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# Centre Write

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## Staying faithful?

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## To veil or not to veil?



**Dr Qanta Ahmed** is author of *In the land of invisible women: A female doctor's journey in Saudi Arabia*

**Dr Qanta Ahmed** explains why she, a Muslim woman, believes veiling in Britain should be outlawed

I am a Muslim woman who is observant of Islam. I also believe 'veiling of the face' is an un-Islamic practice. I reject the niqab as part of my personal battle against Islamism – Islam's totalitarian imposter – and because Islam has raised me to be a feminist and humanist. Wearing the niqab is to affiliate with Islamism, and reject secular values. Defending it as an Islamic rite is an act of idiocy – and worse, it can lead to ground being yielded in the battle of political ideas to a totalitarian ideology.

As a Muslim, I am not alone in rejecting the false idea that the niqab represents Islam. Morocco, which has a Muslim majority, has banned the sale and production of the burqa. Turkey – whose population is also majority Muslim – has banned all head coverings. Pluralist Ahmadi Muslims – renowned for their profound commitment to interfaith tolerance, and rejection of violence – have affirmed that Muslim women must reveal their faces. They consider concealment of the face to be a threat to national security.

**“They believe the niqab to be a religious rite, and not a cultural practice which has been recently appropriated by Islamism – a doctrine so misogynistic that women barely exist in Islamist literature.”**

Of course, the veil – including the niqab – carries different meanings depending on context. And that context is critical for meaningful contemporary debate in Britain.



As a doctor, I treated Pathan grandmothers of jihadist families in Pakistan's Swat Valley in Khyber Pakhtoun province. Wearing the burqa allowed them to leave their mud-walled homes in the mountainous hamlets where they lived their limited lives. They could enter public space, travel to the market, and come (escorted by their eight year old grandsons) to the government clinic for treatment. Even though there is no mandate for the burqa in the Quran, cultural pressures had hermetically sealed it in these communities over time. By wearing the niqab and burqa, these women could have some sort of personal agency. Without cultural change

beforehand, denying these women their niqabs or burqas would be an anti-feminist act of oppression.

In Britain, circumstances are completely different. Muslim women in Britain are among the most empowered and liberated Muslim women today. Legislation protects them from forced marriage, honour violence and female genital mutilation – all grotesque human rights violations, wrongly imposed on women in the name of Islam. Muslim women in Britain hold political and public office. In Britain, therefore, the veil should be banned.

Islam never intended women to be unseen, unheard, or denied personal

>> agency. Consider Hazrat Khadija – the Prophet Mohammed’s first wife with whom he had his longest marriage. She was a wealthy merchant, who owned property and traveled internationally to trade. She was neither immobilised nor concealed. She was sufficiently independent to approach the young prophet with a marriage proposal. The first Muslim woman was therefore a self-made, socially mobile entrepreneur, financially self-reliant and fully autonomous in her decision to marry. A thousand years ago, our female predecessors fought in battle, and personally challenged the Prophet Mohammed for their fair share of the spoils of war.

But the niqab mocks this proud tradition of Islamic feminism. We see the veil enforced by coercion and violence. In Afghanistan, acid attacks forced Muslim women to adopt the burqa. In Pakistan, Muslim women concealed their maimed and mutilated noses behind the veil. The windows of their homes were blacked

out on the Taliban’s orders. In Saudi Arabia, women are compelled to wear black abbayahs and hijabs. Women in Iran continue to be silenced by the regime. Advocating a dehumanising garment like the niqab empowers extreme Islamism at the expense of Muslim womanhood.

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The Quran mandates veiling the gaze – for both women and men – and the covering of secondary sexual characteristics. But I denounce the suggestion that erasing women from view is mandated by Islam. Naive intellectuals – profoundly ignorant of the history of veiling – may criticise me for such strident refutation of the niqab. They do not realise they have been deceived. They believe the niqab to be a religious rite, and not a cultural practice which has been recently appropriated by Islamism – a

doctrine so misogynistic that women barely exist in Islamist literature.

In short, British secularists have been cowed into yielding to extremism. Protected by the British fear of appearing ‘Islamophobic’, Islamists exploit British tolerance in order to destroy it. This is the cunning game of the Islamist: the exploitation of pluralism to thrust extreme, misogynistic practices into the mainstream, while denying their critics the right of reply.

It is imperative that those who defend the niqab understand that they are not advocating feminism. They are advocating totalitarianism based on invented Sharia. Extreme Islamism claims legitimacy from Islam, while it is locked in mortal combat with secular democracy.

Within the secular liberal democracies of Western Europe, the niqab is a cultural symbol. It must be stripped of the false religious legitimacy it has been afforded by Islamists and well-intentioned, but naive, non-Muslims. 

