

# Embodying Nationhood? Conceptions of British national identity, citizenship, and Gender in the ‘Veil Affair’

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## Abstract

This article reports on a study of mediatised public discourses on nationhood, citizenship, and gender in Britain, and analyses the ways in which these accounts may be utilised in the cultivation of particular kinds of social identities. We distinguish our approach at the outset from other lines of inquiry to report on a macro level exploration of an event in which these value discourses were operative, namely the national the press reaction to the former Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw’s 2006 comments on the Muslim face-veil or *niqab*. The article traces and analyses the interactions and intersections of completing but overlapping accounts of nationhood, citizenship, and characterisations of the role of Muslim women. It identifies interdependent clusters of responses that illustrate the ways in which the *niqab* is a ‘contested signifier’ in contemporary social and political life, and the ways in which nationhood, citizenship, and gender feature prominently in its signification.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written about the place of Islam and Muslims in Britain, but very little research has systematically explored how accounts of nationhood and citizenship are being invoked during the course of public discussion on Muslim ‘difference’. The rationale behind *this* study is that an investigation of mediatised public discourses can reveal something meaningful about how various sites of boundaries, of different permutations and normative force, are invoked and promoted during the cultivation of particular kinds of contemporary social identities. Our means of pursuing this has been to focus upon a case or an event that has allowed us to observe and analyse the explicit operation of these value discourses so that, in contrast to the ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995) line of inquiry, we can examine explicit reference to accounts of British national identity and citizenship, and in contrast to the ‘everyday nationalism’ (Brubaker, 2006) approach we can examine a discourse at a macro level rather than behaviour at a micro level. The case we have selected focuses upon the national press reaction to comments made by the former

British Foreign Secretary, the Leader of the House at the time of his comments, and now Justice Secretary, Jack Straw, detailing how he asked Muslim women to remove their face veils (*niqab*) during consultations in his constituency office.

One way to approach this discussion is to recognise the ways in which social constructions of gender are often central to the imagination and reproduction of nationhood. Or as Yuval-Davis' (1997: 43) exploration of this relationship puts it, public discourse on gender provides 'a rich resource, usually full of contradictions, which is used selectively by different social agents in various social projects within specific power relations and political discourse in and outside the collectivity'. A number of different authors have approached these complex entanglements from a variety of perspectives (Bussemaker and Voet, 1998; Dietz, 1987; Lister, 1997; Lutz, Phoenix, Yuval-Davis, 1995; Walby, 1992), and in Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989: 7) we find several key means through which conceptions of gender and nationhood might be charted. These can include the ways in which women may be seen as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities and, by extension, how they may be characterised as reproducers of boundaries of national groups. Women, moreover, may become the signifiers of national differences in the construction, reproduction and transformation of national categories. Thus, and while men are more likely to monopolise its political and military representation, it is women who come to 'embody' the nation as such (Lutz *et al.*, 1995: 9–10).

Our discussion will illustrate the ways in which the tensions within these tendencies can be thrown into sharp relief by contestations over the signification of 'the veil'<sup>2</sup>. As Khibany and Williamson suggest (2008: 69) 'the veil is an increasingly political image of both difference and defiance . . . a stubborn refusal to accept 'our' culture or to embrace modernity, it is an . . . image of menace.' These intersections require some nuance because in Britain, in contrast to other European countries (Bowen, 2006), the wearing of Muslim head coverings – encompassing a variety of garments from the headscarf or *hijab*, or the full face veil or *niqab*, to full body garments such as the *jilbab* – has not, until recently, attracted intense political or legal concern. Headscarf wearing tended to be viewed as consistent with the right accorded within a multicultural society of 'ethnic dress', such as the Sikh *turban* or Jewish *Yarmulke* (Mandla v. Dowell Lee, 1983), although protection from religious discrimination was extended in 2003.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, until the late 1980s and early 1990s Muslim identities were a very minor feature of mainstream accounts of ethnic minorities and discourses of multiculturalism in Britain.<sup>4</sup> This was of course until the Rushdie Affair alerted the public imagination to the presence of minorities who subscribed not solely to a national identity or a south Asian regionalism (and even less to an anti-racist political blackness), but to a potentially universal Muslim identity that provided an increasingly salient category in the course of self-identification and public claims-making (Modood, 1990). The cacophony of

Muslim protests over the publication of that novel, and the near universal condemnation of these Muslim contestations, initiated the eventual creation of a Muslim umbrella body<sup>5</sup> paralleling earlier Jewish organisations.

Just as importantly, however, this episode established the notion of ‘fundamentalism’ within Islam and amongst Muslims which, as discussed below, would later be contrasted with ‘moderate’ Islam and Muslims. This has continued apace with the local impact of global acts of *Al Qaeda* inspired terrorism that, in the public discourse at least, have increasingly coupled Muslims and Islam with violence and terrorism. As Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman (2005: 515) recognise this too has been a gendered phenomena, but has more often focused upon men, and is entangled with a variety of more traditional anxieties that have re-entered the frame:

In the post 11 September period there has been a certain conflation of the criminal male, the Muslim and the fraudulent refugee and a growing legitimization of the suspension of their human rights. The construction of boundaries and borders that differentiate between those who belong and those who do not, determines the meaning of the particular belonging. It is here where the interrelationships between the politics of belonging and struggles for national self determination are anchored, where both collusion and resistance between them are performed and narrated.

We will return to this account below, but at this juncture we need to register the symbolic significance of how wearing different kinds of Islamic dress does not stand outside these discursive currents, a fact that is complicated by heightened political adoption. As Reina Lewis (2007: 433) has described: ‘challenges to accepted UK veiling regimes by some young women revivalists have tested the sartorial limits of multiculturalism’. It is therefore worth noting the extent to which the relationship between Muslims and multicultural citizenship in Britain has become increasingly interdependent, and for which there are at least two reasons. The first is that Muslim claims making has been characterised as specifically ambitious and difficult to accommodate (Joppke, 2004; 2009; Moore, 2004; 2006; Policy Exchange, 2007). This is particularly the case when Muslims are currently perceived to be – often uniquely – in contravention of liberal discourses of individual rights and secularism (Hansen, 2006; Hutton, 2007; Toynbee, 2005) and is exemplified by the very way in which visible Muslim sartorial practices have in public discourses been reduced to and conflated with alleged Muslim practices such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, a rejection of positive law in favour of criminal shar’ia law and so on. Such examples are elaborated in the following sections, but it is here suffice to say that these discourses suggest a radical ‘otherness’ about Muslims and an illiberality about multiculturalism. Since the latter is alleged to license these practices, opposition to the practice, it is argued, necessarily invalidates the policy.

The second reason derives from global events, not necessarily from the acts of terrorism undertaken by protagonists proclaiming a Muslim agenda (which are routinely condemned by leading British Muslim bodies), but from the subsequent conflation of a criminal minority with an assumed tendency inherent in the many. Indeed, in a post-9/11 and 7/7 climate, the explanatory purchase of Muslim cultural dysfunctionality has generated a profitable discursive economy in accounting for what has been described as 'Islamic terrorism' (e.g., Cohen, 2007; Gove, 2006; Phillips, 2006).

The net outcome of these two issues is a coupling of diversity and anti-terrorism agendas that has implicated contemporary British multiculturalism as the culprit of Britain's security woes. A good illustration of this can be found in a comment by the Labour MP, Tony Wright, who disapproved of the funding of Muslim schools shortly after 9/11 by stating: '[b]efore September 11 it looked like a bad idea, it now looks like a mad idea' (BBC News, 22 November 2001). As Singh (2005: 157) has quipped, comments such as these make it appear as though 'British multiculturalism is dead and militant Islam killed it off'. It has been argued that to some extent this was evidenced in the *Secure Borders – Safe Havens* White Paper (2002) which extrapolated from official inquiries into the civil unrest in some northern towns and maintained

The reports into last summer's disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley painted a vivid picture of fractured and divided communities, lacking a sense of common values or shared civic identity to unite around. The reports signalled the need for us to foster and renew the social fabric of our communities, and rebuild a sense of common citizenship, which embraces the different and diverse experiences of today's Britain. (Home Office, 2002: 10).

The concern with forging allegiances around core principles shared by all, through the effective engagement of responsible 'active citizens' located in 'active communities', has been interpreted as evidence of an assimilationist turn (McGhee, 2009). An alternative reading of some measures is proposed by Meer and Modood (2009) who emphasise the civic and political dimensions of such priorities, particularly those concerning citizenship pedagogies, in a way that does not signal the erasure of past multiculturalist developments. In either case the limiting development that *has* emerged surrounds the further distillation or ranking of potential new migrants according to a skills emphasis, common to a variety of western immigration agendas, in a way that has not borne well for migrants seeking refugee or asylum status. This is relevant to our discussion because a point made by some is that such restriction has gone hand in hand with the racialization of Muslims too (see Meer and Noorani (2008) for a discussion of features of contemporary forms of Muslim racialization). As Yuval-Davis *et al.* (2005: 515–6) summarise

Except for the highly skilled, immigration and asylum laws make it very difficult to migrate to Europe through legal means, something which has

contributed to the development of the discourse which constructs irregular migrants and asylum-seekers as criminals. In the aftermath of 11 September their construction as potential terrorists has also helped with the militarization of anti-immigration surveillance and the suspension of much of their human rights guaranteed by international conventions. This surveillance is being directed against anyone who might be seen to be 'different' and has enhanced the racialization of the 'Others' in Western countries and affected constructions of national boundaries.

While we accept much of this analysis we wish to guard against a repetition of the conceptual blunders of the past in conflating a variety of issues surrounding minority, and particularly Muslim, difference with perceptions and anxieties surrounding immigration and asylum. That is to say such perceptions continue to be salient and so are sociologically important because the assumption that refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants more broadly, are tainted with Islam has significant social and political implications. We do not, therefore, confuse the claim that people hold such perceptions with the claim that if we wish to research the representation of Muslims we ought to be researching representations of asylum seekers, refugees, and low skilled economic migrants more broadly.

Before we elaborate on this, we return to Jack Straw's original statement and remind ourselves of the two-fold rationale which he outlined. While this article is primarily concerned with the press reaction to his comments and not the motivation behind his intervention, we are interested in the ways in which he rationalised his concerns and how we might reflect upon the veil as a contested signifier of integration.

### **Veils as contested signifiers**

In his weekly column in the *Lancashire Telegraph* (5 October, 2006) Straw described how he asks Muslim women wearing face veils (*niqab*) to remove them when meeting him in his Blackburn constituency office. In the article he gave two reasons for this. First, he suggested that the removal of the face veil would enable him to engage more effectively in a 'face-to-face' conversation since it would enable him to 'see what the other person means, and not just hear what they say' stressing the value of being able to see someone's face in a conversation. He then moved from a focus on the interpersonal to the societal, by describing face veils as 'a visible statement of separation and difference' that made 'better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult'.<sup>6</sup> He continued:

It was not the first time I had conducted an interview with someone in a full veil, but this particular encounter, though very polite and respectful on both sides, got me thinking. In part, this was because of the apparent incongruity between the signals which indicate common bonds – the entirely English

accent, the couple's education (wholly in the UK) – and the fact of the veil. Above all, it was because I felt uncomfortable about talking to someone 'face-to-face' who I could not see (ibid.).

Before embarking on the media analysis which forms the main part of this article, it is worth locating discourses about veiling within a broader historical and materialist framing which might also shed light on some of the oppositions inherent in Straw's own reflection on the wearing of the *niqab*. While veiling is typically seen as Islamic, it is pre-Islamic in origin and has been widely adopted by a variety of communities, particularly in the Middle East. Historically it often signified status as much as piety or ethnic identity (Lewis, 2007), in the sense that veiling was a sartorial representation of the gender seclusion of the harem system (the separation of domestic space) based upon a presumption of active female sexuality and the controlling of 'inappropriate' contact and 'modesty' between genders (Mernessi, 1991). While the patriarchal dimensions of such gendered motives are operative, it is worth recognising that within Islamic traditions gender dress codes and behaviour appropriate to the occasion (such as reduced eye contact between sexes) are required from both sexes. Nonetheless regimes of veiling were often practised as a means of asserting control over women through the 'rhetoric of the veil' (Abu-Odeh, 1993) in contexts where land and family interests required strategic marriages and female virginity was prized.

Focusing on the colonial and post-colonial history of Egypt, Leila Ahmed (1992) traces new founding discourses about veiling which emerged during the period of colonial domination so that it became a potent signifier not only of the social meaning of gender but also for issues of nationalism and culture. She illustrates, for example, how the veiled/unveiled woman came to represent conflicting views of national identity signifying the opposition between 'western' and 'indigenous' or 'authentic' values, conflicts which are also inflected with class divisions. Similar discursive framings are evident in debates about modernity in Turkey (Secor, 2002; Gökariksel, 2009). Veiling becomes then a powerful 'contested signifier' (Dwyer, 1999, 2008) of national and cultural identities which may be worked and re-worked in different contexts. Within the UK different approaches to appropriate Islamic dress, including headcovering, might be interpreted as an embodied social practice inflected by a range of discursive framings. Numerous studies (Dwyer, 1999, 2008; Bhimji, 2009; Afshar, 2008; Afshar *et al.*, 2005; Werbner, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Tarlo, 2007a,b,c) attest to a resurgence in the wearing of the hijab, and less frequently the *niqab*, amongst particularly young Muslim women. Wearers, like Straw's constituent, are often well educated and articulate and resist assumptions that they are not in control of their own sartorial choices. Instead, new veiling regimes are frequently evoked as a political, as well as religious, response to Islamophobia while the rise of a transnational veiling-fashion industry (Gökariksel and Secor, 2009; Tarlo, forthcoming) suggests new intersections between faith and modernity.

In the discussion which follows we explore these issues through the press reaction to Straw's original article by examining how Muslim difference is conceptualised according to accounts of (i) Britishness and national identity, (ii) citizenship and social cohesion, and (iii) matters of gender and violence. We acknowledge at the outset that there are interdependencies between these matters, just as the ways in which conceptualising Muslim difference may cut across each other.

## Methodology and methods

The last few years has witnessed the proliferation of a variety of Muslim media sources which have emerged to compete and redress the mainstream press coverage of Islam and Muslims in Britain. Meer and Modood (forthcoming) explore how the perception of negative portrayals has given rise to alternative Muslim media sources that are more aware of and sympathetic to Muslims in the course of reflecting the Muslim or Islamic identities of both its producers and readers. In particular, publications such as *The Muslim News*, *Q-News*, *Crescent International*, *Impact International* and *Trends*, media committees at the MCB and FAIR, and radio stations such as *Radio Ummah* and *Radio Ramadan* have increasingly mobilised alternative views to mainstream or 'hegemonic' media sources.

In truth this agency is not limited to alternative public spheres but is equally discernable amongst a plethora of Muslim organizations seeking to challenge the negative representation of Muslims in the mainstream media. As a further distillation of this concern, in a forthcoming account Meer, Dwyer, and Modood (draft paper) employ the controversy surrounding the so-called 'veil affair' to explicitly investigate how over the last decade or so the voices of a variety of self-consciously Muslim actors, not least Muslim women, have become increasingly discernable in public and media discourses. These voices are not only those of professional Muslim commentators or journalists, within news reporting itself there is an observable variety of Muslim perspectives, and this marks a positive contrast with the more limited range of argumentation (publicly reported at least) during the Rushdie affair (Appignanesi and Maitland, 1989). Further valuable discussion of this can be found in Tarlo (2007b) and Werbner (2009). This article, however, is more concerned with mainstream non-Muslim accounts and so relates to Allan's (1999) analyses of how the dominant media serve to construct and reconstruct ideas of citizenship and nationhood. In a way this is reminiscent of how Anderson (1983, chapter 3) now famously argued that the rise of the mass press, or 'one-day-best-sellers', from the eighteenth century onward furnished 'rational subjects' with the preferred ideologies with which to define themselves as part of collectivities rather than as individuals. This in turn shaped imagined norms and conventions (that had material consequences) which coloured the discursive spaces of citizenship one shade instead of another.



An analysis of print media discourses might therefore reveal something valuable about common beliefs and value systems (McQuail, 1994), such that if one was to consider the dynamics of this discourse as being more epiphenomenal with respect to wider societal concerns, analysis would still reveal views held, even if these are not in and of themselves efficacious (and pernicious). This is particularly relevant because this article explores some of the commonsense arguments that, as Favell and Modood (2003: 493) have argued, fail to do justice to the complexity of 'hard cases', and encourage a conflation between fact and fiction through a reliance 'on the unchallenged reproduction of anecdotal facts usually taken from newspapers'.

Indeed, and in making a broader point about the currency of press discourse, van Dijk (1999 quoted in Richardson, 2001: 148) supports this view when he states that 'speakers routinely refer to . . . newspapers as their source (and authority) of knowledge or opinions about ethnic minorities'. This also lends some support to the view that 'social theories are (re)produced in the social worlds by the news media, influencing audience attitudes, values and beliefs' (Richardson, 2001: 148). This is a key point because while it is may be difficult to gauge a link between 'thought' and 'action', or how negative or positive representations of Muslims may translate into their discriminatory or beneficial treatment, what we can point to are the studies of Wilson and Gutierrez (1995: 45) which show that 'negative, one-sided or stereotypical media portrayals and news coverage do reinforce racist attitudes in those members of the audience who do have them and can channel mass actions against the group that is stereotypically portrayed'. To this end this paper reports on a variety of argumentation strategies evidenced in public and media discourse (for detailed discussion of 'argumentation strategies' see Meer, 2006; and Richardson, 2001). It is in this respect that Elizabeth Poole's (2002: 23) account of 'representation' is instructive:

I use the term representation to mean the social process of combining signs to produce meanings. While it is evident that the media do reproduce the dominant ideologies of the society of which they are a part, I would argue that they also connect their own 'meaning' (norms and values) through signifying practices. Representation is not then a transparent process of re-presenting an objective reality. There is always a mediating effect whereby an event is filtered through interpretative frameworks and acquires ideological significance. News, then, provides its audiences with interpretative frameworks, ways of seeing the world and defining reality. [. . .] [The task is] to extract the discursive constructions within the texts that are related to wider social processes.

This article reports on a content analysis of the national press reaction to Straw's comments but purposefully limits the time-frame to data produced during a ten day period in which the issue dominated the news agenda (5 to 15 October, 2006). By searching the *LexisNexus* database of national news-



paper archives with the key words ‘Straw’ and ‘Veil’, we identified 497 items which, with the use of *Atlas Ti*, were coded in two stages. First, according to whether they comprised: 1-Newspaper Editorials or Leaders; 2-News Items or News Features; 3-Letters, and 4-Columnist Opinion or Comment. Secondly, according to a coding schedule devised to tap key words such as ‘Britishness’, ‘cohesion’, ‘multiculturalism’ and so on, before qualitatively tracing the relationships between the ways in which these newspaper items invoked or made reference to accounts of national identity and citizenship therein. As Poole (2002: 24) reminds us: ‘developing categories of analysis is problematic in that it is always subject to interpretation. Decisions made about these should be informed by familiarity with the object under study’. This has very much guided our study and has generated a considerable amount of data that cannot all be summarised here, so this discussion will be limited to a cross-section of findings from 1-Newspaper Editorials and Leaders, and 4-Columnist Opinion or Comment.<sup>7</sup>

One compelling rationale for limiting our analysis to these items concerns the ways in which the currency of different types of press discourse is sometimes overlooked, which means that the content of newspapers can be homogenised in a manner that ignores internal variation between different sections. For example, van Dijk (1999 quoted in Richardson, 2001: 148) has argued that ‘speakers routinely refer to . . . newspapers as their source (and authority) of knowledge or opinions about ethnic minorities’, but is unable to discern the different roles played by public intellectuals and opinion forming commentators or columnists (Meer, 2006), and editorials and leaders, that consistently propagate the social and political positions of publications (Franklin, 2008), in the course of ‘influencing audience attitudes, values and beliefs’ (Richardson, 2001: 148). Contrasting editorials or leaders with comment and opinion pieces is one means of redressing this (see also Meer and Mouristen, 2009) and so overcoming the a priori assumption that a single publication contains no significant internal variation (Khiabany and Williamson, 2008).

## **Britishness and national identity**

How, then, did conceptions of Britishness and ideas of national identity feature in the press discourse? To answer this question it would be wise to step back and register how debates around the idea of British national identity, its construction and acquisition, have in recent years enjoyed prominence in several kinds of arenas (Uberoi, 2008). One influential articulation in governmental policy and discourse, frequently discussed in the press, has sought to renew or reinvigorate British national identity through the promotion of common civic values, as well as English language competencies; a wider knowledge of – and self-identification with – cultural, historical and institutional heritages, in addition to approved kinds of political engagement and activity (Meer and Modood, 2009). This may be cast as a sort of British civic

national identity that remains embedded, as the Commission on the future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (CMEB) (2000) described, in particular cultural values and traditions that involve not only a rational allegiance to the state, but also intuitive, emotional, symbolic allegiances to a historic nation, even while the nature of the nation is contested and re-imagined.

This is not of course unique to British versions of civic nationalism. As Viet Bader reminds us: 'all civic and democratic cultures are inevitably embedded into specific ethno-national and religious histories' (2005: 169). Were we to assess the normative premise of this view, however, we would inevitably encounter a dense literature elaborating the continuing disputes over the interactions between the civic, political and ethnic dimensions in the creation of nations, national identities, and their relationship to each other and to non-rational 'intuitive' and 'emotional' pulls of ancestries and cultures and so on.<sup>8</sup> What is most relevant to our discussion, however, is not the debate between different camps of 'modernist', 'ethno-symbolist', and 'primordialist' protagonists and the like, but the ways in which contemporary appeals to ethnically marked political projects such as British national identity and British citizenship are reacting to Muslim 'differences'<sup>9</sup> (for a study of how this is happening in non-political urban contexts, see Kyriakides, Virdee and Modood, 2009).

It is perhaps telling, however, that much of the literature on national identity in particular has tended to be retrospective to the extent that such 'forward looking' concerns do not enjoy a widespread appeal in scholarly accounts of national identity (while the opposite could be said to be true of the literature on citizenship). This tendency is not limited to academic arenas, however, and one of the curiosities in popular articulations of national identity is the purchase that these accounts garner from a recourse to tradition, history, and the idea of a common past (Calhoun, 1994). One implication is that national identities can frequently reflect desires to authenticate the past, 'to select from all that has gone before that which is distinctive, 'truly ours', and thereby to mark out a unique, shared destiny' (Smith, 1998: 43).

It was this very assessment which, at the turn of the millennium, informed the CMEB's characterisation of British national identity as potentially 'based on generalisations [that] involve a selective and simplified account of a complex history.' One in which '[m]any complicated strands are reduced to a simple tale of essential and enduring national unity' (cmmd 2.9: 16)', and it was precisely this tendency that informed the CMEB's alarm at how invocations of national identity potentially force ethnic minorities into a predicament not of their making: one in which majorities are conflated with the nation, and where national identity is promoted as a reflection of this state of affairs (because national identities are assumed to be cognates of monistic nations). For in not easily fitting into a majoritarian account of national identity, or either being unable or unwilling to be reduced to nor assimilated into a proscribed public culture, minority 'differences' may therefore become variously negatively conceived.

Britain has faced its own particular challenges in addressing issues of disadvantage tied to cultural difference experienced by a variety of ethnic and religious minorities. The most substantive response developed cumulatively during the final quarter of the last century and comprised a range of policies and discourses commonly known as multiculturalism. This has sought to engender equality of access and accommodate aspects of minority difference while promoting the social and moral benefits of ethnic minority related diversity in an inclusive sense of civic belonging (Modood, 2005; Meer and Modood, 2009). Indeed, at a public policy level Britain rejected the idea of integration being based upon a drive for unity through an uncompromising cultural 'assimilation', over 40 years ago, when the then Labour home secretary Roy Jenkins (1966) defined integration as 'not a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.

This has neither been a linear nor stable development, however, and has frequently been subject to criticism not only from a variety of camps who – for different reasons – militantly resisted and opposed it, but also from those who 'accept[ed] multicultural drift grudgingly as a fact of life, regretting the passing of the good old days when, they believe, Britain was a much more unified, predictable sort of place' (CMEB: cmmd 2.2: 14). As the CMEB infamously insisted:

Britishness, as much as Englishness, has systematic, largely unspoken, racial connotations. (cmmd 3.30: 19). [. . .] Britain confronts a historic choice as to its future direction. Will it try to turn the clock back, digging in, defending old values and ancient hierarchies, relying on a narrow English-dominated, backward looking definition of the nation? (cmmd 2.3: 13–14).

The commissioners perhaps found their answers in the hostile reaction upon the immediate publication of their report, based upon (mis)readings that the report was anti-British and/or unappreciative of how contemporary Britishness was already inclusive of minorities (McLoughlin and Neal, 2004). Nevertheless, their insistence that the dangers of nationalism are particularly great when there is non-reflexive ownership of the terrain is worth pursuing here, for the issue under consideration is how and what kinds of national identity and citizenship are invoked during discussion of the meanings of different veiling practices by the commentariat (as one amongst several carriers of national identity, alongside the education system and broader mass media amongst others). For example, the *Daily Mail* leaders and editorials would frequently frame their discussion by juxtaposing British national identity with multiculturalism, and the following extract provides a good illustration of how the two were often cast as mutually exclusive:

[T]his Government has actively promoted multiculturalism, encouraged Muslim 'ghettoes' and set its face against greater integration. Anyone who

dared to question this new apartheid was routinely denounced as a 'racist'. Britishness? Who cares? For New Labour yes, including Mr Straw, it became an article of faith for the ethnic minorities to celebrate their own languages, culture and traditions, at the expense of shared values. There could hardly be a more effective recipe for division. Is it really surprising . . . if they [Muslims] see Mr Straw's views on the veil as a juddering reversal of all that has gone before? (Daily Mail, 7 October, 2006)

While there is clearly more at work in this account than national identity, it is unmistakably performing several functions, chiefly as the antithesis to an ideological multiculturalism that has fostered Muslim 'difference' before channelling it into the creation of 'ghettoes', 'apartheid', and other division achieved 'at the expense of shared values'. So Britishness minimally comprises 'shared values' promoting something opposite to division. What these shared values consist of and how they are absent in multiculturalism is un-stated. The position of this editorial was stridently supported by the newspapers' prominent columnists. Amongst these Allison Pearson rehearsed the very exercise of 'ownership' over British identity that the CMEB sought to problematise. So, for example, she laments the ways in which 'the veil makes the majority of British women feel' (Pearson, 2006). She continued:

It's not a nice sensation – to feel judged for wearing your own clothes in your own country. The truth is that females who cover their faces and bodies make us uneasy. The veil is often downright intimidating. [. . .] I just don't like seeing them on British streets. Nor do I want to see another newspaper provide, as it did this week, a cut-out-and-keep fashion guide to the different types of veil: 'Here we see Mumtaz, or rather we don't see Mumtaz because the poor kid is wearing a nosebag over her face, modelling the latest female-inhibiting shrouds from the House of Taliban' (Pearson, 2006).

The intersections with gender here are palpable, particularly the discourse on female submission which belies the contested nature of what veiling signifies as elaborated earlier, and which is explored further below, but it is worth recognising how, by any measure, Pearson mounts a visceral, ethnicised, rejection of 'the veil' on the grounds that it is non-British in inception and adoption. This is premised on an exclusive, majoritarian, account of nationhood, accentuated by a rhetorical juxtaposition of 'British streets' with 'the House of Taliban'. It is perhaps unsurprising, however, to find such vitriolic accounts in a notoriously 'difference hostile' publication. As such we should turn to another publication, one bearing a reputation for balanced discussion, where British national identity and examples of Muslim 'difference', may less predictably be cast as mutually exclusive. In this respect the *Independent* offers an interesting case since, in our view, it consistently provided the most nuanced and context sensitive editorial content, contrasting different forms of muslim

headress. In one leader entitled: 'Mr Straw has raised a valid issue, but reached the wrong conclusion', it maintained that 'it [the *niqab*] is not the wearing of the headscarf. . . . Unlike in France, where the wearing of headscarves at school became a highly contentious political issue, the attitude to headscarves in Britain has been wisely liberal, which has kept the subject largely out of the political domain' (7 October, 2006). While in another leader it went as far as to contrast what it deemed as the negative contemporary press coverage of Muslims with that experienced by other groups in earlier periods:

The shameful aspect is that we are repeating our mistakes, in standing by while certain ethnic or religious minorities – in this case, Muslims – are demonised. Britain may be seen abroad as having managed the transition to a multicultural society more successfully than some, but as a nation we have not overcome the tendency to suspect, even fear, 'the other' (*Independent*, 6 October, 2006).

This charge against a British national tendency to frame itself against a minority other rehearses some of the concerns outlined by the CMEB earlier, and makes the interesting distinction between national and international perceptions of Britain's ease with 'difference'. These *Independent* editorials and leaders are particularly striking when contrasted to the ways in which national identity was invoked in the near universal condemnation of the *niqab*, and sometimes also the hijab, from its leading columnists. This included Richard Ingram (2006), Jemmima Lewis (2006), Deborah Orr (2006), and Joan Smith (2006). Most notably, it also included Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2006); one of only two or three Muslim columnists in the national press, who stated:

[W]hen does this country decide that it does not want citizens using their freedoms to build a satellite Saudi Arabia here? [. . .] It [*niqab*] rejects human commonalities and even the membership of society itself. . . . It is hard to be a Muslim today. And it becomes harder still when some choose deliberately to act and dress as aliens (9 October, 2006).

This uncompromising and emotive portrayal of the *niqab* as an alien disruption and/or abuse of British freedoms sits alongside Pearson as some of the most staunch comment made by any, let alone any Muslim, commentator; and is especially noteworthy for its assimilatory injunctions in reprimanding Muslims for continuing to accentuate their differences. It also deviates dramatically from the *Independent* leaders discussed earlier, and which refrained from making prescriptive demands on Muslim behaviour vis-à-vis Britishness. As such Alibhai-Brown not only concurs with Allison Pearson and the editorials of the *Daily Mail*, but also with right-wing commentators in the *Daily Telegraph* such as Simon Heffer (2006), and perhaps most consistently with Charles Moore's (2006) assessment that contested veiling practices are symptomatic of 'a struggle for control of Islam in this country, and for its political

exploitation' (7 October, 2006). In a marked contrast with Alibhai-Brown, however, Moore's account was nuanced with qualifications that were absent in the formers', and continued:

There is an attempt to 'arabise' Muslims from the Indian sub-continent, persuading them to wear clothes that are alien to their culture to show their religious zeal . . . For a few Muslim girls in this country, wearing the veil is a form of oppression imposed by their families; for more, it is a form of teenage rebellion, of showing more commitment than their parents – a religious version of wearing a hoodie (ibid.)

Moore nevertheless repeated Alibhai-Brown's juxtaposition between British national traditions and the wearing of 'the veil' as 'a hostile statement about the society in which the wearer lives' (ibid.). This, indeed, was the consistent editorial position of the *Daily Telegraph's* (2006) leaders which described the *niqab* as 'one of the most emblematic symbols of Muslim life', while insisting that 'many non-Muslims find these veils a little unsettling . . . not because they are an exotic import to these shores . . . but because they conceal the face' (7 October, 2006). Such leaders betrayed a conscious attempt to de-couple the possible negative implications of the *niqab* because they are 'different' (or 'exotic') in and of themselves, from their impact as 'unsettling' because they conceal the face. The *Daily Telegraph* editorials did not hold to this line of argumentation consistently, however, as discussed below, and so more often than not accorded with its columnists such as Patience Wheatcroft (2006) who, writing in its Sunday edition, characterised the *niqab* as

[A] barrier that limits the creation of relationships. It unites those who nestle behind such garments and makes it harder for them to integrate . . . It may be that there are many Muslims who choose to wear the veil but also want to play a full role in British society. They should realise that they are making that more difficult because of the uniform they choose to wear (8 October, 2006).

This is perhaps more a comment on the relationship between the *niqab* and citizenship, as explored below, but it also says something about the discursive interdependencies between national identity and citizenship, and this now familiar line of argumentation found voice in the *Times* columnist Janice Turner (2006) who described Straw's comments as 'no more than a quid pro quo' since 'we are as a culture deeply uneasy if we cannot see the faces of those we talk to' (7 October, 2006). This was supported by Simon Jenkins (2006) of the *Sunday Times* who cast the *niqab* as 'an assertion of cultural separateness' since 'to a westerner such conversation is rude. If Muslim women, and it is a tiny number, cannot understand this, it is reasonable to ask why they want to live in Britain' (8 October, 2006). Britishness, then, is a derivative of something tied up with western cultural sensitivities and psychologies. It is, moreover,

perhaps to a surprising degree, presented as a take it or leave it affiliation by both *Daily Telegraph* and the *Times* columnists, with neither allowing much room for its contestation or revision. In this regard the *Sun*'s Martel Maxwell (2006) put it simply:

[W]hat about championing British values? It's a question the nation is asking after Jack Straw's comments on Muslims covering their faces with veils. Yes, we can still be accepting of other beliefs. But it's time to put our own first and expect newcomers to respect us before being granted the same privilege (11 October, 2006).

This begs the question, however, as to whether these series of reactions are really (i) specific to the *niqab*, (ii) to Muslim 'differences' in general, or (iii) whether they are tied to a broader pattern of reactions to ethnic and religious minority 'differences' in general.

### **'Difference' and citizenship in 'real integration'**

In turning to these issues it is worth noting how the immediate newspaper leaders and editorials contained a spectrum of positions in which some tendencies were more pronounced than others. Amongst the broadsheets this included a differentiation between the *niqab* and other – including Muslim – forms of religious attire. More often than not, however, this only served to emphasise the uniqueness of the *niqab*, specifically its perceived capacity to convey a desire to separate through limiting contact. The following *Times* editorial provides a good example of this argumentation – notice in particular the linkage of 'difference' with 'separation':

[T]here are numerous modes of attire – religious and secular from priests to punks – that indicate separation or difference. What is unique about the veil is that it precludes a basic form of human contact in a way which the Sikh turban or the Buddhist robe or the Christian Cross do not (7 October, 2006).

The *Guardian* too contrasted the *niqab* with other religious attire in the course of its assessment that Straw's 'reference was exact, not to the hijab, or headscarf, worn by many (although not all) Muslim women, but to the covering of the face in a private meeting' (7 October, 2006). But note that while the *Times* differentiated between Islam and other religions, the *Guardian* contrasted the *niqab* with varieties of dress internal to Islamic traditions. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the extent to which objections to the face veil are premised upon its inscription as a 'statement of separation', to use Straw's term, and how this serves as a general metaphor for Muslim non-integration.



It is our contention that there is a perceptible formulation of citizenship operating in this characterisation which accentuates the requirements of duties, obligations and responsibilities, but problematises entitlements, benefits and 'rights' – not least a right to public respect of 'difference'. More specifically the operative account of citizenship appears to convey a view which states that too much difference will lead to separation, and that 'real' integration and citizenship can only be achieved through greater public conformity. In this formulation, private Muslim difference will be overlooked where it does not disrupt the norms of public convention, which means that the cultural manifestations which sustain outsider identities, and which are epitomised here by the *niqab*, should be shed (cf., Kyriakides *et al.*, 2009). For example, we intimated earlier that some newspaper editorials premised their objection to the Muslim *niqab* on a distinction between the 'difference' that it denotes (which they did not object to in itself), and the kind of negative 'signal' or 'meaning' that it specifically conveys in contrast to other forms of religious attire (Muslim and non-Muslim). In practise this proves to be a very porous distinction to the extent that throughout successive leaders the *Daily Telegraph* (6 October, 2006) and the *Times* (7 October, 2006) were able to herald Straw's comments as 'at long last – provoking a debate' (*Telegraph*) that quickly moved outward from the specific case of the *niqab* to incorporate a broad corpus of 'difference' related issues, and which facilitated those newspapers' political rejection of multiculturalism per se. Thus the *Times* insisted:

[I]ntegration is not aided by the wearing of veils, just as it is not aided by the failure of immigrants to learn English. It is another example of the damage done by multiculturalism to the cause of real integration (7 October, 2006)

The 'real integration' alluded to here is positively contrasted to a multicultural integration that sustains 'difference'. In charging Muslim *niqab* wearers with self-segregating and adopting isolationist practices under a pretence of multiculturalism, these narratives rehearse accounts pioneered in post-riot 2001 inquiries (see Hussain and Bagguley, 2005) and which provided many influential commentators with the licence, not necessarily supported by the specific substance of these reports, to critique Muslim distinctiveness in particular and multiculturalism in general.<sup>10</sup>

On this anti-multiculturalism terrain the *Daily Telegraph* was able to mount multiple critiques of Muslim 'difference' that, in its view, impeded integration or was synonymous with non-integration. In this manner its Sunday companion, the *Sunday Telegraph*, concluded that the very presence of the face-veil was final proof of how the 'Government's attempts to "integrate" Muslims have been a failure' (8 October, 2006). An analysis echoed by the *Telegraph's* former editor, Charles Moore (2006), who insisted that: 'to encourage it [the *niqab*] among citizens proposing to live and bring up families in the modern Western world is literally to set one's face against the rest of us' (7 October, 2006). So in sum these leaders could be read as arguing that (a) the *niqab*

articulates an attitudinal and behavioural desire to be 'separate'; (b) that *interpersonal* 'separation' informs a wider pattern of *societal* 'separation'; (c) that this is the source of Muslim non-integration, as they understand it, so that (d) Straw's intervention was appropriate (and indeed long overdue). To a surprising degree, some of this logic was also presented in the *Guardian's* description of the *niqab* as

... a literal barrier between citizens, an obstacle to interaction rather than a bridge between people and that it adds to social divides that already exist. [...] The *niqab* may bring benefits but for a wearer there may be costs too in terms of contributing to and advancing in society (7 October, 2006).

This may be read as arguing that in the currency of citizenship the social costs of the choosing to wear the *niqab* are too high a price to pay. Or as Rosie Boycott (2006) of the *Daily Mail* put it, 'the problem of how to deal with people, how to negotiate your way as a citizen is removed'. This too was a view shared by the newspaper that had hitherto expressed the most sympathy for Muslims, the *Independent on Sunday*, which described the *niqab* as more than a 'statement of separation' – and as 'a word Straw did not use but could have – rejection. It has this effect on others in public places and in the interactions of strangers' (8 October, 2006). In this regard at least there was less dissonance between editorials and the views of columnists within this newspaper, with Deborah Orr (2006) reminding Muslim women 'that many fellow citizens think them [the *niqab*] a total abomination – and for sound reasons. Barrier to integration? Of course. That's the point' (14 October, 2006).

Running throughout much of the press reaction was a tangible anxiety over the long term security risks posed by Muslim 'non-integration'. For example, the *Observer* provided this appraisal of the relationship between wearing of the *niqab*, social cohesion (as it understands it), and terrorism:

[T]he debate about what obligations a minority has to change its habits in the interests of wider social cohesion is not new. [...] This has been a problem for all immigrants to Britain, but there is a reason why it is more politically charged in the case of Muslims: their alienation from the rest of society is a factor in the recruitment of terrorists (8 October, 2006).

One of the criticisms of the social cohesion/community cohesion agenda has concerned how the term has been invoked to mean something closer to assimilation (Barry, 2001) than integration as a two-way process (Modood, 2007). This is a criticism that could be made of the understanding betrayed in this editorial which uses the term to focus *exclusively upon the obligations of Muslim minorities*. But what this leader assumes as a matter of fact, as much of the debate on Muslims tends to, is that Muslims are not 'integrated' and that the source of this alleged non-integration rests with Muslims themselves. This is a circular argument because evidence of Muslim non-integration lies in

discernible public affirmations of Muslimness, so that we return to the way in which the very presence of the *niqab* serves as a symbol of Muslim 'non-integration'. This logic was shared by the *Guardian's* Martin Kettle (2006), for whom the *niqab* is 'not merely a badge of religious or cultural identity like a turban, a yarmulke or even a baseball cap' because:

It is at some level a rejection. And since that statement of rejection comes from within Islamic cultures, some of whose willingness to integrate is explicitly at issue in more serious ways, it is hardly surprising that it should be challenged (7 October, 2006).

For similar reasons, the three most popular tabloids – the *Sun* (6 October, 2006), the *Mirror* (6 October, 2006), and the *Daily Mail* (6 October, 2006) – each strongly endorsed Straw's intervention. A great deal of this endorsement was prefigured with a rhetorical investment in Straw's credibility as a long-time anti-racist friendly politician with a significant Muslim electorate in his own constituency; a rhetorical manoeuvre that frequently drew upon Straw's own comment ('if not me, then who?') on the appropriateness of his raising the issue. As the *Mirror* editorial put it: 'when someone as well-meaning as Mr Straw suggests it's time to question whether Muslim women should be veiled, it is right to take notice' (6 October, 2006), and the *Mirror's* Richard Stotty (2006) reiterated his paper's support for Straw in emphasising the interpersonal gains to be found in unveiled face to face communication. Stotty quickly moved from this issue outward, however, much like many newspaper leaders and commentators, from relating the alleged interpersonal separation caused by the *niqab* to 'a growing and dangerous separation between communities' that has, in this commentators' view, 'already had disastrous results' (8 October, 2006).

## **Gender and violence – domestic and international**

The *Sun*, more explicitly than the others (with the exception of the *Daily Express*), insisted that 'veils make it harder for Muslim and white communities to mix' (7 October, 2006), and the *Sun* is perhaps also unique for being the only prominent tabloid with a Muslim commentator. Anila Baig (2006) was recruited in the aftermath of 9/11, and she wore a *hijab* when she joined the paper; an experience that she drew upon in framing her reaction to Straw's comment:

I took to wearing the headscarf after 9/11. I saw it as a badge of honour. My religion might be misunderstood but I was proud of it. No one forced me to wear it and no one forced me to take it off. One day it just slipped off my head and I didn't even notice. When it was time to renew my passport it felt easier to not wear it. It was the height of the recent terror plot and I was

going to the US. Why draw attention to myself? And yet I can't help feeling like I'm letting the side down. I want to defend women who take the full veil but I can't. I have to face facts – I find it intimidating too and it does smack of separateness. Nowadays I can take or leave my headscarf. Maybe one day that will be true for women who wear the *burkha* (Baig, 2006).

This is an interesting extract that displays at least two viewpoints: one of a Muslim woman who has previously worn a headscarf (but not the *niqab*) with pride and through choice before deciding to discard it, and that of a Muslim woman who is conscious of the societal/external attributions placed upon *niqab* wearers. The tension in her account, particularly her insistence that she finds the *niqab* 'intimidating too and it does smack of separateness' (ibid.) unites her piece with the dominant editorial line of her paper, as does the conflation of the *niqab* with the *burkha*.

Crucially, newspaper editorials fairly unanimously cast the *niqab* as an impediment to Muslim women's autonomy, with the most sympathetic evaluation elaborated by the *Independent* which deemed it difficult to disentangle 'the burden of tradition, culture and family [which] often weighs so heavy that it can be hard to discern where convention ends and genuine free will begins' (7 October, 2006). The most hard-line and uncompromising articulation of this concern, however, was to be found in the *Sunday Express*' announcement that 'Straw was right to call for a debate . . . but he did not go far enough' (8 October, 2006). It continued:

Muslims say the decision to wear a veil is the woman's choice but how can we talk about young Muslim women making a 'choice' to cover up in the presence of men who are not members of their family when they have been indoctrinated from an early age to believe that a woman who does not dress 'modestly' has no self respect and will be treated as such? (ibid.)

In fact the three most popular tabloids – The *Sun*, the *Mirror*, and the *Daily Mail* – each insisted that Muslim women provide an exception to the right to dress differently on the grounds that that they may be subject to cultural coercion. The *Sun* explicitly qualified its position on the basis that: 'Muslim women are vital in the struggle against extremism. Until they establish confident equality without wearing a mask in public, we cannot expect the voice of modern Islam to be heard in Britain' (6 October, 2006). This is a good illustration of the coupling of diversity and security agendas in public discourse on Muslim 'difference' elaborated earlier, and which contained a further inference to the relational categories of modern and moderate Islam. This was exemplified in a comment piece by the *Sun*'s political editor, Trevor Kavanagh (2006):

The veil sharply defines one section of society and deliberately excludes the rest. And what were once masks imposed by men are increasingly adopted

by some women as a silent gesture toward the host nation. [...] Islamic extremism thrives on grievances. For some women the veil is a genuine expression of faith. For most, it is imposed by men who treat women as second-rate citizens. For an increasing minority it is a form of passive aggression (9 October, 2006)

While this extract touches on several issues, what is particularly prominent is the problematising of an unambiguous or 'sharp' distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim, which is coupled to patriarchal coercion and latent aggression. It appears in these accounts that the alleged aggression is always simmering, likely to erupt at any 'perceived grievance'. Moreover, and as this extract illustrates, the 'role' of Muslim women has taken on incredible significance in the discourse on Muslim integration. This entails a paradoxical tendency to simultaneously cast Muslim women as the main vehicles of integration but also the first victims of the failure of integration. In this context, freely choosing to wear the *niqab* is, then, in some ways, a greater offence than being forced to wear it, or as Khiabany and Williamson (2008: 69) put it: 'veiled women are considered to be ungrateful subjects who have failed to assimilate and are deemed to threaten the British way of life'. The gender dimension is made additionally interesting because much has been penned on the convergences between Right and Left on attitudes toward Islam and Muslims, and a further illustration of this may be found in contrasting Kavanagh with the following comment from Joan Smith (2008) of the *Independent*:

The hijab, *niqab*, jilbab, chador and burqa. I can't think of more dramatic visual symbols of oppression. Last week, the bodies of a young Asian woman and her two infant sons, aged two and one, were found in a flat in the Handsworth area of Birmingham. All three had died by hanging, and the police say they are not looking for anyone else in connection with the tragedy. Neighbours said that the mother was unable to speak English and usually wore traditional Islamic dress, including a burqa – two factors that they felt contributed to her social isolation (8 October, 2006).

There are several broad confluences in this passage, each foreclosing a varied reading of different examples of Islamic dress. All are nevertheless associated, indeed implicated, in violence against women. This dovetails into a discourse of segregation and disempowerment, epitomised by the non-acquisition of English language competencies.

In broad terms, this is a thesis perhaps most associated with feminists of whom Susan Moller Okin (1999) is exemplary, and concerns how traditional religious cultures exhibit a significant risk of coercing and causing harm to minority women. In Smith's (2006) account above, Islam as a doctrine, and Muslims as practitioners of that doctrine, bear values that are intrinsically irreconcilable with accounts of gender equality and leads her, as it does Okin (1999), to reject minority cultural practices perceived to negate those

women's autonomy. This is an analysis that has received much support from writers such as Irshad Manji (2005) and Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2007), both of whom are often unproblematically promoted over less sensationalist writers such as Kecia Ali (2006), Asma Barlas (2002) and Amina Wadud (1999), all of whom take a critical but nuanced perspective toward Islamic religious sources and practices. What is lacking in this press discourse is an acknowledgement of the need to understand and take seriously the risks of harm to women from religious and other quarters, alongside how the debate about Islam and gender equality lends itself to a generic, racialised, anti-Muslim sentiment.

A refreshing exception to this trend can be found in Dustin and Phillips (2004) whose research into honour killings and forced marriage makes clear that these practices are not inherently associated with any one religion, that they are separate from matters of religious attire, and that they are not practices widely endorsed by religious communities. There were a few examples of such a reading including Venessa Feltz's (2006) insistence that every woman should be free to wear 'as much or as little as she fancies' (12 October), and Madeline Bunting's (2006) complaint that Straw risked fuelling anti-Muslim prejudices by focusing on the clothing choices of a small minority of Muslim women in Britain. In the main, however, such nuance was absent and is illustrated in Alibhai-Brown's (2006) opposition to the *niqab* on the grounds that: 'I have seen appallingly beaten Muslim women forced into the *niqab* to keep their wounds hidden'. Henry Porter of the *Observer*, too, held this line of argument:

Straw didn't quite say that the veil has no place in a liberal secular society, but if that was his intention I agree with it. This is not to persecute Muslims for their beliefs or deny them rights: it is simply to say that the veil, like it or not, has become increasingly regarded as a symbol of separatist aspiration and of female subservience (8 October, 2006).

In this way the twin issues of segregation and violence were centrepiece, and were resurrected in a number first person accounts. This included the *Daily Star*'s Linda Harrison (2006) who spent the day in a *niqab* – 'peering out through a tiny slit' – to report how 'there is no doubt that people react differently to the veil and that it creates barriers between people. Walking out in my normal clothes, I was so relieved to feel part of the crowd again' (11 October, 2006). The *Daily Mail*'s Rosie Boycott (2006) undertook a similar exercise which she described as 'feeling completely cut off from the world around me. I'm in it, yet I'm apart' (14, October, 2006). And her co-columnist, Allison Pearson (2006), was moved to describe a Muslim woman she saw wearing the *niqab* as resembling 'a huge crow that had a beak or some kind of metal grille in the place where her face should have been' (11 October, 2006). Suzanne Moore (2006) encapsulates these readings of the *niqab* as follows: 'I object to the veil because I am a feminist not because I am phobic about

anything. If a woman cannot get on a bike, smile at her children or have a cup of tea in public, it's oppressive' (8 October, 2006).

## Conclusions

It is difficult to provide a singular account of the issues that were raised during the so-called 'veil affair'. It therefore appears more appropriate to speak of clusters of discourses that may be grouped into three areas. Firstly, the press reaction frequently invoked an exclusive account of Britishness – but, crucially, not through stating what Britishness is but by denying what it is not. Most prominently, particularly in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, Britishness is not multicultural. Within this cluster there was an overlap between ethnic and civic accounts of national identity, with British national identity and British citizenship conceived as interdependent entities (with the characterisation of the former drawing on the characterisation of latter, and vice versa). Secondly, there appeared to be some dissonance between newspaper leaders and newspaper commentators in certain publications. This was most pronounced in the *Independent* and the *Guardian*, while in other publications there was a consistent opposition to the *niqab* and a largely unfaltering endorsement of Jack Straw's intervention. The *Independent* provided the widest disparity between these two sections, and the commentators were notable in consistently viewing their staunch opposition to the *niqab* as a feminist position in tune with an ethic of liberal secularity, and specifically in conceiving the *niqab* as a symbol of oppression (illustrated by Joan Smith and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown). This was not limited to the *Independent*, however, and as a discursive trope was repeated, though less consistently, by some other commentators, particularly in the *Guardian* and *Observer*. Thirdly, some opposition to the specific form of Muslim 'difference' that is symbolised by the *niqab* drew heavily upon a 'security' theme. This was premised upon a cumulative series of steps which assumed that the *niqab* represented an obstacle to interpersonal communication, that interpersonal communication is an integral part of interaction between different communities, and that some communities need more interaction than others because their separatism gives rise to radicalism (which in turn gives rise to terrorism). Indeed, removing the *niqab* was, for many commentators, an integral part of counter-terrorism. All of this suggests that veiling regimes remain in Britain, as elsewhere, a 'contested signifier' in contemporary public and media discourse.

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## Notes

- 1 This research is part of a project within the Leverhulme Trust funded Bristol-UCL Programme on Migration and Citizenship. We are grateful to three anonymous reviewers and Nickie Charles for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
- 2 As we discuss in greater detail below, the generalised term 'the veil' is frequently used, particularly by non-Muslim commentators, to encompass a wide variety of different forms of headcovering adopted by different groups of Muslim women. These different 'veiling regimes' (Secor, 2002) often relate to specific historical, social, economic and political contexts and individual women respond in different ways (Afshar, Aitken and Franks, 2005; Tarlo, 2007c). In the discussion which follows we try to refer to specific forms of Muslim headcovering where appropriate, however we also note the ways in which discursive framings often elide these distinctions reproducing what Abu-Odeh (1993) describes as 'the rhetoric of the veil'. Thus we sometimes make use of the generic term 'the veil' when we want to highlight these discursive practices.
- 3 For example protection from discrimination for Muslim women at work is provided by the 2003 Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations. As Lewis (2007) reports some cases have tested this legislation recently in relation to wearing the *niqab* in particular.
- 4 This is despite the fact that there has been a long established Muslim community in Britain, made up of Arab (particularly Yemeni) and South Asian sea-faring migrants (Ansari, 2004). Yet it is also true that the major part of the approximate 1.6 million Muslim presence results from post-war commonwealth immigration from India, East Africa, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The socio-economic profile of these groups varied on arrival but included those from rural backgrounds with low skills and little formal education who became concentrated in factories, transport and blue collar work, whilst the more skilled and qualified Indian and East-African Asians fared much better in the labour market, in much the same way that their children would later in the education system (Modood *et al.*, 1997). Although there is evidence of some social mobility amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups, it remains the case that Muslims are currently concentrated in the most socially deprived strata of employment, education, and housing (Abrams and Houston, 2006; Policy Innovation Unit, 2001) with some evidence of disproportionately bad health (Nazroo, 2003). This is compounded by an increasing change in profile and balance between South Asian and other newly arrived national origin groups, often refugees from war-torn areas such as Middle-Eastern, Afghani, Somali, Bosnian and other Eastern European immigrants who are contributing to the category of 'Muslim' in Britain.
- 5 Inaugurated in 1997, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is an umbrella organisation made up of over 400 local, regional and national organisations. Its aims include the promotion of consensus and unity on Muslim affairs in the UK; giving voice to issues of common concern; encouraging 'a more enlightened appreciation' of Islam and Muslims in the wider society; and working for 'the good of society as a whole'. With a view to representing British Muslims, it lobbies government and holds discussions with various public bodies and is in many respects modelled on the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Its pre-eminence waned in the mid-2000s as it grew critical of the Iraq war and the so called 'war on terrorism'. It has also faced considerable public criticism from both government and civil society bodies (particularly of the centre-right) for allegedly failing to reject extremism clearly and decisively. Such charges stem from the links between some MCB members and the Islamist organisation Jamat-e-Islami which was founded in northern India in the 1930s by Abu A'la Mawdudi. David Cameron, widely anticipated to be elected Prime Minister in the next general election, has likened the MCB to the far-right British National Party (BNP) (Cameron, 2007). An outcome of such political critique has been the invitation to represent British Muslims in matters of consultation as stake-holders to a plethora of other, though curiously less representative, Muslim organisations (such as the Sufi Muslim Council (SMC) and the Al-Khoie Foundation).

At the same time newer advisory groups (such as the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Body (MINAB)) do not seek the same remit of representation as the MCB, while other older bodies such as the Islamic Sharia Council (ISC) continue to be an affiliate member of the MCB.

- 6 It is also worth noting that throughout the article and subsequent interviews, Straw continually distinguished between the full face veil or *niqab*, and other types of Muslim coverings such as the headscarf or *hijab*.
- 7 The News Items and Letters are explored separately.
- 8 Chief amongst these: whether or not 'nations' are social and political formations developed in the proliferation of modern nations from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, or whether they constitute social and political formations – or 'ethnies' – bearing an older pedigree that may be obscured by a modernist focus.
- 9 Though this concern perhaps relies on the cultural-imaginary form of 'modernist' argument most associated with Anderson (1983).
- 10 Including the Ouseley Report's (2001) likening of Muslim settlement patterns to those of 'colonists' (see Wainwright, 2001). It is worth remembering that the Ouseley Report was a response to the tensions in Bradford in the late 1990s and was completed before the 'riots' of 2001 but only released in their aftermath and fed into their analyses.

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