

**Article # 1:****MY BODY IS MY OWN BUSINESS**

By Naheed Mustafa

I often wonder whether people see me as a radical, fundamentalist Muslim terrorist packing an AK-47 assault rifle inside my jean jacket. Or maybe they see me as the poster girl for oppressed womanhood everywhere. I'm not sure which it is.

I get the whole gamut of strange looks, stares, and covert glances. You see, I wear the hijab, a scarf that covers my head, neck, and throat. I do this because I am a Muslim woman who believes her body is her own private concern.

Young Muslim women are reclaiming the hijab, reinterpreting it in light of its original purpose to give back to women ultimate control of their own bodies.

The Qur'an teaches us that men and women are equal, that individuals should not be judged according to gender, beauty, wealth or privilege. The only thing that makes one person better than another is his or her character.

Nonetheless, people have a difficult time relating to me. After all, I'm young, Canadian-born and raised, university educated – why would I want to do this to myself, they ask.

Strangers talk to me in loud, slow English and often appear to be playing charades. They politely inquire how I like living in Canada and whether or not the cold bothers me. If I'm in the right mood, it can be very amusing.

But, why would I, a woman with all the advantages of a North American upbringing, suddenly, at 21, want to cover myself so that with the hijab and the other clothes I choose to wear, only my face and hands show?

Because it gives me freedom.

Women are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. We feel compelled to pursue abstract notions of beauty, half realizing that such a pursuit is futile.

When women reject this form of oppression, they face ridicule and contempt. Whether it's women who refuse to wear makeup or shave their legs, or to expose their bodies, society, both men and women, have trouble dealing with them.

In the Western world, the hijab has come to symbolize either forced silence or radical, unconscionable militancy. Actually, it's neither. It is simply a woman's assertion that judgement of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction.

Wearing the hijab has given me freedom from constant attention to my physical self. Because my appearance is not subjected to public scrutiny, my beauty, or perhaps lack of it, has been removed from the realm of what can legitimately be discussed.

No one knows whether my hair looks as if I just stepped out of the salon, whether or not I can “pinch an inch,” or even have unsightly stretch marks. And because no one knows, no one cares.

Feeling that one has to meet the impossible male standards of beauty is tiring and often humiliating. I should know – I spent my entire teenage years trying to do it. I was a borderline bulimic and spent a lot of money I didn’t have on potions and lotions in hopes of becoming the next Cindy Crawford.

The definition of beauty is ever-changing; waifish is good, waifish is bad; athletic is good – sorry, athletic is bad. Narrow hips? Great. Narrow hips? Too bad.

Women are not going to achieve equality with the right to bear breasts in public, as some would like to have you believe. That would only make us party to our own objectification. True equality will be had only when women don’t need to display themselves to get attention and won’t need to defend their decision to keep their bodies to themselves.

*Naheed Mustafa graduated from the University of Toronto with an honours degree in political science and history. She is currently [at the time this was written] studying journalism at Ryerson Polytechnic University.*

## **Article # 2:**

# **WEARING THE UNIFORM OF OPPRESSION**

By Catherine Meckes

IT takes some pretty twisted logic to call wearing a hijab, the head-to-toe covering for women prescribed by the Koran, liberating. It’s like saying an animal in a cage is free because it doesn’t have to deal with the realities of its natural habitat.

Choosing to wear a hijab – which leaves only the face, hands and feet showing – is a form of hiding, of crying uncle, of saying to men who leer and gape, “You win, it’s my fault you are staring, assaulting, raping. You guys can’t control your sexual urges, so it’s up to me to make sure there isn’t even a suggestion of a body under my clothes to tempt you. My fault. Sorry.”

Naheed Mustafa (“My Body is My Own Business – Facts and Arguments, June 29) justifies wearing hijab as a way that Muslim women can take control of their own bodies. But the covering of Muslim women has its origins in the need men felt to protect their woman, considered to be their property, from the sexual predations of other men, not because these advances were an aggression against another person but because they were an affront to the honour of male relatives. The result of such sexual tampering was severe punishment for the perpetrator, but also for the women, who, having lost her value with her virtue, was cast out or killed, regardless of her innocence.

Look at the profound shame and self-loathing Muslim women who were raped in Bosnia are suffering because they believe their communities will no longer accept them.

How ironic and sad that Ms. Mustafa should claim that wearing a hijab, so symbolic of women’s subjugation, is evidence of her freedom. Surely it’s just the opposite.

Ms. Mustafa is right, of course, in her indictment of a society that objectifies women, using their bodies to sell products and assigning them value based on physical attributes. There's no doubt it's a struggle for women to live in the West with the lie that they are free and equal. The world, the West included, is still emerging from the tradition that has existed during most of its history, that of women as man's possession. We in the West have chosen to go in a different direction from the Muslim world in this evolution. And Middle Eastern countries themselves vary in how much they take part in this tradition, from the recent crackdown on improper covering by women by the reactionary regime in Iran to more liberalized customs in Lebanon and parts of Turkey.

The kind of attitudes that produce, for example, the Miss CHIN Bikini contest, an annual Toronto parade of female flesh before throngs of ogling, hooting males, or the Sunshine Girl daily offering of bulging breasts and bums in the Toronto Sun, are odious and offensive. But there are other ways of dealing with them than sticking your head, ostrich-like, into a veil.

Having lived in a Muslim country and studied Islam, I have some understanding of, and sympathy with, Muslims and their culture. There's a great deal of unjustified fear and ignorance in the West about Islam. Fortunately for Muslim immigrants, Canadian society is committed to pluralism, and most Canadians believe in that principle, if the practice is sometimes trickier to accomplish.

For example, we long-time residents of a west-end Toronto neighbourhood have adapted to new and sometimes strange sights as each new influx of immigrants transforms our streets. There are many women in our area – Indians, Middle Easterners, Africans – wearing all sorts of traditional dress, from strict hijab to filmy scarves flowing from head to shoulders. They are now as much a part of my neighbourhood as the modern dress most of us wear.

But recently, I encountered a Muslim woman in the supermarket, shopping with her family. She was wearing hijab, but she also wore a veil across her face, hiding it from the eyes down. With a head scarf covering her forehead, there was just a slit left for her to look through. A few days later, I saw another woman, similarly veiled, walking on the street.

I found the sight of these women with their hidden faces disturbing. It's one thing to see covered faces as the exotic and mysterious produce of another culture you can leave behind when you return home. But finding them on my home turf, I have to confront my fears about what this kind of dress represents for me, and for all women: backwardness, submissiveness, degradation.

So seeing educated, modern women like Naheed Mustafa embrace hijab as something liberating, as giving women control over their bodies, as a way of coping with the frustration and often intolerable sexism of our culture, dismays and mystifies me, as I'm sure it does other women.

There are many worthwhile and admirable practices in Islam that we should know about in the West. Wearing hijab is not one of them.

*Catherine Meckes is a graduate of the journalism program at Ryerson Polytechnic University.*

## Non-Fiction Analysis

*Instructions: Carefully read the assigned texts. Answer the following questions for each of the texts. You will need to refer to class notes. You may work with a partner on this. Each person will need to submit their answers on a separate page. It will be marked out*

**"My Body Is My Business"** (by Naheed Mustafa)  
and **"Wearing a Uniform of Oppression"** (by Catherine Meckes)

1. What is the thesis of each of these essays? (2 Marks)
2. What is the purpose of each of these essays? (2 Marks)
3. Which essay do you feel was the most effective? Why? Explain your choice using specific examples from the texts; you should have AT LEAST 5 points to support your choice. Consider essay structure, clarity, methods of development, literary devices, tone, appeal to emotion, logic, credibility (etc.). (5 Marks)

*\*\* REMEMBER: you do NOT have to AGREE with the message of the one you believe is most effective; you are simply analyzing which one was most EFFECTIVE.*

4. Locate and highlight four devices used in these essays. (4 Marks)
5. Explain the irony of the comic. (1 Mark)
6. What is the message of the comic? Explain. (1 Mark)

