of the body men are the weaker sex and that it was the women’s social responsibility to wear the hijab. In fact, Nisa also stated that seeing women dressed provocatively, she thinks not of the women but of the men, and how they must be dealing with such spectacles. However Nisa, the mother of three sons, also said that there was much about today’s practices of segregation that was troubling. Her boys rarely socialised with their girl cousins. She said she remembered her own childhood, playing cricket in the open and spoke of the close connection that she still feels with her cousins. She felt that the younger generation was missing out on something valuable about family life. But to Homa, a younger, more strident voice for the new Islam, this was a small price to pay. “Better safe than sorry,” she said. When I asked Nisa if she would feel the same way if she’d had girls, she smiled and admitted that she probably would not. Marina Rifai, an ophthalmologist stated that she believed in the segregation of the sexes. She said that human beings were wont to stray and that it was best to avoid practices that could lead to “improper” behaviour.

Stereotypes

The stereotypical rendition of Muslims as backward seem to have found their realization in the rigidity of some communities. “Fundamentalist” Islam, wherever it is practised,

often becomes a textbook example of institutionalised subjugation of women. The simplistic rhetoric of “liberation” used by the west in the case of Afghan women and the Taliban is a telling example of this confluence.³ It was even used as a part justification of the bombing of Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11th attack on the United States. Such analyses are often dangerous and capture little of the complexities of women’s lives.⁴ When speaking with so many women, the sense of purpose that they felt when choosing to wear the hijab was inescapable. In addition to the social responsibility that they seemed to feel was theirs, there was also the feeling of martyrdom that goes with the belief that one is making the supreme sacrifice for God. There was never at any moment a claim that wearing the hijab was a pleasure. Shahila, a thirty-year old mother of two who was not wearing hijab, said quite fervently that she admired those who did but that she, unfortunately, did not yet have the strength to make that sacrifice. Her feeling was that she would eventually do so. When I asked women how they felt to be wearing hijab they usually said, “I haven’t had any problems,” “I always thought I should get into it,” or “I didn’t find it too difficult.” There was no positive response, no embracing of the garb with any feeling of pleasure. Marina Rifai in fact said that “if Allah was to say, tomorrow, that hijab was no longer necessary, I would be the happiest.”

Dr. Marina Rifai is an ophthalmologist who is also a founder member of Al Muslimath, an Islamic educational institution for women. She is also the community’s most diligent proponent of the new dress. Her position on Hijab was unequivocal. “Hijab is a Wajib,⁵ a Farl,” she told me. “It is an obligatory duty that nobody has questioned. I know there are some people who question saying interpretations are different and so on... If so there must have been some ulema who said something ...(but) for the past 1500 years there hasn’t been a single ulema or for that matter a female ulema who has said that hijab is not (required) because it is a direct straight forward very clear order from Allah.”⁶

Hijab

Disputing my claim that hijab was a recent introduction to the country, Rifai insisted that the hijab had always been a part of the garb of Muslim women and was lost only because of colonialism, modernisation and the historically more recent moves towards female education. She says that there was only about 30 years or so (from the 50s to the 80s) during which Sri Lanka saw a lapse in the practice. Today with the refocusing on the Quran it has re-emerged. And this, she said, is happening all over the world.

There are a great many practical benefits to wearing the hijab. At the level of class there is a certain solidarity that the uniform garb, and the sentiment of martyrdom brings about among women. Further, for lower middle and working-class women the hijab makes sound economic sense. One woman, Zakiya, said that she sews her own hijabs for roughly about Rs.500.00. This is less than the cost of a saree. She also said “I don’t have to worry about what to

wear to weddings.” Zakiya also claimed that the Hijab gave women a certain feeling of safety. “Men don’t press against you in buses like they used to,” she told me.

Today Islamism’s initial fervour has abated. Those that feel they have a personal relationship to God continue to wear the hijab, consider themselves especially blessed, as “true” Muslims and fear for the after-life of those who don’t. Those who refuse the hijab embrace the conviction that theirs is a kind God, who has better things to do than constantly police potential lapses. They speak of the “Spirit” of the religion and find it ridiculous that it has been reduced to a puritanical preoccupation with sex. The less kind amongst them make fun of the cloaked “heebie jeebies” and wonder about the personal hygiene of wearing black layers in the Colombo heat. The most zealous Islamists still take it upon themselves to tell others that they should reform or suffer in the hereafter. These others are now less embarrassed about sticking to their skirts and blouses, jeans and t-shirts or sarees and salwar kamis.

However, to appear in public as a Muslim woman it has become necessary that one should cover one’s head.⁷ In some instances it is necessary that women are veiled.⁸ Further, the institutionalisation of the veil as uniform in Muslim schools has helped spawn a generation for whom hijab is the norm. This generation is not aware of the fact that their parents made a conscious choice to practise their religion in this manner. The fact that there are multiple ways in which one can have a relationship to ones faith, that there are enormous and perhaps unnecessary sacrifices that women are called upon to make in the pursuit of piety is not something that the new generation is aware of. The freedom of movement and of enjoyment of their bodies that women in Hijab deprive themselves of has completely fallen out of the equation. For many today things are as they should be, and always have been. There is a flowering of madrasas, the practice of Jamaath or teaching pilgrimages on which men go for days has become a popular pastime amongst young Muslim men. Muslim women find recourse to women’s study circles like those organized by Marina Rifai’s Al Muslimath. Thereby a wide religious education is being imparted to the community as a whole.

However, there is little room for criticism, and debate takes place only in relation to different details and levels of practice. These debates are often very emotional and sometimes turn violent. As a result of this resurgence in activity social life within these sections of the Muslim community becomes inevitably segregated and women become relegated to a role inside the household. Recently a rule regarding women’s travel, where they should not travel anywhere for more than three days unless accompanied by a father, son or a husband has been discussed. In this day and age it is distressing to think of what such practices will augur for women’s future access to rights and resources if unmediated by men. It is also a telling comment on the division of communities. The interaction between many of these Muslim women and women of other communities is becoming minimal. Unfortunately the more

liberal sections of the community offer no real public challenge to these developments and a level of polarisation is taking place. Today, Muslims subscribing to different dress codes hardly recognise each other.

A friend of mine recently related the following story to me. While relaxing at a hotel down south one afternoon my friend encounters a little Muslim girl and her father on the beach. The little girl in her long pants, kurtha and scarf is allowed to play in the surf while her veiled female relatives hover by the pool side sipping cool drinks and tending their babies. She gets into conversation with my friend relaxing on the beach in her bathing suit, and after a little while asks her what her name is.

“Zainub,” my friend tells her. The little girl is shocked.

“That’s a Muslim name no! That’s one of our names, that can’t be your name!”

“Yes it is,” Zainub replies.

“But you are not a Muslim!”

“But I am,” my friend tells her.

Notes

1 A version of this piece appeared in *Options* No 31. 3rd Quarter 2002, Women and Media Collective, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

2 I spoke to several veiled and non-veiled Muslim women about Hijab. They included professionals, housewives, women of different ages and class backgrounds, those who were clearly against wearing the hijab and those who were proponents of the dress.

3 It is well known today that it was not just the Taliban that was the problem in Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance according to the Afghan women’s group RAWA was said to be as bad if not worse.

4 It is in fact worth asking if Muslim regimes of various sorts derive any rhetorical value from positing themselves in such oppositional terms.

5 A farl or a wajib is a term used to indicate practices that are required of Muslims. Sunnah indicates actions taken by the prophet and those that are therefore recommended for all Muslims and haram indicates those that are forbidden.

6 Interview with author 11th March 2002.

7 Prominent non-veiled Muslim Women, Ms. Jezima Ismail, Chancellor of the Eastern University and Ms. Ferial Ashraff, MP both stated that they consider covering their head a necessary part of their public persona.

8 A comment had been made recently that the two Muslim representatives on the Women’s Committee, Faizun Zakaria and Fazeela Riyaz were both unveiled. ■

A press release by several women’s groups states:

WOMEN APOLOGIZE FOR THE EVENTS OF JULY 1983

We recall with deep regret and remorse the tragic events of July 1983 in which thousands of Tamil women, men and children lost their lives and homes due to politicized and organized ethnic violence.

We express our deep sadness at the bereavement, loss and grief suffered by families who lost loved ones, friends and cherished memories and acknowledge the wounding and scarring fear and trauma that has haunted the Tamil community since then.

We deeply regret the consequence of the violence that led to large scale displacement and forced thousands of Tamils to flee the country of their birth and seek refuge in countries across the world causing painful fragmentation of the Tamil community.

In this year which marks 20 years since the events of July 1983, one of the most horrendous ethnic pogroms of modern Sri Lanka, we wish to strongly condemn all the acts of commission and omission in July 1983 and its aftermath. We also strongly condemn the two decades of official silence with no acknowledgement or reparation to the Tamil community. We wish as women who have been working for a peaceful and just political solution to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict to apologize for the events of July 1983 and promise to make every effort to ensure that such a pogrom will never again be the fate of any ethnic community living in Sri Lanka.

It is our sincere hope that we, as women from all ethnic communities, can work together to sustain the current peace process and search for a lasting peace in our country which will protect the human and democratic rights of all our peoples. This is the real hope of the Sri Lankan Tamil community and all Sri Lankans who do not wish for a 1983 to ever happen again.

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS OF LANKA
WOMEN’S COALITION FOR PEACE
WOMEN’S FORUM FOR PEACE