

## **The Veil and the British Male Elite**

**Ali Khan**

In line with the feminist bumper sticker "Well-behaved women do not make history," Aishah Azmi, a Muslim woman born in Cardiff and raised in Birmingham, is determined to disobey the British male elite and make history. Azmi fully veils her face in the public, including at the school where she taught young girls and boys. No parents or female colleagues at the school objected to her choice of dress. Over the complaint of a British male colleague, however, Azmi was suspended from the job. As the controversy grew, some parents joined the opposition to the veil, complaining that students could not hear Azmi speaking behind the veil. Azmi offered to drop the veil while teaching if no male colleagues were present. The school declined the offer. As a woman of will and determination, Azmi too has refused to give up her identity in public spaces. She is in the process of defending her rights through the British legal system. Though she has lost her case in the first administrative hearing, she intends to appeal to the higher courts.

### **Politicization of Veil**

Instead of allowing the system to freely and fairly process Azmi's legal claim, the British male elite wasted no time in condemning the veil as a profound violation of the British culture. The debate is no more narrow or legal. It is racial and religious.

All over the world, the law permits employers to impose reasonable grooming standards on employees. For example, the police officers may be prohibited from donning hippie hair and the schoolteachers may not be permitted to wear short skirts. Azmi will have a weak legal claim if the school can show a factual linkage between veil and teaching inefficacy. But that is not the point the British male elite, though known for their love of legal formalisms, is making. Their argument goes beyond the grooming standards at workplace. They wish to assimilate immigrant women into a prototypical woman who caters for male sensibilities and makes men feel comfortable.

### **British Male Attacks**

Former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (who loves to cook puddings in free time) cast the first stone when he requested that Muslim women drop the veil. Straw attempted to intellectualize his request by a louche admission that he watches the facial expressions of women when he engages in conversations with them. The veil prevents him, says Straw, from fully understanding what Muslim women are saying---not because he cannot hear them but because he cannot see their faces. (I wonder if Straw listens to the radio or ever talks on the phone.)

While Straw flirted with unconvincing logic, Mr. Phil Woolas, a local government minister, came down on the veil with a hard hammer. Mr. Woolas minced no words in issuing a forceful fatwa that the veil provokes "fear and resentment" among the British people. Woolas tried to influence the legal debate as well by openly suggesting that Azmi "can't do her job" wearing a face veil.

While the case was still pending before the tribunal, Prime Minister Tony Blair also entered the furor, smearing the veil as a "mark of separation." Wearing his familiar postiche smile, Blair argued that the veil "makes other people uncomfortable." Fully exploiting the office of the Prime Minister, Blair supported the school's decision in suspending Azmi from the job. Another male from the British ruling elite, higher education minister Bill Rammell, added prejudicial perspective to his colleagues' crusade by reminding the forgetful British public that Imperial College in London had already banned face veils in class.

In this perfervid air of British xenophobia, one important voice arose to protest. Trevor Philipps, the head of the Commission of Racial Equality and a man of African descent, warned that the

debate over the veil had “turned ugly” and could spark violence. What is needed, said Mr. Philips, is a gentle and refined discussion. His warning came true within hours when racially charged hoodlums attacked male worshippers at a mosque in Greater Manchester.

Undeterred by these attacks, the British elite continues to trash the cultural identity of a fellow citizen from Cardiff. Meanwhile, history with its inexhaustible ironies offers additional insights into the British resentment against the Islamic veil.

### **Common Law Coverture**

For centuries, the British male elite has served as hysterical vigilantes against assertive women who, like Aishah Azmi, wish to maintain their self-identity in public spaces. In his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, William Blackstone defines coverture as follows: “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended or consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything.” The law of coverture, though wrapped in the romance of a delightful marriage (for man), drew its vicious logic from colonization as the British male elite fictionalized the household in terms of a small colony under the husband’s viceroyalty, a colony in which the wife’s property came to be vested in husband and in which she was disqualified from entering into separate contracts. These female disabilities were considered necessary to promote the “superior” British culture at home and abroad. Women who refused to get married for fear of losing personal and property rights were regarded as “redundant women.”

The common law coverture gradually lost its grip over the British women. The British male elite is now resurrecting coverture to subjugate immigrant women. The new coverture turns the old coverture on its head. The old coverture coerced white women to promote the Victorian vision of separate spheres---homes for women and markets for men. The new coverture compels immigrant women from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to abandon their unique identities in public spaces. For white women, the old coverture created and enforced the separation of gender spheres; for immigrant women, the coverture imposes the fusion of gender spheres. In each case, some women must lose their identity. In all cases, coverture forces women, white or black, to constantly adjust their identities to make the British men feel comfortable.

### **Obtuse Logic**

There is yet another irony in the veil controversy. In 1991, Fatima Mernissi’s book *Le Harem Politique* (1987) was translated into English with a more descriptive title, *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Analyzing sociological roots of the Islamic veil, Mernissi contends that the Arab male elite of the first few decades of Islam concocted the sacred sources to impose a controlling and oppressive headgear on women. The Prophet was egalitarian, says Mernissi, but his men were not. His men first solicited gender discrimination from the Prophet; and after his death, they fell back into the pre-Islamic days of ignorance and fabricated the Prophet’s sayings to perpetuate gender inequality and the veiling of women. True Islam, Mernissi seems to conclude, would let Muslim women choose whether they want to wear the veil.

Few scholars in the Muslim world agree with Mernissi’s theological or sociological theses, even though the face veil (niqab) is far from a universal value in Muslim countries. Ironically, the British male elite will also hesitate to embrace Mernissi’s book. Mernissi is a feminist who wishes to expand the choices women may exercise in public spaces. Mernissi criticizes the “oppressive veil” as a male imposition. She would nonetheless allow women the freedom to wear the veil.

In condemning the veil, however, the British male elite is not making the freedom argument. They are not quarrelling that women like Azmi are oppressed and that they must have a choice. In fact, these men spurn the choice argument. They are advocating gender integration for personal convenience. Immigrant women must not wear the veil in public, they say, because the veil is a mark of separation, the veil makes British men feel uncomfortable, and the veil does not allow

British Jacks and Joes to watch Muslim women's facial expressions. No self-respecting woman will accept this obtuse logic.

It appears that the British male elite is determined to direct and dictate women according to their personal preferences. They perhaps do not realize that their forced unveiling of Muslim women is no different from their forced domestication of Victorian women.

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