## POINT \*\* COUNTERPOINT

## Fashioning lies, veiling the truth

S the hijab issue heats up in France and Germany, and the psychological pressure and the brainwashing of women intensifies all over the Muslim world, the feverish cry of "an attack on hijab is an assault on Islam" should be given a closer examination. Hijab especially this modern form of the headgear that is causing the controversy in Europe, is not, and should never allowed to be, a valid symbol of Islam. Showing how irreligious it is to claim that it is an integral part of Islam best exposes the insidious misogynist politics of worldwide hijabisation.

Of course hijab is not mandated by the Qur'an, nor is it sanctioned anywhere in the Hadith. I would like to turn to the Qur'an and discuss some of its verses, focusing on their semiotic value and rhetorical tone. hoping, thereby to prove why the hierarchical enforcement of hijab on women is not only not required by the Qur'an, but insisting that it is so constitutes a grievously sinful lie according to the Qur'an.

There are three verses in the Qur'an that deal with the women's dress issue. All of them use mildtoned language, understandably suitable for gentle suggestion or kindly advice. No amount of conflation of the language used in these verses can possibly be construed as the Quranic mandate of hijab. The word hijab itself means. "curtain" and it occurs seven times in the Qur'an in a variety of nuances of meaning. Its most notable use in Sura Maryam in the sense of a "screen" occurs in the context of Mary's immaculate conception of Jesus, and the word metaphorically captures the moment of that

Commemorate Mary in the Book When she withdrew from her family she went to an eastern place. And she took a screen [a curtain

or a cover] from them. And we sent our spirit to her.

(19:16-17) References to seclusion and modest dressing of women are made in Sura Ahzab (33: 32-33, 53), but they are very specifically addressed to the Prophet's younger wives, and Muslim scholars all over the world acknowledge that these advices, still mildly spoken, are not binding to the general mass of mu'mina the believing women. Only one controversial so-called "scholar" from the Indian subcontiOf course hijab is not mandated by the Qur'an, nor is it sanctioned anywhere in the Hadith. I would like to turn to the Qur'an and discuss some of its verses, focusing on their semiotic value and rhetorical tone, hoping, thereby to prove why the hierarchical enforcement of hijab on women is not only not required by the Qur'an, but insisting that it is so constitutes a grievously sinful lie according to the Qur'an.

linguistics, besides theology.

nent, the infamous father of modern Islamic fundamentalism, Abul a-la Moududi, insists that the advices in Sura Ahzah he treated as dicta for all Muslim women. He does not care that the verses in Sura Ahzab begin very clearly by the apostrophe: Ya Nisa un Nabi (O women of the Nabi, you are not like other women) Moududi wrote a series of essays in Urdu on women and "purdah" and published them in 1939. In a passionate defense of veiling of women Moududi says, "Though the veil has not been specified in the Qur'an, it is Qur'anic in spirit." Moududi's haunted house of

hijab's "Qur'anic spirit" is so spooky that a precondition of entering it is a flat denial of what is actually there in the Qur'an. Such doublespeak is designed to mislead, to distort reality and to corrupt thought, and it is no wonder that Muslim religious scholars of the Indian subcontinent at the time vehemently shunned his brand of Islamism. Commenting on the manipulation of the sacred text, Rafiq Abdullah, a Muslim lawyer in London notes: "Incapable of envisaging the Qur'an as a linguistic space which contains a multiplicity of discourses (including the prophetic, legislative, eschatological, narrative, metaphysical, spiritual), Islamists choose to ignore the fact that they are interpreting a mythical past and carrying out a partial, generally decontextualised, reading of the words of God."

The loud claims made by Muslim patriarchy and their army of wellmobilized women followers that there is a thing called "Islamic dress code for women" has very feeble basis in the Qur'anic text. Religious traditions are vast, and in Islam's case, globally spread out. Traditionally Islamic legal-moral rules or mores were carefully attuned to the way the Qur'anic language communicated on the matter at hand. Hermeneutics, or the art of interpretation, requires mastering a variety of skills and knowledge in the fields of history. philosophy, law, dialectics and

Trained religious scholars or Arabic jurists would comb the Qur'an in order to establish a graded scheme of classifying behaviour -- waiib (mandatory), mandub (recommended), mubah (permitted), makruh(disapproved), haram (forbidden), and so on. The fact that Abul a-la Moududi had no formal training as a religious scholar is evidenced by his blithe exclusion of consideration of Qur'anic texts in his pronouncements of veiling and seclusion of women. Completely insensitive to some of the beautiful sentiments expressed in the Qur'an about women, Moududi's writings exhibit brute assertions, borrowing more from the old Judeo-Christian theologies that brand woman as the original sinner and the cause for Fall

principles of gender equality. The most egregious falsification occurs, ironically, in the case of the most frequently quoted verse from Sura Nur by the proponents of hijab:

of Man, than from the Islamic

Tell the believing women to lower their eyes, Guard their private parts, and not

display their charms, Except what is apparent outwardly

And cover their bosoms with their

And not to show their finery (24:31)

Mark again the even-toned rhetoric of the language of the advice and the generality of what is being advised. Not counting the fast disappearing tribal groups of Africa, South America and elsewhere where women remain topless, women of all religions all over the world dress by covering their bosoms. "Not to show their finery" is an additional cautionary measure towards checking an individual's desire to show off superficial adornments to outsiders. But the

Qur'an is not as draconian in its

opinion on a woman's natural desire

to adorn herself as the Muslim

fundamentalists interpret this verse.

In the rest of the ayat we get the idea

that a sweet, youthful mu'mina can

wear her fineries in front of her family members and householders. Just don't stamp your feet too hard and create a jangle of noise that would make outsiders be aware of all the baubles you have on you. Pretty fair advice to impetuous youthful females given almost with a touch of grandmotherly affection.

The key to understanding the true import of this verse is the first utterance: Qul li-mu'minati vaahdhudhuna min absari hinna (Tell the believing women to lower their eyes). These words are rhetorically repeated here from the preceding verse 30: "Tell the believing men to lower their eyes .

Bar none, both sexes are asked to ahadhadha or cast down the gaze or glance. It is not hard to recognize this gesture, universal and utterly human, as the outwardly visible physical manifestation of a mental activity. Modesty, then, resides in the mind. All other external accoutrements suggested by the Qur'an are subservient to this inner, mental activity that is further reinforced by the adverbial clause: min absari. The verbal, absar comes from basira meaning "the ability of having the power of mental perception, discernment, clear thinking" etc. Therefore, the clause min absari appended to the lowering gaze" action should mean that we are asked by the Qur'an to divert our gaze from what is before our eyes and turn inward to our inner discernment and fine-tune our moral judgments about what is decent and what is not. To construct a stricture of enforced superficial outward garb (the burkha or the hijab) out of this mild language of the Qur'an is a travesty, and an insult to the deep moral and intellectual message of the Qur'an on developing our inner sense of

As in Sura Nur (30 and 31), all the advice for modesty to women can be shown to have its counterpart advice to men elsewhere in the Qur'an. Further illustrating the difference in meaning the rhetorical thrust of the language in the Qur'an can make, I would like to cite a verse from Sura Luqman that is meant exclusively for men to observe modesty in their conduct and demeanor. The tone of the language here is definitely more strident than the one that addressed women in

either Sura Nur or Sura Ahzab about modest dressing:

Do not hold men in contempt, And do not walk with hauteur or

the earth. Verily God does not like the proud

and boastful. Be moderate in your bearing, and keep your voice low.

Surely the most repulsive voice is that of the donkey. (31:18-19) Imagine if it was required for all

Muslim men to walk around in all their waking hours with a device fitted around their neck that measured the decibel of their voice, and an ear-piercing alarm setting off alerting family members, coworkers and neighbors every time the voice reached the level of a braying donkey! How about men wearing a "macho prevention meter" around their waist? Or, how about a shackle around their ankle to curb their "proud and boastful" bearing? The Qur'anic language is clear and unambiguous about its admonitions. The genuinely pious and spiritually well formed men of old were mindful of such Qur'anic moral quidance.

In the guise of leading us back to an imagined and presupposed "purer" Islam, the modern fundamentalists. like Moududi, invent concepts that actually divert unsuspecting believers from the path of true devotion and traditional piety. Even though they appear to renounce the modern world's secular culture, they inhabit its material and technical realms and exploit them to the hilt. Moududi's writings are translated in 40 different languages and vigorously disseminated through the internet. We must grapple with this odd quality of modernity of their ement, and not regard them as "old fashioned" conservatives, or simply "backward" looking in their religious views. They do not blink at the idea of brazenly misinterpreting the Holy Qur'an and manipulating the sacred scripture to fit those ideologically driven concepts about religion. Insisting on hijab as a paradigmatic self-definition of Islam is one such concept. Saying the Qur'an mandates it is a lie. Saying Allah will punish a Muslim woman who commits the sin of not wearing a hijab is an outrageous lie. I leave you to ponder the words and their rhetorical thrust in the following verse from Sura Hud:

Who is more wicked than the one who fashions lies about God?

Such men shall be arraigned before their Lord.

And the witnesses (angels) will

"These are those who imputed lies to God."

Beware! The scourge of God will

fall on the unjust. (11:18)

it cannot, over time, be undone. Farida Maiid is a poet, scholar and literary

The problem is whether we have the right leadership to undo it.

## The picture the world sees

Officials are paid to make decisions on right and wrong, not on the punch of pictures -- or on how things might look it they came out.

JONATHAN ALTER

few years ago. I traveled to Vietnam, Without intending to do so, I found myself visiting the scenes of iconic photographs I remembered seeing when I was a kid: the Saigon street corner where Eddie Adams took the shot of a Viet Cong suspect being executed at point-blank range; the stretch of road the naked little girl ran down; the roof of the building near the U.S. Embassy where the last helicopter lifted off. For many of us, these images were the Vietnam War.

The same will be true of the Iraq war. Someday, when Iraq is peaceful again (and that day will come), tourists will want to see the square where the Saddam statue toppled, the spider hole he hid in and, of course, Abu Ghraib Prison. It's too early to know exactly which of the unspeakable pictures from the torture sessions will come to represent this sickening chapter in the book of superpower superembarrassments. Will it be that prisoner wearing the hood with electrical wires attached? Those stacked naked bodies with smiling guards above? Lynndie England leading around a naked man on a

The assumption last week in Washington was that the damage from this fiasco in the Arab world will last for 50 years, as Sen. Jack Reed put it

For all the power of the humiliating images to confirm the worst assumptions about the United States and strip away its moral authority, this seems exaggerated. Pictures play powerfully on emotions, but emotions -- when they don't involve immediate family -- are not often enduring. They can change depending on the next pictures and the next sequence of decisions and events. The images from Vietnam searing as they were -- were ultimately a reflection of the policy failures, not the cause of them, and the hatred expressed by Vietnamese toward the Americans who bombed them lasted only a few years. The same goes for Iraq and the Middle East. Just because the damage is done doesn't mean that

Take one Donald Rumsfeld. First, he and President Bush and

But at this particular historical moment, the United States can be safer only when it is respected abroad. The only way we'll get the cooperation we need to win either the war in Irag or the wider war on terrorism is by persuading other nations to begin looking to us again for leadership. No respect, no victory. In that sense, restoring America's prestige is a means to an end, and the presidential election, a referendum on which man can best change the picture that the whole world sees.

the rest of the war cabinet ignored Colin Powell's presentation of the Red Cross' evidence of abuses in Iraqi prisons. Then Rumsfeld went on the "Today" show to say he didn't have time to read the long report on Abu Ghraib (what else was so important?) but that "anyone who sees the photographs does, in fact, apologize." Anyone? Who is "anyone"? It wasn't until his job was on the line and he bothered to finally view the pictures that he delivered a proper apology before Congress. Rumsfeld said that it was the pictures that made him realize the seriousness of the reported behavior -- the "words (in Pentagon reports) don't do it." But high-level government officials should be capable of responding to horrible abuses under their authority without audio-visual aids. They're paid to make decisions on words and facts and right and wrong, not just on the emotional punch of pictures -- or how something might look if it came out. Character, we know, is what you do

when you think no one is watching. Of course, some people didn't even mind the pictures. Rush Limbaugh told his audience last week that the whole thing reminded him of a "Skull and Bones initiation." He argued that the torturers should be cut a little slack: "You ever heard of emotional release? You heard of need to blow some steam off?" Limbaugh's peculiar rationalization didn't get traction, but he's right about one thing: when it comes to pictures, context still counts. Sympathy for the prisoners developed in this case because few were suspected terrorists. Some were resisting Coalition forces -- which is terrible but not terrorism, unless you think every civilian who ever resisted an occupying army in human history was a terrorist. Others were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. None had anything to do with

But imagine if these images had been of, say, al Qaeda terrorists in captivity in Afghanistan in late 2001. There would have been no uproar at all. In fact, at that time too many people (including me) were complacent about the use of psychological interrogation techniques that end up loosening the bonds of civilized behavior and making Americans look like hypocrites. Is there any way forward after

this excruciation? Any way to rebuild the bridges (remember that overworked Clinton metaphor?) the Bush administration is burning? For all the talk in John Kerry's campaign about

America's tarnished image in the rest of the world, most U.S. voters aren't interested. In the broadest sense, they're correct. Being respected and popular again is not an end in itself; sometimes we need to do the right, unpopular

But at this particular historical moment, the United States can be safer only when it is respected abroad. The only way we'll get the cooperation we need to win either the war in Iraq or the wider war on terrorism is by persuading other nations to begin looking to us again for leadership. No respect, no victory. In that sense, restoring America's prestige is a means to an end, and the presidential election, a referendum on which man can best change the picture that the whole world sees.

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