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Culture clash? The silent questions that linger in the space between

A burka's tale

Taimur Ahmed encounters a burka with a message and poses some challenging questions

On a warm July evening in downtown Toronto, among the sea of Canadians basking in the summer heat and wearing next to nothing to celebrate, a shimmering black *burka* floats past gawking eyes. Ironical that all the ogling eyes reveal so much – fear, sympathy or disdain – but see only a pair of disembodied retinas, which reveal nothing. I'm sitting on the patio of The Rex, Toronto's preeminent jazz club on Queen Street, where the cacophony of instruments – piano, trumpet, drums – battle it out, echoing the multiplicity of reactions the *burka* provokes.

If, as anthropologists claim, 90 percent of all communication is nonverbal, one must concede that at least a portion of this nonverbal communication emanates from our clothing. Just like large antlers and peacock feathers, the mute fibres of human dress, woven, cut and stitched together, have the power to speak. The *burka*, in this sense, is a real chat-box. A pair of designer jeans, for example, tells the world that its inhabitant is probably wealthy, as designer jeans tend to cost a great deal. If the jeans also happen to be the latest

cut (that being a skinny leg for women) the signal is that the wearer is savvy enough to be aware of the latest trend. If one of the most common clothing articles can reveal so much, what, I wondered, was the *burka* on Queen Street saying?

Before long, the answer presented itself in the shape of a curvaceous blonde, standing in the line to enter the club across the street. Gauging by the way most men were staring at her, almost drooling, the message her tight jeans were sending out seemed to be in accordance with her wishes. But this was not the case for everyone looking at her. A guy dressed in shorts, unshaven and with long, unkempt hair – a typical anti-establishment, weed smoking, bohemian, counter-culturist – walked by and shook his head. The signals her tight jeans were sending out to him were somehow inverted. Instead of attraction, he felt something close to disgust. To him, the jeans were an ostentatious display of wealth; a sign that perhaps the wearer is of below average intelligence, having been brainwashed by big-media and big-business into spending foolish amounts of cash on ordinary denim.



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What are their threads saying?



Queens St: where a burka's about as common as a tank top in Liberty Market

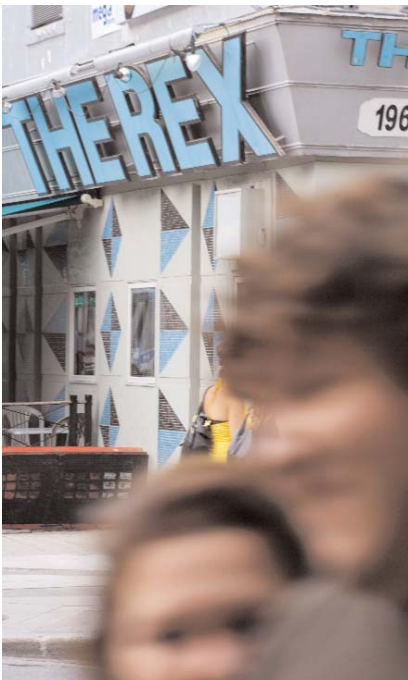
Realising that clothes don't always say what the wearer means to convey, I knew there was only one way to be sure. I got up from my seat and walked up behind the floating 'shuttlecock.' "Excuse me," I said. The burka stopped and turned. Dark feline eyes peered out at me. A soft voice came from where the mouth would be, "Yes?"

"I don't mean to intrude, but I'm doing some research for a newspaper article on why women wear the burka. Would you mind sharing your reasons with me?"

The answer I got was short and curt – exactly what I was looking for.

"I wear the burka because Allah has commanded me. It is a part of Islam. And I wear it because I want to make a statement to people like you who think it is some kind of monstrosity."

In the intellectual tradition of the West, religion is looked upon with a certain amount of distrust – especially when it is worn on the sleeve. The burka is 'all sleeves' in this case



The Rex jazz club attracts clientele of all sorts



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I was happy at the response I got; I was looking for a quick recap, rather than a long lecture, as I am not wholly unfamiliar with the reasons why many choose this dress.

Following my analysis, I realised what the *burka* (at least in this case) was saying, “Unlike the rest of clothing on Queen Street, I am not concerned with speaking about myself, describing whether I am healthy, wealthy, intelligent, or not. I *only* speak of my commitment to Allah.”

I am fully aware that there is a debate about whether the *burka* is really an Islamic injunction or a more cultural one. Those who believe that the *burka* is not an Islamic injunction will believe that the wearer has been fooled into thinking this is Islam. Others, who hold the opposite view, will think that the wearer is not only intelligent to

have deciphered that the *burka* is an Islamic injunction, but also give kudos to her for having the strength to follow through on the injunction. For the purposes of my analysis, which is to find out what this particular *burka* wanted to say, rather than what was heard, these debates are beside the point. As long as the wearer believed

that the purpose was to serve Allah, that is what the *burka* was ‘saying,’ from the wearer’s point of view.

As in the case of the bohemian looking at the blonde, the signal being sent by the *burka* and what is received are not the same. Here is a sampling of responses I received when I asked what people thought the *burka* was saying to them.

“It just looks *odd*.”

“I feel the Taliban have arrived. I don’t

like seeing this kind of dress.”

“It’s too hot to be wearing *that* in July.”

“She’s probably been brainwashed into thinking Islam wants you to wear the *burka*. Poor repressed soul.”

“I just don’t understand the need to wear something like that.”

The reactions were overwhelmingly negative. And, as expected, there was a small minority who didn’t take notice of it, or took the approach that people can do whatever they want, as long as it doesn’t interfere with other peoples’ lives.

The *burka* is not alone as a piece of everyday religious clothing (I am not comparing the *burka* here to ceremonial religious dress such as what the Pope might wear). The Sikhs have their Turbans and the Jews their skullcaps (*yarmulkes*). Buddhists wear robes, and the

Amish wear their own distinctive dress (which stresses simplicity and traditionalism).

If I had asked a Sikh why he wears a turban, or a Jew why he wears a skullcap, the answer, I suppose, would have been very similar to what the lady in the *burka* said. “It is a part of my religion.” So why is it that by the time the signal

reaches the observer, it is completely distorted in the case of the *burka*, invoking an extreme reaction that other religious apparel does not incite?

The *burka* is viewed as an extreme form of religious expression as compared to the other everyday religious clothing. It is a complete annihilation of the person within the folds of the garb, except for the eyes (and I’m sure there is a maulvi out there who thinks that sunglasses should be

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Different strokes



Queen St: where fashion reigns

worn with the *burka*). This is the primary reason why what the *burka* says and what is heard are two very different things. Instead of a whisper or a standard tone, with which the robes and the caps of other religions speak, the *burka* bellows: “Inside dwells religiosity!” Hence it is not greeted the same way by ‘listeners.’

The second reason, which compounds the issue created by the first reason, is that in the intellectual tradition of the West, religion is now looked upon with a certain amount of distrust – especially when it is worn on the sleeve. The *burka* is ‘all sleeves’ in this case. The net effect is that the *burka* shouts its religious message into ears that are already overly sensitive to such tones.

As the sun set, I made my way towards the subway, having enjoyed a day out on Queen Street and feeling rather productive, as I had not only thought of a new article to write but also conducted the necessary interviews to reference. My final thought-experiment was based more on a real memory of Lahore in July than something I conjured from my imagination: a poor, misguided (or rather un-guided) blonde, fair skinned beauty, walking down Liberty Market in the sweltering heat wearing shorts and a cut-off T-shirt bearing her midriff. The traffic had come to a standstill. The shopkeepers and the shopping public all stood dead in their tracks. A hoard of lecherous men followed her, and some called out rudely to her in Urdu. She smiled and waved back! She thought they were hurling compliments at her. I worried for her safety, but she eventually got into a car and escaped.

The solution in this case seems much simpler. I wonder why, because the situation is exactly the same, only the host and foreign cultures and the ‘coverage’ of the dress are inverted. Most would agree that the midriff exposing woman at Liberty Market should cover up, regardless of the heat, women’s liberation, or

other facts. What she was communicating to the public in Liberty Market was not what she intended, and despite the temporary boost in confidence, no sane or secure individual would welcome such misconstrued attention.

The same goes for clothing that communicates in alien cultures. Cross cultural communication (verbal or nonverbal) demands that we take into consideration the standards, norms and customs of the other: “When in Rome do as the Romans do,” has, like all adages, some truth to it and some falsehood. You don’t want to completely lose your own personality or sacrifice your beliefs when you arrive in a different culture. It would clearly be taking the “In Rome” adage too far if the woman had dressed up in a *burka* in Liberty Market. As educated Pakistanis, we would tell the tourist to find some middle ground. Suggest a *shalwar kameez*, or even jeans with a *dupatta*. If the blonde tourist in Lahore doesn’t adapt, she takes responsibility for the signals she is sending out and also the consequences. The only smart thing for her to do is to tone her ‘blaring’ message down and gear it to her more conservative audience by wearing something less revealing. Simultaneously, we would also insist that the lecherous hoards in Liberty Market who pathologically leer at women even in *burkas* either “get a life,” or “need education.”

Now, flip this situation on its head, and apply the same lessons to the lady in the *burka* on Queen Street and those bystanders who thought it was the Taliban’s advance. Would we be justified in asking the *burka* to tone down its message on similar grounds, while simultaneously hoping to educate people in the West about the message of the *burka*? I leave these questions for the reader to answer. ■

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