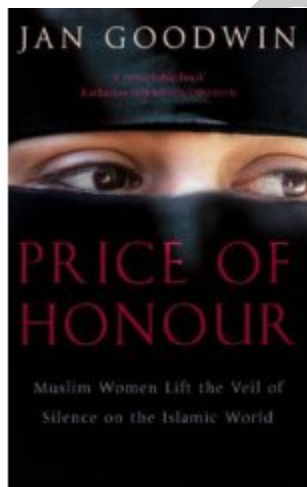
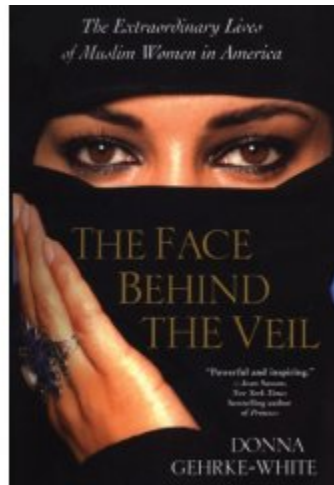
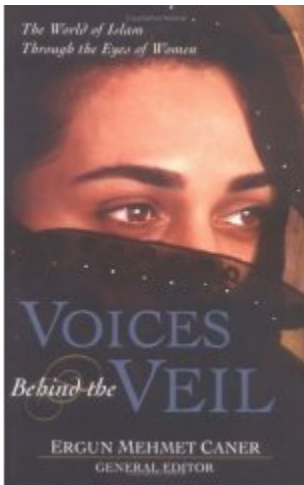


Re- Presenting Muslim Women

Venture into the non-fiction section of any bookstore and you are sure to come across a plethora of books about Muslim women most likely written by non-Muslim women who claim that they have somehow managed to infiltrate the Islamic world to offer readers a compelling (Western oriented) insight into the clandestine lives of Muslim women. Titles such as *My Forbidden Face*, *Without Mercy: Woman's Struggle Against Modern Slavery*, *Voices Behind the Veil* and *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, typically feature the familiar image of the muted Muslim woman, swathed in black, gazing pleadingly at the reader from the shadows of religious oppression.



Tune into any news or current affairs program featuring anything remotely connected to Australian Muslims and you are likely to be confronted with a similar image. An image that signifies Islamic orthodoxy, that marks Muslim women as subordinate, backward, suppressed and that masks a deep concern over the threat of an Islamic presence in Australia to an ill defined set of Australian values.

A brief survey of articles in the print media involving Australian Muslims reveals a plethora of headlines which draw heavily on this imagery: “Nile warns of veiled threat”; “Veiled threat”; “Life behind veil of Islam”; “The hijab jihad”; “Veiled threat an insult to all”; “Unveiling feminism in the Koran”; “Hiding behind a veil of outrage”; “Liberator or oppressor, paradox of the veil”, “For women, the hijab and the burqa reflect their subjugation” and “Shrouded in strife” to name a few.

For many Muslim women, those who wear hijab in its various forms and those who do not, the Australian media’s apparent fascination with the veil is somewhat perplexing, often frustrating and at times utterly amusing. In March 2006, an article in the *Canberra Times* on the practice of veiling in Cairo somehow linked the veil to the number of violent crimes against women and even a ban on abortion in the US state of South Dakota. An equally tenuous link between a Muslim woman’s dress and public security was suggested by Australian Christian Democrat MP Fred Nile who in 2002 called for a public ban on the veil, because a woman could “easily” hide a bomb in her chador.

Rarely, if ever, do the popular media offer an insight into the reality of the diversity of the Muslim diaspora in Australia. Rarely, if ever, do the media offer an alternative image of Muslim women. American-Egyptian journalist Mona El Tahawi recalled how, upon leaving a Mosque after a religious celebration she was confronted by the spectre of journalists clamouring over a throng of non-veiled women to photograph a woman in full Islamic dress. When Iktemal Hage Ali, the only non-veiled Muslim female representative on the Prime Minister’s Muslim Reference Group was nominated for NSW’s Young Australian of the Year, her ability to “represent” Muslim women was questioned even by those in her own community.

Unlike any other religious group, a Muslim woman’s identity will almost always be brought into question based on what she wears, or doesn’t wear. While the voices of veiled Muslim women are silenced by the feminist discourse that largely portrays them as unable to speak for themselves the voices of non-veiled Muslim women are also stifled by the media constructed image of Islamic ‘authenticity’: the ugly Muslim male and the oppressed veiled woman.

Meanwhile, the hijab has become somewhat of a phenomenon in some parts of the Arab world where it is not traditionally worn. Hijab fashion shops are flourishing in down town Cairo. Brightly coloured billboards advertise the latest innovation in hijab styles from the more traditional style that covers the ears and neck to the latest “Spanish style” made famous by a new generation of young Egyptian actresses who have embraced the hijab. Fashion designers are cashing in on the new wave adding sleeves and closing cleavages to ensure that their designs appeal to a growing population of women who want to remain on the cutting edge of fashion. The hijab is no longer just a religious symbol, it is also pop culture.





The veil worn by Egyptian women today is not the austere black cover worn by their grandmothers. Young women wrap their locks in brightly coloured sequined scarves draped over a Western- style ensemble accessorised with a well heeled pair of stilletos. In restaurants and nightclubs, impeccably groomed young women donned in Fendi scarves chat comfortably with their male peers.

The phenomena, it seems, has traversed the globe. Young Australian women have revamped the hijab to match their secular outfits. Slinky tops over tight jeans are finished with matching scarves, sunclases and Maybelline makeup. The combination suggests an attempt to forge a compromise between secular and Islamic traditions. This is the new 'hijabi'.



The stagnant, unyielding media image of the oppressed Muslim woman is a far cry from the reality of the lives of many Australian Muslims. Muslim women have come to be represented in the Australian media by 'a look'; a media constructed expectation based on a notion of Islam as backward and oppressive. The tendency to reduce the Muslim diaspora to a singular image excludes a range of Muslim women who, in exercising their right to dress as they please, do not 'look' like a Muslim.

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