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A most colonial strategy: Saving Muslim women, demonizing Muslim men



by Azeezah Kanji October 14, 2015October 5, 2021

The Harper government's niqab-stripping mania bears disturbing resemblance to the officially imperial past.

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For those familiar with colonial history, the current Canadian government's niqab-stripping mania bears disturbing resemblance to the officially imperial past.

French colonial administrators were obsessed with freeing Algerian women from their supposedly oppressive clothing, staging de-veiling ceremonies to initiate Muslim women into liberation. "One of the women later recalled how she had cried when she was forced to put on a red and blue robe for the mass spectacle," **writes Susanne Kaiser**.

Lord Cromer, who administered British colonialism in Egypt, **cited the imperative of saving Egyptian women from their head scarves** to rationalize British rule. This commitment to Egyptian women's liberation was uneven and superficial, little more than hijab-deep, for he simultaneously

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Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage in England.

Colonialism sustained itself with the salvific mythology of "white men saving brown women from brown men." Brown men were the villains in this drama, tyrannical rulers of a cruel and barbaric patriarchy. (Unlike the more enlightened, benevolent modes of patriarchy prevalent in the colonial metropoles themselves.) The misogynistic Brown man and oppressed Brown woman were central figures in colonialism's morality play, necessitating the mission to civilize both characters.

Lord Cromer's contemporary counterparts at 24 Sussex similarly instrumentalize Muslim women's rights in the service of projects of domination. What Professor Sherene Razack has dubbed "the eternal triangle of the imperilled Muslim woman, the 'dangerous' Muslim man, and the civilized European" stabilizes the post-9/11 "clash of civilizations" narrative.

The stereotype of Muslim men as abusers of women and children at home, and terrorists in the world at large, justifies domestic securitization and international militarization. The characterization of the niqab as a "medieval tribal custom" demonizes the Muslim men thought to impose such a custom on women — as does the legislative representation of Muslim men as practitioners of "barbaric cultural practices" such as "honour killing," forced marriage, and polygamy (soon to be reportable by tip-line by the non-barbaric segments of Canadian society).

The furor over niqabs and barbarisms is not simply a "distraction" from "real problems," but a "real problem" in its own right: crude fuel for the Islamophobic fires powering the counterterrorism-industrial complex. Images of "honour killings" in Canada and sex slaves in ISIS-held territory fuse into a phantasmagoria of violent Muslim masculinity. Tail them, surveil them, harass them, entrap them, stigmatize them, denationalize them — and bomb ISIS! After all, as our current prime minister recently informed us, "The threat we face today is not CSIS, it is ISIS." (But why do we have to choose?)

The Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act , Bill C-24, the Anti-Terrorism Act, Bill C-51, the Barbaric Cultural Practices Act and the recurrent federal and provincial efforts to ban niqabs — all work together to buttress "the eternal triangle of the imperilled Muslim woman, the 'dangerous' Muslim man, and the civilized European."

But the national security state is not an agent for women's liberation. Amar Wala's documentary *The Secret Trial 5*, for instance, powerfully depicts the corrosive effects of security certificates on the families of men held under them. Sophie Harkat, the wife of security certificate detainee Mohamed Harkat, was denied her husband's companionship for four years while he was imprisoned, held without trial on the strength of secret evidence. She was subsequently required to act as her husband's virtual jailer when he was placed under extremely restrictive house arrest — even forced to accompany him when he used public bathrooms. Mohamed Harkat now faces deportation to Algeria, to the possibility of torture.

In the words of Sophie Harkat: "Imagine the constant sound of a walkie talkie following you. Imagine having no more personal space or private life. Imagine your home being raided by 16

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Women suffer when men they love are vilified, dehumanized, hounded by security agents, indefinitely detained, tortured: hardly a strategy for ameliorating gendered oppression. Neither, for that matter, is denying women their citizenship. The resistance of women like Zunera Ishaq, Sophie Harkat, Monia Mazigh, and so many others reminds us that liberation does not lie in the neo-colonial gender politics of the "war on terror."

History should teach us to be wary of Lord Cromers, whether clothed in the **pith helmet** of a British colonialist or the **helmet hair** of a purportedly democratic Canadian prime minister.

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