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### Reimagining the Burqa

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# *Reimagining the Burqa*

FARKHUNDA ZAHRA NADERI'S CAMPAIGN FOR AFGHAN PARLIAMENT

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## Abstract

Throughout the recent war in Afghanistan, the burqa has represented the oppression of the Taliban. It has acted as a site of intersection and contestation among discourses of beauty, freedom, women's rights, human rights and religion. This article explores the 2010 Afghan Parliamentary campaign of Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, who uses the symbol of the burqa rather than her own face on her campaign posters. Naderi's campaign represents a disruption of the purported essence of the burqa because it denaturalizes the garment, purporting to turn the little window into a 'window of power'. Naderi removes herself from her position of power as an educated Afghan woman with access to many opportunities and instead places the spotlight on the faceless Afghan woman in the burqa, symbolizing that it could be any woman on that campaign poster; it could be any Afghan woman running for office. This is her goal: to enable any woman to be successful, in the burqa or not, able to make the choice not to wear the burqa, but also to make the choice to wear the burqa but not be subjugated as a result. In this way the notion that there is any essence to the burqa itself is disrupted.

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## Keywords

Afghanistan, burqa, election, Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, women's rights

Throughout the recent war in Afghanistan, the symbol of the burqa has been utilized as a legitimating reason for the war, emphasizing the way the overthrow of the Taliban has liberated Afghan women from the anonymity of the faceless and oppressive burqa. This article sets out to explore the burqa through the lens of Farkhunda Zahra Naderi's 2010 campaign for Afghan parliament. Naderi rewrites the burqa for Afghan women by using it as a symbol in her campaign. The chadari, as the burqa is called in Afghanistan,<sup>1</sup> marks a site of contestation, where concepts such as freedom, human rights, especially

women's rights, and religion intersect, and Naderi's choice to use it as a symbol of her political campaign represents a resistance to the notion that the burqa has a particular essential meaning.

In order to lay out the argument that Naderi's campaign constitutes a disruption of the essence of the burqa, I first explore the social and anthropological context any discussion of veiling engenders. I examine the relationship between veiling and discourses of modernity, colonialism, and Orientalism. I then focus on the image of the burqa in Afghanistan, particularly post-9/11. In the United States, the image of the burqa has been used as a political tool to legitimize intervention in Afghanistan. This image of the burqa replicates much of the colonialist and Orientalist logic which emphasizes dual visibility as a prerequisite for political participation. Focusing on this notion of visibility and the role of the female body in political discourse, I analyze the multiple interpretations of burqa throughout the USA and Afghanistan, both that the burqa is oppressive and that it is representative of a woman's religious choice.<sup>2</sup> I explore what I term 'burqa discourse', the various discursive constructions of the burqa which attempt to imbue it with what comes to pass as essential and inherent meaning. I borrow this term from Leila Ahmed's 'discourse of the veil': a description of the discursive construction of the meaning of veiling due to the British colonial presence in Egypt (Ahmed 2005a). I argue that it is worth exploring this specific instantiation of the discourse of the veil to assess the discursive constructions of the burqa in the context of post-9/11 Afghanistan. I then explore Farkhunda Zahra Naderi's parliamentary campaign, situated within this burqa discourse. Naderi's campaign acts as an illustration of the potential for a discursive resistance against the essentializing narratives posited by a discourse of the burqa.

'Veiling is a rich and nuanced phenomenon, a language that communicates social and cultural messages, a practice that has been present in tangible form since ancient times' (El Guindi 1999: xii). This metaphor of veiling as a language is echoed by Lila Abu-Lughod (1999: 165), who refers to it as a 'vocabulary item in a symbolic language for communicating about morality'. The veil takes on multiple dimensions, situated at the intersection of the discourses of culture, religion, dress, empire, gender, and politics. Veiling has historically played a significant role, particularly in the intermingling of colonialist and nationalist discourses. As Leila Ahmed describes, veiling in western discourse historically became symbolic of the oppression of women by the masculine eastern 'Other'. This narrative was used to morally justify the colonialist project of undermining the cultures of the colonized people (Ahmed 2005a: 321). Women were seen to be the bearers of culture, thus their veiling practices took on symbolic significance.

Colonialist politics used women's bodies as a site of inscription for political meanings. Following Michel Foucault ([1976] 1998), we can understand the body itself as the site of struggles of power and identity construction. It is understandable, therefore, that the Muslim woman's body, and in this case, what it is wearing, stands not only as the marker of identity but the very

site for the scripting of identities. Thus, the practice of veiling came to stand in as a visible reminder of civilizational differences and identities. As Serge Elie (2004: 144) writes, 'woman is the embodiment par excellence of the "Other" in the Arab world'. And if woman is the embodiment of the 'Other', the veil is the strong symbol of this 'otherness' to the West (Gole 1996: 1).

Much of the rhetoric surrounding the veil focuses on the notion of visibility. Visibility marks the site of contestation surrounding the veil because the anonymity provided by veiling disrupts the standard of facial identification which is privileged in western modernity. For the foreign observer, the encounter with a figure whose face cannot be seen is a shock: 'Persons inside burqa are experienced as non-persons by those who are not used to seeing them' (Papanek 1982: 14). Unni Wikan describes the ingrained western conviction that veiling is inherently oppressive and believes this is because the West associates seclusion with oppression. Those who voluntarily adopt the veil make no sense to the West, so they do not shake convictions about the oppressive nature of veiling, even if the women who veil proclaim that they view the veil as liberating and as a source of pride and prestige (Wikan 1982: 104–5). The attributing of non-personhood to the burqa-clad woman speaks to the fetish with visibility of western culture. Visibility is privileged even to the point that it dictates personhood itself; agents are those who are visible. However, veiling also offers the opportunity to play with the notion of visibility. It suggests seclusion, the private realm, and modesty, but through its relationship with modernity, veiled women have acquired public forms of visibility. Being covered in certain Muslim countries has become a means for women to access the public sphere, yet their presence in public disrupts traditional gender hierarchies because they participate in public affairs while wearing a religious sign (Gole 1996: 22). Additionally, the focus on the veil in contemporary political debates is making the veil itself a visible public symbol, even though as a garment it is intended to reduce the visibility of the covered woman.

Veiling as a practice also provides the potential for considering an alternative conception of visibility. Fadwa El Guindi gestures toward this in her exploration of the Islamic construction of space. She argues that dress is a geography of its own which maps identity and group memory. Veiling offers the possibility of identification based not on physical or facial appearance, but on other signs (El Guindi 1999: 58). Under the full veil, women see but are not seen. This disrupts the notion of dual visibility that is so often privileged as a prerequisite for effective communication. But it is precisely this one-sided visibility which gives the position under the veil the potential to wield such power. Numerous Islamic and women's movements in the last thirty years have offered up a potential notion of resistance by reclaiming veiling for themselves as a feminist, nationalist, or potentially modernist practice, including the turban movement in Turkey (Gole 1996), the resurgence of the veil in Egypt since the 1980s (Mahmood 2001, 2005), and the variety of Islamic fashion shows around the world (Navaro-Yashin 2002).

The meanings of the veil which have been discussed here lay the framework for understanding the discourse of the burqa which emerged after 9/11. The focus on the burqa during this time period is a useful illustration which makes the point that essentializing discourses of the veil are not relegated to the colonial era. Soon after 11 September 2001, President Bush famously referred to the Afghan woman who wears the burqa as a 'woman of cover', invoking this notion in relation to the motivations for the war in Afghanistan. First Lady Laura Bush characterized the fight against terrorism as a fight for the rights and dignity of women (Abu-Lughod 2002: 784). The burqa became symbolic of a society literally veiled in darkness, while the unveiled Afghan woman represented freedom (Blustain 2001: 19). The burqa itself became the representation of the repression of the Taliban, which had turned women into invisible creatures without rights (Hoodbhoy 2001; Abu-Lughod 2002; Cooke 2002; Rosen 2003). For the West, there was no more poignant symbol than the woman in a burqa to rally support for an intervention into Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban; which, the argument went, was also posited to be a victory for human rights, especially women's rights. Women were represented as in need of liberation, oppressed by the religious extremism that had taken over their society. As Julie Billaud (2009: 121) characterizes,

the chadari suddenly became the symbol of women's oppression, making Afghan women's bodies markers of their absolute 'otherness.' As a result of these discourses, the necessity to 'lift the veil' was an argument used to gather public support for the military intervention.

This logic replicates the colonialist logic previously discussed, in which women's bodies become sites of inscription for meaning, and women's dress becomes a site of contestation in itself, rather than one aspect of a larger context. Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood (2002: 342) characterize this post-9/11 logic: 'superpower politics played out on Afghan women's bodies'.

What was so interesting about the post-9/11 focus on the burqa was that it detracted from focus on the historical context of the situation in Afghanistan. When listing the violence perpetrated by the Taliban, it was an article of clothing that came to occupy the position at the top of the list. This went hand-in-hand with a disregard for the historical context, particularly the conditions of war and militarization when the USA supported warlords in the Cold War. Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002: 342) question why these circumstances were deemed less injurious to women than lack of western dress styles. Still, the burqa-clad body of the Afghan woman served as a motivation for mobilizing against the Taliban in the name of human rights (Mahmood 2005: 166), thus presenting a dichotomy which equated veiling with oppression and unveiling with liberation.

The unveiled Afghan woman not only acts as a representation of freedom and liberation in western discourse, but also conceptions of beauty. She is framed in such a way that only unveiling her could expose the true beauty underneath. Western journalist Jon Lee Anderson relates his experiences in Afghanistan in October 2001 at a newly established school. He describes the teachers as 'beautiful, with large brown eyes and fair skin' wearing colorful tunics and gold jewelry when they are in their classrooms teaching. Then when they must leave the school, they clothe themselves in white burqas: 'they had become wraiths' (Anderson 2001: 41). The use of the term wraith brings to mind ghosts or spirits, perhaps intended to describe the way women in burqas haunt Afghan society from the margins rather than being included as full members of society. It draws a distinction between the beautiful, colorful, alive, unveiled woman and the ghostly, blank, veiled apparition. By linking women's agency with their clothing, the garment itself becomes imbued with meaning as a symbol of women's oppression.

This depiction of the young teachers is problematic for multiple reasons. Beauty is an aesthetic judgment, not an objective one. For what purpose might Anderson want to establish that these women are beautiful? It is perhaps a rhetorical device to mark their beauty in contrast with the ghostly appearance of the burqa. It is perhaps intended to associate their liberated state with beauty in some sense. However, emphasizing their fair skin seems a problematic association, especially as Anderson describes the Afghan men: dirt-smeared skin, weather-beaten skin, or no descriptions of skin at all, simply a description of dark hair or brown eyes. In Spivak's (1988: 296) classic formulation repurposed, it may be white men seeking to save light brown women from dark brown men, imposing on those women a certain identity based upon a conception of their beauty in contrast to that of their society. Cynthia Enloe describes the way in the 1930s and 1940s, the Islamic veil became a point of intersection of colonial feminist discourses, where even as colonial discourses promoted anti-veil, women in the colonized country were unable to control the argument. They were either portrayed according to the standards of the society around them, which could be viewed as oppressive, or they were equally oppressed by the imposition of external standards intended to liberate them which still held them against a specific conception of beauty (Enloe 1989: 52). Jennifer Fluri (2009: 242) explores how Afghan women's bodies post-9/11 came to act as a metaphor for liberation in the way they transformed into the 'modern western and hegemonic model of the global feminine subject'.

Sarah Blustain argues that the burqa, portrayed as a symbol of freedom and beauty, worked to serve American political goals during the war in Afghanistan. Indeed, the burqa was utilized throughout political rhetoric as something representative of oppression.<sup>3</sup> Positing this oppression as a symbol of Afghanistan itself allows the war on terror to be situated within a context of liberation rather than conquest, and to be posited, at least in part, as a war targeted toward the achievement of women's rights. The US Bureau of

Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor released a report on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan in 2001 describing the Taliban's 'war against women', emphasizing not only the denial of legal rights to women, which are granted to them by Islam, but also the oppression of the burqa. The burqa is described by the report as a

voluminous, tent-like full-body outer garment that covers them from head to toe ... the burqa's veil is so thick that the wearer finds it difficult to breathe; the small mesh panel permitted for seeing allows such limited vision that even crossing the street safely is difficult. (US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2001)

This threat to Afghan women's basic safety by wearing the burqa is reinforced by stories of women who would not remove the burqa even when they became violently ill. The economic burden of the burqa is often illustrated by the example that entire neighborhoods often share one burqa due to cost, so women have to wait days for their turn to go out in public.

The burqa acts as a site for discussion of women's rights in Afghanistan. Though the discussion moves beyond simply the oppression of a garment, the garment is a symbol of everything the Taliban has done to women, and to Afghanistan in general. Following 9/11, 'the burqa-clad body of the Afghan woman became the visible sign of an invisible enemy' (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002: 341). The Taliban has not simply made women wear the burqa, but has also covered up the true nature of Afghanistan. The burqa has thus acted and continues to act as a powerful political symbol, existing at the intersection of discourses of human rights, liberation, and just war. The burqa in western rhetoric extends beyond a symbol of women to a specific portrayal of Afghanistan itself, a country weakened by its subjugation to an oppressive power (the Taliban), and in need of liberation from a strong external power (the USA). This is how the burqa is posited by western rhetoric, and it thus comes to occupy an integral position in the legitimization discourses for the war-on-terror.

This portrayal of the war on terror is not without its critics. Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel argue that the Bush administration manipulated women's issues by portraying the war-on-terror as a fight for the rights of women. The war on terror ended up subjugating more women by subjecting them not only to the violence of war, but also to the violence of characterizing them as those needing protection or liberation rather than as agents themselves (Hunt and Rygiel 2006). Jasmin Zine argues that veiled women inhibit the imperialist gaze because they invert it: they can see but not be seen. The western emphasis on removing the veil is essentially denuding the female other, representing a western masculinist power of possession. She concludes that the purpose of the war on terror is ultimately to repress the Muslim male while 'liberating' the Muslim female (Zine 2006). Miriam Cooke also problematizes what she refers to as US imperial logic, which is gendered and constructs men as

Other and women as civilizable. This logic then posits that to rescue and civilize the women, we must attack the men (Cooke 2002: 486).

Overall, in western rhetoric surrounding post-9/11 Afghanistan, the burqa has taken on a meaning beyond simply a garment. Yael Navaro-Yashin describes a similar controversy over veiling in Turkey: in the age of commodification, the symbol itself becomes significant. This is true of cases where 'politics is waged over the symbol more than on its content' (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 111). This applies to the burqa in Afghanistan, where the symbol of the burqa has come to represent a western conception of Taliban-era Afghanistan. The burqa itself matters more than what it represents, and the symbol has become reified and politicized. Women's bodies have become a site for the enactment of politics, in this case for the western civilizing mission in Afghanistan.

The burqa also occupies an important site in religious rhetoric. Western rhetoric representing the burqa as oppressive is shared by some Muslims, but certainly not all. Religious groups throughout the Middle East argue that women who wear the burqa are already liberated, and that their choice to wear the garment is a free choice. In Islam, the veil is seen as a mechanism to perform piety in the sense that veiling contributes to the making of a pious self (Mahmood 2001: 214). It represents the ultimate agency because it represents the active construction of the self, where the veil can represent a woman engaging in performative practice to manage others' impressions.<sup>4</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod (2002: 786) reminds us to be cautious about confusing veiling with lack of agency and warns against a reductionist perspective which interprets veiling as the 'quintessential sign of women's unfreedom' even though we may object to state imposition of veiling as in Iran. Perhaps the problem here lies in associating an inherent meaning with the veil itself. The veil does not unproblematically represent chastity and piety or oppression and passivity in a dichotomy (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 110). Situated within this oppositional rhetoric about the meaning of the veil are real women, amid current European anti-veiling, and an election year in Afghanistan where the chadari has become an issue.<sup>5</sup> Exploring the Afghan parliamentary elections of 2010 enables a broader examination of potential resistances to the essentializing narratives of the burqa.

The 2010 Afghan parliamentary elections had an exceptionally high number of candidates. There were over 600 people running in Kabul alone for only thirty-three seats, nine of which must go to women, according to new election requirements for female participation (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Independent Election Commission 2010b). But one candidate stands out, Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, not because of her political statement or her policy prescriptions, but because of her campaign posters. Rather than a smiling face, her posters depict photos of women in chadari. She was not the only woman running for parliament. Many women candidates faced death threats from those who do not want women participating in politics (Sadat 2010).<sup>6</sup> Female candidates' campaign posters were defaced and torn

down (King 2010; Somerville 2010) and the death threats they received were from ordinary people, not simply Taliban members. There have been several cases of the threats manifesting into action, as in the case of MP Hawa Nooristani, who was shot in the 2005 election while campaigning (Somerville 2010) and had a car bomb explode in 2010, in which her daughter and ninety others were wounded and seven people died (Landay 2010). That same daughter decided to run in the parliamentary elections in Kabul. Also significant has been the murder of five male campaign volunteers who were working for the campaign of female candidate Fauzia Gilani, in August 2010 (Boone 2010b). Women have inundated the ballot in Kabul because they feel more comfortable running for office there than in their rural home provinces, which are often more opposed to a woman running for office.

The case of PM Malalai Joya is a useful illustration of many of the challenges faced by women seeking to serve in the parliament in Afghanistan. Malalai Joya was first elected to the Loya Jirga in 2003, then the Wolesi Jirga in 2005. Throughout this time, she spoke out against the Afghan warlord mentality and the corruption she says characterizes the Afghan government (BBC News 2003). She has been critical of the Karzai government as well as the US role in Afghanistan, referring to both President George W. Bush and President Obama as warmongers. Her speeches against the corruption of parliament members, and particularly of religious leaders, have led to threats against her, and in 2006 she was suspended from parliament (Hasan 2010). She has received global attention due to the persecution she has faced. *Time* magazine named her one of its 2010 100 people who most affect our world because she managed to triumph over her circumstances, get an education, get elected to parliament, and challenge the Taliban and Afghan warlords (Ali 2010). Joya's situation also illustrates another issue with a woman serving in the Afghan parliament: even if they want to change the way things are run, it is not an easy process, and many female MPs do not pursue an agenda of aggressive change.

Though Farkhunda Zahra Naderi has not achieved the global fame Malalai Joya has, her campaign has garnered some attention in the West. She was interviewed by CNN News on 8 September 2010, in which the uniqueness of her campaign was emphasized (Dougherty 2010). Part of the reason she likely has not received the notoriety Joya has is because she has not directly challenged the corruption of the Afghan government, preferring to adopt a platform tailored to women's rights. She has also not challenged the role of the US government in Afghanistan, making her seem less relevant to the USA than Malalai Joya.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Naderi has the backing of a powerful family within Afghanistan, which allows her to face fewer challenges to her political service. She also operates within a religious framework, rather than posing a secular challenge like Malalai Joya.

The daughter of a well-to-do spiritual leader, Naderi is in a unique position to be able to make a political statement. Her family wealth and status, with several family members running for or serving in political office, enable her

to make statements that other women might not be able to make. A member of the Hezb-e-Paywand-e-Milli political party (HPMA), known as the National Solidarity Party of Afghanistan,<sup>8</sup> a minor political party, Naderi continues on in a family legacy of participation in politics. Her father, Sayed Mansoor Naderi, who also serves in the Wolesi Jirga from their home province of Baghlan, is considered to be the leader of the Paywand-e-Milli party. He also has a history as a member of the PDPA, which was a communist political party in Afghanistan until the early 1990s (Hewad 2010). Throughout the 1960s he was imprisoned several times for political dissent. He went back and forth between government service and being persecuted by the Government. He served as Vice-President of Afghanistan from 1996–8. A critic of the Taliban, he left for exile in Uzbekistan in the late 1990s. He returned to Afghanistan in 2002 after the fall of the Taliban and ran for political office (US Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services 2004). Both her father and her brother, Jafar Naderi, have demonstrated ties to Hamid Karzai, the current President of Afghanistan. Sayed Mansoor Naderi is also the leader of a religious sect of Shiite Ismailis and holds the honorary title of Sayed of Kayan, 'one of the highest honors in the Islamic world, and he is one of the most respected men in Afghanistan' (US Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services 2004). He is considered to be the leader of all Afghan Ismailis.

Naderi's campaign was fully financed by her father (Hanifi 2010), who owns several businesses throughout Afghanistan including a Land Rover importing business and a chain of grocery stores (Hewad 2010). Her background is an interesting mix of traditional and modern. She was educated in the UK and uses women's equality and education as her platform in her campaign. However, her father is the leader of a religious sect. Though not fundamentalist in their religious beliefs, the Ismailis follow an esoteric variety of Islam which still relies closely on traditional religious tenets. It is worth emphasizing here the importance of the socio-economic aspect of Naderi's campaign. First, her campaign is for a parliamentary seat in Kabul, an urban area considered to be more progressive than the rural districts. As a result she faces less of the gender barriers than female candidates in rural areas. Second, her family background and status have enabled her more freedoms to travel internationally and to financially support both advanced education and political involvement. She does not need to work to support herself and can devote more time to her political causes. The fact that she has influential family members who are already involved in political office, particularly her father's extensive Ismaili network and the tremendous popular support he enjoys, as well as her brother's role as governor of Baghlan, likely influence the success of her campaign. Her family status and wealth also enable her more access to particular freedoms, including choosing not to wear a chadari, which are not necessarily accessible to women with different backgrounds.

Naderi's familial structure is not itself what makes her campaign so interesting. It is rather the symbols she adopts to represent herself and her campaign. The other women candidates post campaign posters with heavily made-up

faces and pretty colored head scarves (Rahmani 2010; Sommerville 2010; Tiedemann 2010).<sup>9</sup> They represent what many would call the new Afghanistan, where women can be successful businesswomen and members of parliament. But they also represent a specific type of framing of female candidates: a focus on appearance. Brigitte Nacos has discussed the way women politicians and terrorists are both portrayed in terms of their appearance. The media report on their figure, hair, makeup, and clothing, whereas they are more likely to focus on issues with male candidates (Nacos 2005: 437).

The female candidates in the Afghan election are framed in the same manner, and often participate in this framing themselves. One candidate, Fareda Tarana, is known for her trademark long eyelashes which she emphasizes in her poster photo, along with her history as a contestant on the Afghan Star television show, a singing contest. Robina Jelali is known for her success as a sprinter for the Afghan Olympic team, and for the 'silk headscarf and make-up' she wears (Sommerville 2010). Numerous other female television stars, singers, and sportswomen are also candidates who use their image to garner votes (Rahmani 2010). Though many candidates argue that their makeup is not intended to win votes, they acknowledge that they are wearing makeup to follow a trend (Zaheer 2010), giving credence to the idea that makeup is integral to projecting an appropriate image. Observers believe that some candidates are relying on their photos to win votes. Political analyst Ahmad Sher states that both makeup and knowledge are necessary to win votes, acknowledging the importance of makeup and image framing for a female candidate (Zaheer 2010). But Farkhunda Zahra Naderi does not put her photograph on her campaign posters, disrupting the apparent necessity of image in an election campaign.

Naderi in fact critiques the focus on appearance that the other female candidates engage in. She states,

in all these pictures [women] look like they are advertising a fashion show or a movie or something ... I'm trying to encourage people to think about policies but a lot of people are treating this like a beauty contest, simply voting on who looks best. (Boone 2010a)

She believes the focus on appearance that the women candidates are emphasizing disables people from taking women candidates seriously and shifts attention from women's education and qualifications to women's looks. She states, 'I want to attract the attention of those who vote for pictures to thoughts and ideas' (Rahim 2010). Though Naderi has made a splash in the news because of her unconventional and different campaign posters, they reflect her larger campaign focus on human rights and women's rights. It is important to keep in mind that simply because there are female candidates in the parliamentary elections does not mean they are all pursuing an agenda of women's rights. There have been accusations and revelations that perhaps some of the women candidates are puppets for warlords trying to gain further political

influence. Since a specific number of seats are reserved for women, it is a strategic decision for them to muster a female candidate (Cavendish 2010). So Farkhunda Zahra Naderi's focus on women's rights is worth noting. Her campaign as a whole promises to advance the inclusion of women into the judicial branch of government to help alleviate masculinist interpretations of sharia law. In the way she uses the chadari for her campaign, she promises to deconstruct many of the gendered dichotomies that define Afghan society and politics.

Naderi entered the campaign out of fear that Hamid Karzai would sacrifice constitutional rights, especially women's rights, to make a deal with the Taliban to end the war.<sup>10</sup> Naderi states that her 'parliamentary platform is on women's rights and human rights' (O'Donnell 2010b). This is particularly focused on women's education, evident through the mannequin she uses for her campaign, which is a woman dressed in a chadari fashioned into a graduation cap and gown. Children form ambassadors for her campaign, including a little girl dressed in a similar graduation outfit. This is how she believes women should be wearing the chadari, as a celebration of their educational achievements and their ability to hold successful positions, in business and in politics (O'Donnell 2010b).

It is worthwhile delving into one of Naderi's campaign advertisements to explore her campaign further. One particular campaign video flashes images of what we can imagine to be Taliban men beating women wearing chadari, stills of women covered in welts and bruises from beatings, while a poem is read by Farkhunda Zahra Naderi in the background. The poem asks why a woman is subjected to violence for no reason, then offers a note of encouragement by telling the viewer to be willful and rise, defend their rights, and fight, as images of a young girl writing on a blackboard, a teenage girl practicing martial arts, and a woman with an inked finger from voting flash past on the screen. The video shows women working and studying as they are encouraged to be warriors who take their rights, concluding with the iconic image of Naderi's campaign: the burqa itself. Over the face mesh of the burqa is written her campaign slogan: 'burqa: the window of power' (Naderi 2010b).

Her campaign has marked a disruption of the essence of the burqa because she has attempted to fundamentally rewrite the meaning of this symbol. What this involves is disrupting the value-laden judgments we associate with the garment. It is a questioning of the very nature of the burqa itself, the way we identify it and its meaning, and the authority this identity comes to hold. In this way, it is Naderi's use of the chadari in her campaign that serves to unsettle the essential nature that has come to be associated with the garment. By exploring alternative uses of the chadari, Naderi is able to demonstrate that the essence we have previously taken for granted is in fact not essential, and that the characteristics we have imbued that fabric with are not natural.

She attempts to unravel the symbolism attached to the burqa by co-opting it for her campaign. She rewrites it as a symbol of women's education through

her chadari graduation gown, and uses the distinctive chadari fabric to create alternative clothing designs. As Lynne O'Donnell (2010b) reports,

Naderi has co-opted the burqa – the pleated, voluminous, synthetic cover-all worn by many Afghan women – in her campaign because, she said, it is an internationally-recognised symbol of Afghan womanhood. But rather than wear it as her compatriots do, over her head with only a small mesh window to see through, she uses the fabric to create a more modern look that is simultaneously modest, high-necked and full-length, yet quirky. Her thick black hair is covered in a fashionable scarf that matches the slate-blue of the burqa fabric, which has been cut into a tight-waisted, sleeveless dress, which she wears over a long-sleeved black top. She uses the distinctive burqa fabric, she said, because 'it is part of my identity,' though as a modern, wealthy and well-connected young woman, it is up to her if and how she wears it, a choice millions of Afghan women do not have.

By refashioning the chadari to serve alternative purposes and understandings, Naderi breaks down the notion that there exists some essence to the burqa itself, whether as symbol of religion or of oppression. There is no fixed understanding of what the burqa means, and Naderi exposes this fact. The single universalized meaning has been disrupted through the exploration of alternative meanings.

When asked by a journalist why she would choose a negative symbol, one in which women must be hidden, to represent her campaign, she responds, 'if reality is cruel, we have to first accept it. After accepting that, it doesn't mean you have to accept and continue it. You have to accept, then you have to find a solution for that' (Dougherty 2010). By doing so, she promises to reinterpret the chadari not as a symbol of oppression, but as a symbol of Afghan womanhood, of her identity as an Afghan woman. Her identity is imbued with the historicity of the chadari, rather than any sort of essence to the garment.

I want to emphasize here that Naderi is not simply turning the western conception of the veil on its head. There are women's movements throughout the Middle East that wear the veil as a way to resist the meanings and narratives of western 'othering' discourse. Leila Ahmed describes this type of veiling: 'taking on that symbol rejects and inverts its meanings – in much the same way as the slogan 'Black is beautiful' inverted and rejected racial stereotypes of the 1960s' (Ahmed 2005b: 166). While Naderi's use of the burqa in her campaign can be read as a resistance to orientalist and colonialist discourses of the veil, it does not simply invert the meaning of the veil, reclaiming and repurposing it for her own uses. It instead questions any posited essence to the garment itself. This goes along with her stated goal, which she posits as women's rights rather than an attempt to encourage women to either wear or remove the burqa (Rahim 2010). Interestingly, her campaign is thus not a campaign about the burqa itself, but about giving voice to the woman underneath who has been politically and socially marginalized.

She purposefully chooses the faceless chadari for her campaign posters. In fact, she states that her campaign photos better represent Afghan women

than a photo of herself would (Rahim 2010). Because the symbol of her campaign is anonymous, it is everywoman, and she herself can be everywoman. She allows her message to be one of women's and human rights because her campaign poster focuses on the primary symbol of a site of contestation of these rights. Since faces are hidden, the chadari is her representation and she does not rely on the framing of her appearance for her campaign, but rather on image framing of her issues. She removes herself from her position of power as an educated Afghan woman with access to many opportunities and instead places the spotlight on the nameless, faceless Afghan woman in the chadari. This symbolizes the fact that it could be any woman on that campaign poster; it could be any Afghan woman running for office. This is her goal: to enable any woman to be successful, in the chadari or not, able to make the same choice *not* to wear the chadari that Naderi makes, but also to make the choice to wear the chadari but not be subject to a subjugation as a result. Her entire point is that Afghan women can turn the little window they look through in the chadari into a 'window of power.'<sup>11</sup> She thus disassociates the concept of women's subjugation from the chadari by showing the chadari on her campaign poster, thus disassociating unveiling from liberation. At the same time, she does not privilege the wearing of the chadari either, and does not appeal to the alternative narrative which posits the chadari as liberating. By refusing to accept the dichotomy, she instead privileges a sense of anonymity which marks a disruption of veil narratives.

Naderi challenges Afghans and westerners to understand the burqa, to go inside it rather than simply eliminating it. If it has so far been Afghan women's weakness, only they can change this, only they can take the symbol of the chadari and rewrite its meaning. The liberation of Afghan women does not come from the outside, from forceful liberation by removal of the garment, but rather from the inside, from a repurposing of the garment by the women themselves. The burqa thus becomes a historical and cultural symbol rather than a symbol of oppression. The fabric is no longer linked with some sort of essence of oppression. Naderi has disrupted any notion of an essence to the burqa itself. It is thus open to alternative meanings. As Fadwa El Guindi (1999: 172) writes of the veil more broadly, 'the veil is a complex symbol of many meanings. Emancipation can be expressed by wearing the veil or by removing it. It can be secular or religious. It can represent tradition or resistance.' I argue further that in fact the burqa need not existentially represent anything, and we need not limit our conception of the burqa to the dichotomy between tradition and resistance.

A postscript must be added here to discuss the results of the election. The parliamentary election was marred with threats and accusations of corruption. However, in December 2010, the election results were certified, and Farkhunda Zahra Naderi was elected to the Wolesi Jirga in Afghanistan, with 6,612 votes (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Independent Electoral Commission 2010a). This matches well with her relative popularity throughout the election. Given the numerous candidates running in Kabul, it is significant that she

was elected and with the number of votes that she received. However, her family's political service has been marred by the accusations of corruption which have characterized the election as a whole. Her father was accused of bribery, though he has not been charged. Twelve people were arrested for transferring \$220,000 to bribe an election official to help with the election of Jafar Naderi, Farkhunda's brother, who was not elected (Hanifi 2011). It remains to be seen what role Farkhunda Zahra Naderi will play in Afghanistan's government, whether she will achieve the global renown of MPs such as Malalai Joya for standing up to the corruption of the Government, and what implications her campaign will have for her political service.

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## Notes

- 1 I use the terminology of burqa and chadari generally interchangeably, though I tend more toward the language of the burqa when analyzing western discursive constructions because this is the term that is used. I use 'burqa' to discuss the discourse as a whole, and 'chadari' to refer to the specific instances of this discourse in Afghanistan and in Naderi's campaign. By no means do I wish to engage in a reductionist understanding of a complex practice, and the chadari is itself a complex symbol in Afghanistan. However, for the purposes of this article, I follow Farkhunda Zahra Naderi's acceptance of this terminology herself in an interview with CNN, which portrays the chadari and burqa as terms for the same garment (Dougherty 2010).
- 2 I focus on the binary argument: women are either forced to wear the burqa by the Taliban or choose to wear it, because the debate is portrayed in these terms, and I am primarily trying to recount this debate rather than pose an interjection. There are indeed multiple reasons for wearing the burqa. In 2010, resurgence of the Taliban in parts of Afghanistan and election year controversies over women candidates have led some women to resume wearing the burqa out of fear. The burqa is being worn for women's protection, a choice made under duress and fear (O'Donnell 2010a). Some female candidates also choose to wear the burqa for protection while campaigning (Callimachi 2009).
- 3 See, for example, Foroohar (2010), who writes of the increase in women's participation in politics throughout the Middle East, not about the burqa, but entitles the article 'The Burqa Revolution', or Wu (2005), who describes global oppression of women in various forms by calling these 'global burqas'. Both of these associate oppression with the burqa, whether or not it in fact exists in the situation of

- which they speak. For example, Foroohar discusses Rwanda and Ecuador and her general focus is on the increase of women in political office. Yet the rhetorical imagery of the burqa is utilized in the title and throughout to grab attention. See also Macintyre *et al.* (2001: A7), who describe a decisive victory in Afghanistan for the USA by proclaiming, 'burqas were lifted, music rang out, the plates of history shifted'.
- 4 I would like to thank an IFJP anonymous reviewer for this point.
  - 5 Though the burqa became a strong western political symbol in late 2001 after the 9/11 attacks, it has remained an important site of debate. European states have debated measures to ban the veil, and the controversy over what the garment means has been reinvigorated. Governments draw attention to the security risks surrounding veiling, that women cannot be identified easily if they are covered and refer to the burqa as a misogynistic relic that should be outlawed in the civilized West. Some western Muslims have responded that this is not a legal matter, as women should have the choice to wear it. 'It's insulting to the intelligence of women who wear the burka to say they oppress themselves by making this choice', says Alaa Elsayed, Islamic Society of North America-Canada's director of religious affairs (Purewal 2010).
  - 6 It is also worth noting here that not all religious leaders or former Taliban are opposed to women's participation. Several prominent religious leaders have come out with statements that women should be allowed to have the same political activity as men. However, the caveat is also mentioned that women participating in politics still need to wear the burqa (Sadat 2010).
  - 7 Additionally, as this article argues, Naderi's entire project expresses alternative forms of agency that are not in accordance with a western model of women's emancipation and liberation. The tendency within western discourse is to ignore something that does not fit with this conception and to focus on the Afghan women who more appropriately express the western model of liberation, such as those who call for unveiling.
  - 8 This party is also known as the NUPA, National Unity Party of Afghanistan.
  - 9 It was previously conceived of as highly dangerous for women in Afghanistan to display their photographs on campaign posters or to be seen campaigning with colorful scarves or not wearing the burqa. Why now do some female candidates feel more comfortable showing made-up faces on campaign posters? It is useful to understand the relatively new development of campaign posters in the context of the re-writing of femininity in the public sphere that has occurred through liberation discourses associated with the US intervention in Afghanistan, and the shifting norms of beauty (Fluri 2009).
  - 10 This is a valid concern shared by human rights groups. In 2006, Karzai failed to nominate any females to the Supreme Court, dropped all of the female ministers from his Cabinet, and nominated only one new woman to his cabinet, as minister of Women's Affairs. Some believe Karzai is not even upholding some of the new laws intended to protect women's rights (Coleman and Hunt 2006).
  - 11 She states this in an interview with CNN, and it is also the topic title of her website, [www.chadari.af](http://www.chadari.af) (Naderi 2010a).

## Notes on contributor

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