



“For all but the very credulous, the sentimental, mediaeval, science-denying, relic-venerating rigmarole of saint-making defies belief.” *Page 18*

IAN WARDEN - BOOMER ANGLES

heads”, in a correspondence that wasn’t published.

ANU visiting fellow in the School of Social Sciences, Dr Shakira Hussein, specialises in the study of gender and Muslim societies and she describes seeing a woman in a niqab at a Canberra fundraising event.

“I remember being at a Muslim function and there was a woman with her face veil and she was taking food up and eating under her scarf, putting food underneath. The other women at the table were saying that looks so ugly, it looks so uncomfortable, it’s looks not very hygienic, she’d be getting food all over her clothes.”

According to Hussein, in places such as Pakistan the genders are segregated for meals, which means burkas and niqabs are not worn during meals. The Canberra scene was therefore peculiar to a Western country.

Also peculiar was that a garment designed to obscure a woman could make her stand out so starkly.

“It’s very unfamiliar to most Australian-born Muslims too,” she says. “The Muslims are just like non-Muslims, elbowing each other and going, ‘What’s the story there?’”

Hussein, who will join Virginia Haussegger, journalist Julie Posetti and international and human rights law expert Professor Hilary Charlesworth for the debate “Should we ban the burka?” at the ANU on Wednesday, says burkas and niqabs are perceived within the Muslim community as extreme and isolating. She insists, however, that it is a woman’s right to choose whether to wear it or not.

“If they want to wear it and it is their choice to wear it then absolutely they should wear it.”

It’s a sentiment that’s echoed by other local Muslims.

For the secretary of the Canberra Islamic Centre, Azra Khan, dressing in any type of clothing in Australia is a personal decision.

“I can’t see that in a modern society dress codes should necessarily be banned or stigmatised or victimised – it’s choice, a freedom of expression,” says Khan, who doesn’t wear the burka, niqab, or the headscarf – the hijab.

That it has sparked such heated debate seems to her to signal a return to a time of greater racial division, such as in the post-9/11 era of animosity towards the followers of Islam.

“We’ve come a long way and for this dress code thing to come up again is a bit of a diversion. Instead of looking at similarities and what brings people together, again as a society we are trying to focus on what the differences are and to create disharmony, and I believe that is a backward step.”

Particularly as the number of women who wear the burka in Australia is so small. In fact, Khan says, she is unaware of anyone who wears it in Canberra.

“I can’t say that we have necessarily been inundated with women walking down the street with the burka on. It’s just a foreign sight.”

Long before Islam, the burka originated in deserts in the Middle East and the subcontinent as a protection for men and women against sand and sun. Most commonly connected with Afghanistan, where it was imposed by the Taliban in 1996 as compulsory for women to wear in public, it is not officially required under the current regime. However, local warlords enforce it in regional areas, and in places such as Kabul it is worn for personal safety.

The niqab, meanwhile, was designed as an elitist fashion to distinguish the aristocracy from the working class in the countries of the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Now it can be seen as a symbol of piety.

Many Muslims believe the Koran requires modest dress in public, in passages such as: “And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands.” But the holy book does not prescribe concealment with the burka or the niqab.

In the West, especially in Europe, the form of dress has created controversy, including in Britain in 2006 when Labour government minister Jack Straw wrote in his local newspaper that the niqab hindered communication and visitors to his office wearing the dress would be

asked to show their eyes and nose. He insisted it was made clear to them that his request could be declined and a female member of staff would remain in the room. Claiming he didn’t support a law banning the veil, he said he’d prefer women to abandon it, in comments that caused a media storm.

In Germany last week, Marwa el-Sherbini was testifying against a man who had insulted her for wearing a hijab after she asked him to let her son sit on a playground swing last year. The defendant walked across the Dresden courtroom and stabbed her 18 times. In her native Egypt, the 32-year-old pharmacist is being called the “headscarf martyr”, with her death being seen as a sign of anti-Islamic sentiment.

While in France the burka has been banned in public schools since 2004, as part of a law prohibiting students from wearing any visible religious symbols, including the Christian crucifix and the Jewish yarmulke. So Sarkozy can be



seen as merely following the lead of former president Jacques Chirac.

In a speech predating Sarkozy’s, however, United States President Barack Obama said in Cairo on June 4 that a woman’s right to wear a covering that can represent oppression is a matter of freedom. “[I]t is important for Western countries to avoid impeding Muslim citizens from practising religion as they see fit, for instance, by dictating what clothes a Muslim woman should wear,” Obama said. “We can’t disguise hostility towards any religion behind the pretense of liberalism.”

Canberra Muslim community leader, author and former Australian diplomat Kerri Hashmi paraphrases American political philosopher Noam Chomsky when she says, “You don’t believe in freedom of speech or freedom unless you believe that people have the right to do things that you despise. That’s the real test of freedom.”

Hashmi, who doesn’t wear a Muslim covering, says she opposes the idea of banning the burka because women in Australia are unlikely to be forced to wear it.

“Really the difference in view is whether we see these women as making this choice themselves or having it forced upon them. And I think they make the choice themselves.”

Provided they have the choice, it’s one that can be made for a number of reasons, she says.

“One is that they believe they are demonstrating that they are more religious than other people. Another one is that they have come from a country where that is the standard and they would feel really embarrassed taking it off, like you would walking in a bikini down the middle of London. So they don’t wish to do it.”

Hashmi insists, though, that she would be reluctant to see her 20-year-old daughter wear the veil. “For her it’s unimaginable. I would try and dissuade her, I think, but you can’t force her not to, any more than I can force her to do anything else I want her to do. Her father would be very unhappy with it too.”

She cautions that banning the burka would



“It’s very unfamiliar to most Australian-born Muslims too.”

ANU visiting fellow Shakira Hussein



“It looks like a shroud for our bodies but today we have to wear it just to be safe.”

Afghan MP and human rights activist Malalai Joya



Muslim studies: Shakira Hussein, above left, specialises in the study of gender and Muslim societies, and Malalai Joya, above right, who says the burka is a symbol of suppression.

not emancipate any woman beneath it. “If the burka is illegal then those women will not leave the house at all, whether it is by their own choice or by their husband’s choice, they won’t be able to go out at all. So making it illegal will in fact confine them much more than they are already confined.”

Malalai Joya writes about her confined life in Afghanistan in *Raising my Voice* and describes learning to wear the burka after returning to the north-western city of Herat in the late-1990s after 16 years in exile in the refugee camps of Iran and Pakistan. “I didn’t like it. Not one bit. It’s not only oppressive but it’s more difficult than you might think, and it took me a while to get the hang of it. My father always said he could spot me in any crowd of women wearing burkas because of the way I walked. He said I looked like a penguin. You have no peripheral vision because of the netting in front of your eyes. And it’s hot and suffocating under there.”

In her case, however, the burka can be used as a tool of defiance. “The only useful thing about these long blue robes was that they could be used to hide school books and other forbidden objects.”

But even Joya, who created international headlines in 2003 when she denounced her country’s leaders for war crimes and human rights violations at an historic constitutional convention, the “Loya Jirga”, and in future may run for president, believes in a woman’s right to choose to wear a burka.

“It is very difficult how we feel personally, as I experience it, under the burka. It’s like insulting women. To tell you briefly, I hate that burka. But if, some women, they like it because of religious cause or as a part of culture, I respect them. This is a personal issue.”

Given the choice, Joya says, it’s unlikely that many Afghani women would conceal themselves within it. “Most women, as I know, they don’t want it. We’ve had women in tears and in tears as they wished they could wear clothes, they could enjoy walking on the streets without worrying that someone will kidnap them, someone would rape them.”

To her, though, the issue of the burka is secondary to the more desperate need to liberate the women in her country from endemic violence and repression.

This is why, to Malalai Joya, a debate about whether or not the burka should be banned in Australia can be seen as an indulgence of the free.

Lynne Minion is a staff reporter. *Raising my Voice*. By Malalai Joya. Pan Macmillan. 278p. \$34.99.

“Should we ban the burka?”, a free public lecture hosted by *The Canberra Times* and the Australian National University, Wednesday at 12.30pm, Coombs Lecture Theatre, Fellows Road, ANU. Bookings: 6125 4144 or events@anu.edu.au