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NO WOMAN LEFT COVERED

Unveiling and the Politics of Liberation in Multi/interculturalism

"[I]T'S A MATTER OF SECURITY"[1]

ON FEBRUARY 15, 2007, five Muslim Girls were forced to withdraw from a Tae Kwon Do tournament in Québec after officials determined the hijabs (head scarves) worn under their helmets posed a safety risk. This was not the first time a Muslim girl had been banned from a sporting event for wearing a hijab. Earlier in the month, Asmahan (Azzy) Mansour, an eleven-year-old girl, was prohibited from playing in an indoor soccer game after refusing to take off her hijab. Once again, "safety" was cited as the reason for the ban. At first glance, the issue of safety suggests the need to protect the girls from physical harm, but these rules were not actively applied until the political storm over "reasonable accommodation" hit Québec. The notion of safety in this context requires a more nuanced discussion: what or whose safety is threatened?

While these incidents happened in Québec, I would argue that the hijab is perceived as a threat to the entire "Canadian nation" and that the site of contestation is the "other" woman's or, in this case, the "other" girl's body. As Jasmine Zine notes, "Muslim women's bodies are the new frontier upon which battles for national identity and citizenship are being waged" (2009: 149). And, as I have stated elsewhere, "[i]images of women in hijabs, burqas or chadors are the ubiquitous signifier to the western world of the oppressed Muslim woman" (Ramachandran 6).

This paper examines how religion and race become conflated with culture under the rubrics of both multiculturalism and "reasonable accommodation." It further explores how gendered constructions of race as culture serve to exclude certain religious symbols and practices (and predictably, people) from the Canadian nation under the guise of protection and liberation of the "oppressed brown woman." While "safety" becomes an issue, I suggest that the ban on girls wearing their hijabs during sporting events is more specifically concerned with the protection of white Canadian and Québec culture from contamination by "the other." As Himani Bannerji has stated: "the problem of multiculturalism … is how much tradition can be accommodated by Canadian

modernity without affecting in any real way the overall political and cultural hegemony of Europeans" (49).

MULTICULTURALISM AND INTERCULTURALISM IN CANADA AND QUÉBEC

Canada is constructed as "the land of freedom," in which women are emancipated and equal to men before the law and state. In this fallacy multiculturalism is permitted only if it doesn't interfere with women's liberation. In the midst of the "reasonable accommodation" debates, the *Conseil du Statut de la Femme* (Council on the Status of Women) issued a report entitled, "Right to Equality: Between Women and Men and Freedom of Religion." The report was targeted to Québec society where a model of interculturalism—rather than multiculturalism—was deemed to be more appropriate. According to the report:

> On the whole interculturalism purports to integrate persons immigrating to Québec around the central focus of the French language, while displaying the openness of Quebecers to the contributions of foreign cultures to the definition of their collective identity. (7)

The report also stressed that Québec's policy on interculturalism derives "from the common will to protect Québec culture as well as values of religious neutrality and equality between women and men." In Part Two of the report, entitled "The Right to Equality Between the Sexes Does not Allow for Accommodation," the Council makes the unequivocal statement that: "the right to equality between women and men ought to be observed under all circumstances and no infringement thereof should take place in the name of freedom of religion" (9). What this proclamation fails to recognize is the interlocking nature of oppression: since religion and culture have been conflated with race, the *Conseil de Statut de la Femme* effectively demands that a Muslim woman living in Quebec identify exclusively as "woman"—constructed according to western norms. Identity for the racialized subject is formed through "social forces—far from remaining as background features—[that] interlock so that the construction of identity is itself contingent on the particular nexus of interlocking factors operative in a given contexts" (Jiwani 16). Since racialized women are produced and perceived through the interlocking nature of their raced and gendered identities, a separation of the two leaves room only for the non-qualified woman: the white, western woman. In other words, the specificity of racialized, religious minority women is erased and then subsumed under normative white femininity.

While the apparent distinction between interculturalism and multiculturalism revolves around the protection of Québec's language and culture, the differences stop there. The history of multiculturalism in Canada is one of

negotiation, resistance, transition, and distortion. According to the 2007-2008 *Annual Report on the Operation of The Canadian Muliculturalism Act*, varying metaphors have been used historically to describe the objectives of the Act (CIC). In the 1970s, the aim was to promote the "cultural mosaic" model where Canada was conceived of as place that allowed different cultures, ethnic groups, and languages to co-exist in the nation. In the October 1971 *White Paper on Multiculturalism,* Pierre Trudeau declared that "although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other." In a speech introducing the *Multiculturalism Act* to the House of Commons on October 8, 1971 Trudeau stated that "The government will support and encourage the various cultures and ethnic groups that give structure and vitality to our society. They will be encouraged to share their cultural expression and values with other Canadians and so contribute to a richer life for us all." While Canadian culture is not defined within the Act, the languages of the nation are identified as French and English. Trudeau also makes the point that "the government will assist members of all cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society." For Trudeau the aim of the multicultural policy was to advocate full participation of ethnic minorities in Canadian society without having to assimilate, but rather retain elements of their culture.

The late 1980s switched to a "level the playing field" strategy where anti-discriminatory programs were initiated to help eliminate social and cultural barriers separating minority and majority groups in Canada. It would seem that the intention was to combat prejudice, introduce diverse cultures, and promote cultural understanding, thereby fostering inclusion. This highlights the two imperatives of Canadian multicultural society: tolerance and cultural sensitivity. The policies of the 1970s and 1980s centered around celebrating diversity through what Stanley Fish refers to as "boutique multiculturalism" where culture is commodified and becomes something expressed through food, music, and clothing, a tradition which continues today. By the 1990s, the theme was "belonging." In other words, we were *all* Canadian regardless of our country of origin, yet we should still celebrate our diversity. In contemporary times, "Harmony jazz" is the applied metaphor. It is said to "capture the spirit of integration in a Canadian context—harmonious interaction between communities, anchored in the structure of Canadian values, within which pragmatic improvisation facilitates a dynamic of integration and accommodation to ensure the full participation of all in Canadian Society" (CIC 11).We can observe from these various metaphors a shift from a land with no culture, to a land with many cultures, and finally to a Canadian culture expressed through Canadian values. Further, there is a change in the language of the Act that now includes words like "integration" and "accommodation," which are very similar to Québec's conception of interculturalism. Sunera Thobani makes an important observation about the repercussions of the Act:

> Multiculturalism has sought to constitute people of colour as politically identifiable by their cultural backgrounds. With this move, race became reconfigured as culture and cultural identity became crystallized as political identity, with the core of the nation continuing to be defined as bilingual and bicultural (that is, white). (145)

The point made by Trudeau in 1971 about helping "groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society" takes on a different significance through the lens of the events that led to the 2007 debates on reasonable accommodation in Québec. In contemporary times these "cultural barriers" are reconceived as those erected by the immigrant population through their own cultural practices. In this manner, to become Québecois or Canadian means to overcome the culture of your country of origin, especially if it is a culture perceived to be connected with terrorism.

While culture is notoriously difficult to define, it seems to be defined in the discourse of multiculturalism and interculturalism through religious symbols. Culture also serves as way to speak about race without discussing biology. This "cultural racism" equates race with nation and culture, excluding people based on incompatibility and cultural incommensurability. Sherene Razack deems this the "culturalization of race." Cultural racism, she explains, is:

> distinguished from its nineteenth-century counterpart by the vigour with which it is consistently denied. In its modern form, overt racism, which rests on the notion of biologically based inferiority, coexists with a more covert practice of domination encoded in the assumption of cultural or acquired inferiority. (2001: 60)

Cultural racism does not negate biology and the inequitable treatment of people based on skin colour. Rather, it builds on it and reframes the prejudice in terms of cultural differences. This serves two purposes: first, it establishes a civilized norm—in this case embodied by Christian Eurocentric culture—and secondly, it provides a basis for discrimination which no longer overtly identifies skin colour as the cause for unequal treatment. By using cultural difference as the demarcation, racism is evacuated from the discussion allowing the Canadian nation-state to retain its particular brand of liberalism.

THREATENING MODERNITY THROUGH HEAD COVERINGS

In the post-9/11 western world, images of women in hijab have been identified as symbols of oppression that pose a threat to western modernity. The turban and beard have not only come to designate "brown men" as oppressors of Muslim women, but also as freedom-hating, democracy-eschewing terrorists.[2] Thus the hijab and turban become a synecdoche for multiple cultures. Implicit within these categorizations is the conflation of religion, race, and culture

expressed through gendered stereotypes. While it would be easy to demarcate Québec and the year 2007 as the location and starting point of religious racism, it is erroneous to do so since religious symbols have also been used previously to exclude non-white Canadians from the nation. In April 1989, the RCMP commissioner recommended that the prohibition against turbans be lifted so that Baltej Singh Dhillon, a practicing Sikh could serve his country, Canada. When the federal government lifted the ban in 1990, there was public outcry against the ruling. The basis for this outcry stemmed from the fact that a turbaned Sikh could not represent the Mounties (one of the most recognizable symbols of Canada and Canadian masculinity) since the turban would replace the trademark Stetson. What followed was an anti-turban campaign consisting of petitions in favour of the ban, and pins and calendars depicting racist images of Sikhs. After the lifting of the ban was made public, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) news aired remarks made by white Canadians that located Sikhs outside of the Canadian nation. "Well they are not in their own country, they are in our country. They can follow their religion but yet they should comply with our rules and regulations."[3] These types of voiced comments contributed to "othering" Sikhs from Canadian nationality and reinforced an "us-them" dichotomy.

Similar sentiments were made clear during the various incidents that occurred in Québec in 2007, beginning with the town of Hérouxville which adopted a resolution concerning *les normes de vie* ("norms for living") directed at "future immigrants" (*aux immigrants éventuels*).[4] In this document, it was apparent that certain religions—most prominently Islam and to a lesser degree Sikhs and Hindus—were being expelled from Québec culture. In addition, we must examine the manner in which gender played a role in the racialization of religion. The guidelines put forth by Hérouxville included a ban on stoning, burning or circumcising women. Though violence against women is already covered under Québec law, by identifying these specific types, the colonial-missionary trope of "saving brown women" from the "barbaric brown man" is evoked (Spivak). Religion and culture become conflated with race under the rubric of 'multiculturalism' and 'reasonable accommodation' by using gendered constructions of culture as religion to exclude certain symbols and practices under the guise of protection of the "brown woman." Protection of brown women from brown men becomes the manner in which xenophobia and racism are masked. The construction of the "Third World Woman" as uneducated, bound to tradition, and under continuous threat of violence from the "Third World Man" is a discursive strategy that has persisted since colonial times (see Mohanty).

In 1997, Susan Moller Okin wrote an article entitled "Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women?" According to Moller Okin, the answer is yes. Although she acknowledges that all cultures have been patriarchal, western cultures "have departed [from patriarchy] far further than others" (16). To demonstrate her point she uses sensationalized examples of clitoridectomy, child marriage, and

coerced marriage to demonstrate how multiculturalism is dangerous to women belonging to the "darker continents."[5] She states:

> [Non-western white women] might be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture) or, preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women—at least to the degree to which this value is upheld in the majority culture. (22-23)

Rather than seeing clitoridectomy, dowry deaths and coerced marriage under the rhetoric of violence against women, they are framed as what Uma Narayan (1997) terms, "death by culture," where violence against "third world women" is explained through culture and not as a systemic imperative of patriarchy. Violence against western women is evacuated from the discussion, and posited, when it occurs (and it does occur), as an individual phenomenon, an anomaly—one that is outside of anything that could be deemed North American "culture." Further, as Sherene Razack notes, "[s]aving Muslim women from the excesses of their society marks western women as emancipated" (2008: 86).

This discourse of liberation has been adopted by certain feminists to justify war and invasion. In her article, "Imperial Wars or Benevolent Intervention? Reflections on "Global Feminism" Post September 11th," Sedef Arat-Koc writes:

> When conceptions of the "other" define "brown women" as helpless victims and "brown men" as their barbaric predators exercising their authority given to them by traditional culture, the discourse of the "self" inevitably becomes one who has a moral and political duty to intervene to save. When it works with these paradigms, the project of "global feminism" has to involve "benevolent rescues" and "principled interventions" and become part of a larger civilizing project which has historically involved missionary projects and modernizing efforts (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994, 7) Interventions "on behalf" of women have a long history in colonialism, from non-or anti-feminist religious missionary activities to feminist campaigns during the first wave. (26)

However, while discourses of care seem to have the best interests of those "being cared" for at heart, they sometimes "function ideologically, to justify or conceal relationships of power and domination," inevitably stripping those being cared for of choice (Narayan 1995). Liberation or freedom then has nothing to do with choice but rather with what is being offered/sold by the dominant society.

THE SYMBOLISM OF LIBERATION AND OPPRESSION

The hijab is nothing but a piece of cloth. Representation, as Stuart Hall illus-

trates, "is a practice, a kind of 'work', which uses material objects and effects. But the meaning depends not on the material quality of the sign, but on its symbolic function" (25). For Hall, representations are one of the primary ways of transmitting culture: the representations convey meaning. How this meaning is perceived is complicated when the representations are "foreign" or "othered." The hijab or veil has a long colonial and imperial history, but what is consistent is the desire of the western world to remove the veil. In colonial times, much like in modern western society, religious practices and cultural practices were equated. Meyda Yeğenoğlu demonstrates this point when she writes:

> [O]ne of the central elements in the ideological justification of colonial culture is the criticism of cultural practices and religious customs of Oriental societies which are shown to be monstrously oppressing women. (98)

Interwoven within this discourse is a strong sexual element, an exotification of the veiled woman:

> The Veil is one of those tropes through which western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantasmatically achieved. (Yeğenoğlu 39)

In modern times the sexualized nature has all but disappeared, and the veil is understood as a signifier of the barbaric and misogynist nature of Islam. As Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad demonstrates: "Increasingly the American public has identified 'the veil,' whether a hijab (a covering of the hair) or burqa (a coving of the head including the face), with Islamic militancy, extremism, jihadism, and oppression of women" (255). What is excluded from media discourse and representation are the voices of Muslim women. In her article, "Unveiled Sentiments," Jasmine Zine illustrates the manner in which Muslim women have used the veil as both a symbol of protest to subvert imperial authority and to disrupt the male gaze. She writes that:

> [a]s an Islamic feminist construct, the veil represents a means of resisting and subverting dominant Euro-centric norms of femininity and the objectification of the female body and as a means of protection from the male gaze. (2006: 243)

In this manner the veil takes on a very different significance from the mediated representations. In dominant Canadian consciousness, the hijab, a piece of cloth, is the symbol for the abhorrent nature of Islam. Oppression that Muslim women suffer is symbolized by the hijab, which is in turn associated with terrorism, notions that are continually reinforced through all forms of media; it has no place in the multi-culture of Canada. However, the question of what

happens when veiled women do not conform to the stereotype of "the oppressed Muslim woman" remains. In today's post 9/11 culture, when Jean Faucher, the president of the Québec Tae Kwon Do Federation, forced the Muslim girls to withdraw from an amateur martial arts competition, stated, "it's a matter of security" he is conflating the issue of "safety" in sports with "national security." While protection of the girls during a sporting event is ostensibly the issue, I would like to suggest that the reaction to the wearing of a hijab is actually more about the protection of white Canadian and Québec culture from "the other" and that Faucher's choice of words effectively express the West's fear of Islamic terrorism. In the end, the hijab is thus seen as a matter of "national security," and I believe that this discourse of security is a tool of neo-liberal governance which bars veiled women from being full citizens in Canadian society. As Thobani articulates regarding the threat to the Canadian nation:

> should these women "lapse" into their cultural and traditional ways, for example, choosing and arranged marriage of choosing to wear the hijab or chador, the superiority of the nation's cherished values becomes suddenly threatened. If assimilation occurs successfully, then their difference can be preserved in the form of their exotic dress, even if only to be worn at community events…. (168)

Liberation for girls and women is thus seen as the freedom—or rather the *directive*—to show her body. The perceived oppressive nature of Islam that forces women to veil is replaced by the mandate to uncover by the Canadian nation state. It would appear that covering and uncovering is the distinction between oppression and liberation in the Canadian context and the Muslim woman's body becomes the site of contestation where struggles over nation and citizenship are waged. The remarkable paradox is that while the Canadian nation wants to liberate Muslim women from what they conceive of as the coerced practice of veiling by their "barbaric" culture, Canadian and Québecois society are leveling a similar control over Muslim women through their dictates to unveil.

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[1]Jean Faucher president of the Quebec Tae Kwon Do federation quoted in the *Montreal Gazette*, April 30, 2007. Online: <http://www.canada.com/topics/news/national/story.html?id=86e77c6f-81c5-4480-830c-daefd44b-7be2&k=1123>.

[2]Although the turban is a mark of Sikh identity, any male with darker skin

wearing a head covering was perceived as a Muslim terrorist.

[3]See <http://archives.cbc.ca>.

[4]See <http://municipalite.herouxville.qc.ca/>.

[5]The term "darker continents" refers to Asia, the Middle East, and Africa where the predominant skin colour is not white.

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