

# Face veils and face masks

## Finding humor in the midst of pandemic

Jacqueline Hoover

“The last thing we needed . . . ,” says a burqa-clad Muslim woman to her friend. A burqa covers a women’s entire body, including a mesh over the eyes. In this meme both women also wear face masks. They need yet another layer of facial covering to shield themselves from COVID-19. The flimsy cloth of the burqa does not provide enough protection.



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does not provide enough protection.

This meme made me laugh when I first saw it, but is it disrespectful for a Christian to laugh at this meme depicting Muslim women? Will it offend Muslims? We certainly should not laugh at people who are different, but can we laugh with them?

Even if we do not want to laugh, we might still find it difficult to resist smiling at a funny meme.

But now even those not wearing burqas are struggling with face masks. Many countries have encouraged or required wearing face masks to ward off COVID-19, especially on public transportation. And so COVID-19 has challenged Western perceptions of face coverings. Before the arrival of the coronavirus, many Westerners disliked Muslim women covering their faces. It was thought to hamper good communication. It was interpreted as a sign of women’s submission, if not oppression, and a security threat. Over the last decade, “burqa bans” have sprung up in several European countries, as well as in Québec and Morocco. These bans seek to exclude Muslim women covering their faces in public spaces.

## Burqa jokes

There is a whole genre of burqa jokes. They play on the anonymity of the burqa. A recently published little book called *Burqa!* illustrates the point. The book provides several illustrations focusing on the women's hidden eyes. In one scene a young child screams "Mama" in the middle of several women in black burqas. The child is lost and distressed; he cannot identify which woman is his mother. In another scene two burqa-clad women meet. One says, "Have we met before?" The other one responds, "Only from seeing each other." Anonymity also gives women power; their eyes cannot be controlled. In yet another scene two men stand in the middle of a group of women in burqas. The one man says to the other, "You never know if your wife is observing you." The gaze of the masked woman can even be threatening. It is not for nothing that this scene is labeled "Psychological Terrorism." It evokes a chuckle as it confounds the notion that the burqa renders women powerless.<sup>1</sup>

## Veiling and COVID-19

The burqa is sometimes confused with the niqab. However, they are different. The burqa covers the eyes with a mesh, while the niqab leaves the eyes exposed. The burqa and the niqab are not mandatory in Islam, and rather few Muslim women wear them. The burqa is found in Afghanistan. Muslim women who cover their faces in the West usually wear the niqab. A far greater number of Muslim women wear the hijab, a veil that covers the hair and the neck but not the face. Some Muslim women do not veil at all, arguing that the Islamic sources do not require it. Women who cover their faces with a niqab or a burqa often believe that they benefit spiritually. They demonstrate their inner dedication to God outwardly by covering the whole body. Veiling is a marker of piety.<sup>2</sup>

Because veiling signals piety and modesty, veiled women in some Muslim countries suffer less harassment in public than unveiled women. The veiled body thus gives freedom of movement. Conversely, in the West

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1 Simona Bassano di Tuffillo, *Burqa! 24 illustrations accompagnées de Ma vie à Kabul de Jamila Majahed* (Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2015), illustrations 3, 11 and 16. The translations are mine.

2 This suggests that Muslim women "who do not cover are somehow less pious and faithful." See A. Brenda Anderson and F. Volker Greifenhagen, "Covering Up on the Prairies: Perceptions of Muslim Identity, Multiculturalism and Security in Canada," in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, edited by Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 62.

the veiled body attracts attention. It signals the alien and the other, and it no longer provides protection. Veiled women and especially niqabi women report being harassed and physically abused in Western streets.

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But COVID-19 changed this. Some niqabi women say that their situation has now improved. One British Muslim woman who wears niqab notes, “There’s a marked difference to the way I’m being perceived. Nobody is giving me dirty looks because of my gloves and the covered face.” Suddenly, niqabi women are the experts on covering the face in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>3</sup> Will this more positive attitude towards face veils last? Some niqabi women are optimistic. One woman from Pakistan notes, “I

think that this gives everybody the opportunity to step into our shoes for once.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The niqab and face mask**

It is remarkable that COVID-19 has people in Western countries covering their faces and changing their perceptions of face coverings. What was resisted on security grounds is now encouraged for the common good. A leading Indian-British-American scientist asserts that not wearing a face mask should be perceived “as ‘anti-social’ in the same way as drunk driving or failing to wear a seat belt.”<sup>5</sup> The anti-social has become social. A Canadian scholar writes, “We have all become niqabis now!” and she points

3 Anna Piela, “Muslim women who cover their faces find greater acceptance among coronavirus masks—‘Nobody is giving me dirty looks,’” *The Conversation*, April 10, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/muslim-women-who-cover-their-faces-find-greater-acceptance-among-coronavirus-masks-nobody-is-giving-me-dirty-looks-136021>. This article also notes that some mosques advise niqabi women to wear a medical face mask under the niqab because the simple cloth of the niqab does not actually provide much protection.

4 Hafsa Lodi, “Niqabi women speak out about the surge in mainstream face-covering,” *Arab News*, May 11, 2020, updated May 12, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1673056/lifestyle>.

5 “Coronavirus: Wear masks in crowded public spaces, says science body,” *BBC (British Broadcasting Company)*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53316491>.

to the hypocrisy of forbidding face veils and encouraging face masks.<sup>6</sup> This led to a catch-22 in France. Someone could be fined on public transport both for wearing a face covering and for not wearing a face covering.<sup>7</sup> What is the proper response? To laugh, or to cry?

Perhaps it goes too far to compare the niqab and face masks. Muslim women veil for religious reasons, and people wear face masks to reduce the spread of COVID-19.<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Bucar, a scholar of Muslim fashion, is not sure that COVID-19 face masking will lead to reduced religious prejudice.

*While I would like to say yes, I don't think this will be the case. Banning face veils in the West has been about gendered Islamophobia. It's not really about covering faces. . . . I think most non-Muslims will not make the connection that face-veiling for religious reasons and public health reasons both depend on ideas about the common good, and that they are both motivated by ethical concerns even if those concerns are of course different. At least, that is a connection they won't make without actually learning more about religious modesty.*<sup>9</sup>

Bucar distinguishes religious and health reasons for covering the face, but she sees both motivated by ethical concerns for the common good. How so? Face masking reduces the spread of COVID-19, and the veiled Muslim woman upholds the propriety of the public sphere with her modesty.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, the niqab has caught the imagination of the fashion industry. In February 2020, as COVID-19 began to take its toll in Italy,

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6 Katherine Bullock, "We are all niqabis now: Coronavirus masks reveal hypocrisy of face covering bans," *The Conversation*, April 27, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/we-are-all-niqabis-now-coronavirus-masks-reveal-hypocrisy-of-face-covering-bans-136030>.

7 Lou Stoppard, "Will Mandatory Face Masks End the Burqa Bans?" *The New York Times*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/style/face-mask-burqa-ban.html>.

8 Thomas Sealy, "Is there a difference between a niqab and a face mask?" *Open Democracy*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/global-extremes/there-difference-between-niqab-and-face-mask/>.

9 Hafsa Lodi, "Niqabi women speak out about the surge in mainstream face-covering," *Arab News*, May 11, 2020, updated May 12, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1673056/lifestyle>.

10 Elizabeth Bucar, *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 2–3.

fashion designer Marine Serre featured futuristic face masks at the Paris fashion show. Models dressed in face masks that resembled niqabs, and one model even wore an outfit that looked like a burqa.<sup>11</sup> The face masks were stylish but severe, a harbinger of what was to come. Not a laughing matter.

The Muslim fashion industry is booming around the world, mostly focused on the hijab, which does not cover the face. Some observers perceive Muslim fashion negatively as a form of Islamization of Western public space. Others evaluate Muslim fashion positively and equate it with freedom and creativity, even seeing its presence in the West as a form of integration into Western societies. However, fashion is about not only cre-



With permission from Shelley Knoll-Miller, *The Age Newspaper*, Melbourne.

ativity and freedom but also following norms that the industry sets.<sup>12</sup> The cartoon here evokes humor as it undermines common assumptions about Muslim women's oppression. It shows a woman in Western attire saying to a woman in a niqab and a long

black dress, "You must be so restricted and uncomfortable!" The woman in niqab agrees, looking at her feet, "I am! And I've only been wearing them for 20 minutes . . ." The woman in niqab lifts her dress to reveal bright red shoes with high stiletto heels. Indeed, her feet are very sore. The woman in Western dress assumes the niqab is restrictive. The woman

11 "Paris Fashion Week: Facemasks on show amid coronavirus concerns," BBC (*British Broadcasting Company*), February 28, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51672753>.

12 Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, "Introduction," in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, eds. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 14.

in niqab thinks nothing of that but points to her painfully restrictive but fashionable shoes.

In a second cartoon (not shown here) a woman in Western dress asks a woman in a niqab, “What’s under your niqab?” The veiled woman responds, “My face, what’s under your make up?” This points to the fact that make-up can function as a type of mask. Some women are known to say that they cannot go outside of their homes without make-up, just like niqabis who cannot leave their homes without their face veil. Indeed, as one British observer comments, “Make-up can be used as a mask, to hide



“The era of men wearing niqab is the era of corona.”  
With permission from Amal Al-Ajmi.

insecurities and shame that people feel about their face and perhaps even how they feel about themselves in general.”<sup>13</sup> Make-up, like other forms of masking, can both hide and reveal, which provides a measure of control and protection.<sup>14</sup>

These two cartoons are humorous because niqabi women deftly evade assumptions about their restriction and oppression. The woman in the red shoes reveals that she is in the thrall of the fashion industry even though she wears niqab. In the second cartoon, the niqabi woman turns

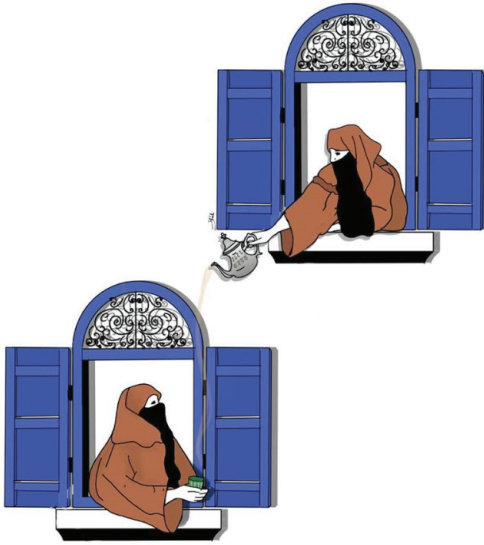
13 Bella Gorman, “What does makeup really mask?” *Varsity*, May 5, 2019, <https://www.varsity.co.uk/fashion/17481>.

14 David Inglis, “Cover their Face: Masks, masking, and masquerades in historical-anthropological context,” in *The Routledge International Handbook to Veils and Veiling practices*, edited by Anna-Mari Almila and David Inglis (London: Routledge, 2018), 279.



the tables on her inquisitor to focus on her veil of make-up. It is easier to see masks on others than to see our own masks.

Kuwaiti artist Amal Al-Ajmi takes things a step further. She painted the picture on the preceding page in response to a Saudi tweet advocating the wearing of niqab as mandatory for all Muslim women. The tweet stated,



“Confinement story: So close no matter how far.”  
With permission from Ichraq Bouzidi.

“The era of men wearing niqab is the era of corona.”<sup>16</sup> COVID-19 has turned the world upside-down, and it seems that even men have become niqabis. While that might sting for some, it could also evoke a good laugh.

Face masks and face veils are similar and yet have different meanings and functions. The drawing on this page by Moroccan artist Ichraq Bouzidi depicts two women in traditional Moroccan veils. They are neighbors, and they used to like to drink tea together. COVID-19 made that impossible. Nonetheless, they found a creative solution to overcome the problem. Bouzidi entitles the drawing: “Confinement story: So close no matter how far.”<sup>17</sup> Face masks and face veils are themselves also “so close

15 Ruba Obaid, “How young Arabs are reacting to the COVID-19 crisis through art,” *Arab News (Saudi Arabia)*, April 13, 2020, updated April 14, 2020, <https://arab.news/jhmjh>.

16 The translation is mine.

17 Obaid, see note 15.

ed, “People are racing to buy masks to protect them from corona, while Islam discovered the treatment 1400 years ago when it ordered the wearing of Niqab as a protection against viruses.”<sup>15</sup> It went viral but was deleted a few days later because of much criticism. Al-Ajmi’s painting shows a niqabi woman saying, “The era of men wearing niqab is the era of corona.”

no matter how far.” Let us think how we can use the COVID-19 crisis to build bridges of understanding just like the two neighbors in the drawing. And let that include some good laughs over our veiled selves.

### **About the author**

Jacqueline Hoover is a freelance instructor in Islamic Studies based in the United Kingdom. She is a member of the sessional faculty at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, and an ordained minister in the Mennonite Church USA. She has taught recently in Malaysia, Egypt, Kenya, and the United Kingdom.