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For Multiculturalist Britain, Uncomfortable New Clothes



Kieran Dodds for The New York Times

SEEING BUT UNSEEN A British Muslim woman with her son and three daughters on Friday in Blackburn, England.

By ALAN COWELL
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Britain's Uncomfortable New Clothes

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RARELY has Britain's struggle to define its relationship with a disaffected and diverse Muslim minority seemed so fraught as it was last week, with the debate fixated on where a woman can wear a flimsy, kerchief-size item of Islamic dress called the niqab, the full-face veil.

The discussion, intensified by Prime Minister [Tony Blair's](#) calling the veil "a mark of separation," is not simply about dress. It seems to signal a broader shift as non-Muslim Britons set new limits of tolerance, not just for recent immigrants but for a younger, home-grown generation of more assertive British Muslims.

Among some of those who have long favored tolerance for individual choice, there is a ginger step toward the notion that the right of the group might trump the right of the individual under more circumstances, even as they are hard-pressed to say exactly why they are drawing the line at the niqab, beyond its being a matter of "communication."

For 40 years, Britain has nurtured a policy of multiculturalism celebrating ethnic diversity and its emblems. That policy evolved in the 1960's, at a time when Muslim immigrants, largely from Pakistan, arrived to take menial jobs. Now, Britons are confronted with the sometimes alienated descendants of that first generation — like three

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of the four Londoners last year — people born in the country, raised in its schools and newly drawn to a re-examination of their ancestors' faith.

A blame-game question is emerging: Who is responsible for the widening gulf between majority and minority?

Along with Mr. Blair's comment, a Conservative opposition figure, David Davis, said some British Muslims had set themselves on a course of "voluntary apartheid," leading parallel lives outside the mainstream. The inference was that multiculturalism had failed.

The counterargument emerged at a labor tribunal in Yorkshire where Aishah Azmi, 24, a teaching assistant, challenged a school board's decision to suspend her from teaching because she wore the full veil.

"Muslim women who wear the veil are not aliens," Mrs. Azmi said at a news conference after the tribunal found that she had not been discriminated against or harassed, though it concluded that she had been made to feel like a victim. This split ruling left her ultimate return to the school, veiled or not, uncertain. "Integration requires people like me to be in the workplace so that people can see that we are not to be feared or mistrusted," she said.

But those who have opposed the wearing of the niqab, like [Jack Straw](#), the Labor Party veteran who is leader of the House of Commons, argue that it prevents communication. They point out that, while the Muslim head-scarf — the hijab — allows the face to be seen, the niqab reveals only the eyes. In school, opponents of the niqab argue, particularly in language lessons, students cannot see the face of the teacher to follow what she is saying.

Of course, the niqab is not the only item of clothing used to express a distinctive notion of piety. There's the Sikh turban, the nun's wimple, the Hasidic Jewish man's black hat and side curls. None of those — not since the battle of Sikhs to wear their turbans at work in the 1970's — has been so singled out.

But the niqab is the only item that completely masks its wearer. In much of the Muslim world, it is part of a pervasive culture dictating that women show their faces only to other women, or to men in their families. In Britain, it has come to offer an emblem by which Islamic separation may be criticized without challenging the right of 1.6 millions Muslims — fully 3 percent of the population — to practice their faith.

The debate opened this month when Mr. Straw complained that in his constituency office in Blackburn, he felt unable to communicate with women wearing the niqab. "There is a wider issue here," he said. "Communities are bound together partly by informal chance relations between strangers, people being able to acknowledge each other in the street or being able to pass the time of day. That's made more difficult if people are wearing a veil."

His remarks drew broad support among non-Muslims, prompting suggestions that he had used the issue to raise his profile as Labor Party figures maneuver for position after Mr. Blair steps down. Only 22 percent of Britons surveyed in an opinion poll taken afterward said they thought Muslims had done enough to integrate, while 57 percent said Muslims should do more to fit it.

For some it is an uneven debate.

"It's not a neutral conversation," said Salma Yaqoob, a Muslim city councilor in Birmingham. Non-Muslims start from a perception that "we have all been victimized as a majority by this awkward minority"; they start from a hostile stance and the Muslims start from a defensive stance."

The full veil, she said, is worn by a "tiny, tiny minority" of Muslim women, some of whom have taken to it after concluding that Islam provides "a sense of identity that gives a framework for their lives." Indeed, it is the very intensity of the debate about Islam, Ms. Yaqoob said, that propels their embrace of it.

"As the context now is so highly politicized, and the Muslims are so much in the

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headlines, people ask, ‘What is this thing we are being demonized for?’” she said in a telephone interview.

Shahid Malik, a Muslim Labor legislator from the same area of Yorkshire as Mrs. Azmi, said he welcomed the debate over the full veil. “If we don’t talk about these things, they are stored up for the future,” he told reporters in Yorkshire.

“As individuals, all women have the right and freedom to wear what they wish, and rightly so,” he said. “However, in certain occupations there are dress codes which employees are expected to adhere to while at work. All right-minded people — Muslim and non-Muslim alike — will agree that in asking a classroom assistant not to wear a veil while in contact with children because it hinders their learning is perfectly acceptable and just common sense. But when your style of dress limits your ability to carry out your role, then the welfare and education of the children must come first.”

The paradox is, of course, that Muslims born and raised in Britain are an integral part of the society that seems to reject them. To be accepted, they need to assert their presence, yet in doing so, they fall afoul of pressures to conform to the standards of the non-Muslim majority.

The debate may also exact a toll on that majority. In an interview, David Edgar, a British playwright, said Britain risked losing the “Voltaire principle, which is: I disagree with what you say but I defend to the death your right to say it.”

“We are slipping very quickly from saying something I agree with — that the veil is a separatist gesture — to something I profoundly disagree with, which is that it should be banned,” he said.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a Muslim who is a columnist for The Independent, sees it a little differently. “What any of us does in our own lives is a private matter — a precious and inalienable right,” she wrote. “But once we enter the job market or national and local authority domains, or tread into places where there is interaction with different citizens, privacy and individual choice become contested — quite rightly, for there is such a thing as British society.”

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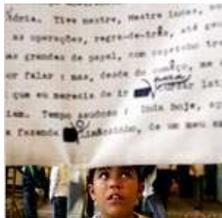
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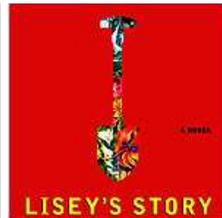
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