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Death by hijab? The morbid obsession with Muslim women's clothing



by Azeezah Kanji February 16, 2014October 5, 2021

The islamophobic response to the death of Naima Rharouity by some media outlets and the reference to the Quebec Charter of Values, has led some to question the obsession with Muslim women's clothing.

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"A woman dies strangled by her hijab," **proclaimed** the *Journal de Montreal*. "Hazardous hijab," "death by hijab" and "oppressed to death," **announced** *Sun News*.

The story behind these crassly sensationalistic headlines is heart-rending: 47-year-old Naima Rharouity, wife and mother of two young children, who **died** last month when her clothing and hair became ensnared in a Montreal subway escalator. While many reports of the accident expressed nothing but horror and grief, other reactions were significantly less humane.

Rharouity was wearing a hijab at the time of the accident, generating **intense speculation and debate** about whether it was her headscarf or another scarf around her neck that caused the entanglement — as if it matters which piece of fabric was culpable. The *Journal de Montreal* reported that the hijab was responsible for Rharouity's death, a claim **parroted** by Sun News (both of which are owned by Quebecor Media). Both persisted in pinning the blame on the hijab, **flying in the face** of eyewitness reports and police statements to the contrary.

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supposition. “When I hear a woman wearing a veil is killed,” opined Levant, “my horror reflexes are ‘Oh my God, is this an honour killing?’” (The thankful **rarity** of so-called “honour killings” in Canada — as compared to other incidents of intimate femicide — suggests his reflexes require some recalibration.)

Online commentators weighed in with **similarly xenophobic remarks**: “This shows when you don’t know how to dress, you can die. The Charter [of Values] would have saved her.” “This is what you get for deciding to keep it on.” “Where was Allah?” “One less terrorist in Montreal.”

How does the victim of a tragedy become a dehumanized object for revulsion? How does an occasion for mourning become an opportunity for minority-bashing?

Needless to say, other **escalator accidents** have failed to arouse vitriol against those who dared to wear Crocs, shoelaces or baggy clothing — articles commonly caught in the teeth of moving stairways. Unlike the hijab, these other normally-innocuous-but-potentially-dangerous-on-an-escalator items of apparel have not been represented as agents of injury and death.

The **strange fascination** with the health risks posed by Muslim women’s clothing is not new. Islam is said to endanger the lives and safety of women, including through the clothing it supposedly imposes on them. The prospect of Muslim women being asphyxiated by their headscarves is a recurring motif. For example, the possibility of strangulation has been cited to **ban hijab-clad girls** from soccer games and martial arts tournaments in Canada — despite the existence of special “sports hijabs” designed to allay safety concerns.

As law professor Natasha Bakht **observes**:

> As more and more Muslim women are vocal about their choice to don the hijab and because these women are pursuing higher education, teaching in schools, running for political office, and advocating in courts of law, it is no longer possible to fit them into the stereotypical box of the ‘imperilled’ Muslim woman. Rather than protecting women from ‘dangerous Muslim men’ or the symbolic assault that the hijab represents to women’s equality, we must now step in to protect Muslim women from the dangers of the physical headscarf itself!

The imagery communicated is far from subtle. Muslim women are depicted as strangled or suffocated by Islam — not only figuratively, but also literally. The scarves on Muslim women’s heads are rendered the nooses around their necks.

However, women in hijabs are seen not only as the unfortunate victims of Islam, but also some of the most visible propagators of its perceived threat. They are simultaneously casualties and carriers, inspiring both pity and fear — although fear seems to be the dominant emotion in the current pathological climate.

And so the morbid obsession with Muslim women’s clothing produces precious little compassion for Muslim women, and results in no improvement to their well-being. On the contrary, it is often

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commitment to exclude them from public life."

Anti-hijab sentiments have once more been brought to the centre of the public sphere in the debate surrounding Quebec's proposed charter of values, which would prohibit public employees from wearing "conspicuous" religious symbols at work.

Although represented as a necessary bulwark protecting women's rights against the encroachment of religion, the charter threatens to entrench gender discrimination by excluding women who wear the hijab (or niqab) from public-sector jobs: in social services, in hospitals, in schools, in daycares, in universities, in courts. Moreover, the charter's proposal has exacerbated xenophobia in Quebec, leading to a surge in **attacks** and animus against visibly Muslim women — including the callous responses to Rharouity's death.

In discussions on the charter, the headscarf has been represented as a symbol of the lethal oppression of Muslim women, reinscribing the fatal triangle of Islam-hijab-death. On a recent episode of CBC's *The Current,* for instance, Algerian-born teacher Leila Bensalem **described** the hijab as a fabric "stained with blood" of women forced to wear it. To which her co-panelist Shaheen Ashraf retorted: "*My* scarf is not stained with blood."

For indeed, the hijab may bear many meanings for women who choose to wear it in Canada: a practice of modesty and piety, a demonstration of respect for traditional values, a marker of identity, a declaration of emancipation from the shallow objectification of women and/or an expression of personal style, among other significations.

Refusing to interpret the hijab as anything but a pennant of patriarchy invisibilizes the woman under the scarf: her history, her motivations for covering, her self-representation.

Time and time again, the project of saving the Muslim woman from her hijab ends up dehumanizing the woman and demonizing the hijab — her exclusion heralded as progress.

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