“Two words: Uncovered face” is how Quebec Premier Jean Charest described the underlying principle of Bill 94 in March 2010\(^1\), a draft law that if enacted would prohibit Muslim women from receiving public services while wearing a niqab, a sartorial hijab that covers the face.

The public deliberation surrounding the legislation elicited diverse opinions. Supporters argued that a face in plain view was conducive to identification, security and communication. Supporters, who were also staunch critics of the niqab, argued their very use subjugated women and prevented the actualization of their right to equality. Muslim women in the habit of wearing a niqab expressed that the law would further isolate them, by preventing them from seeking social services.

I suppose if we were to ask Professor Manal Hamzeh if there are merits in having such a debate, she would respond as one would expect a scholar might. She would point out that the assumptions inherent in the very question represent an oversimplification. Then she would proceed to ask us to broaden our scope and ask a far more difficult question, one relating to purpose, or distinctively, the societal function of the niqab beyond its reality as a piece of cloth. And, she may very well do this because she is herself an expert on the subject, as it was the central thesis of her work, *Pedagogies of Deveiling: Muslim Girls and the Hijab Discourse*.

As Hamzeh coins the term *hijab discourse*, she goes to great lengths to emphasize the point that the true debate is not one solely about dress, “Rather, it is the unexposed complex pattern of normative values and practices which act as a social force that sets the conditions for the construction of material reality of a Muslim female’s body.”\(^2\) In other words, the *hijab discourse* is simultaneously *genderizing* and *hegemonizing*.

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\(^1\) A. Chung, “Quebec niqab bill would make Muslim women unveil,” Toronto Star (on-line edition), March 25, 2010.

From an Arab critical feminist reading of the Quran, the purpose of the hijab is manifest not only in visual representation, though a static, decontextualized and dehistoricized reading has rendered it such in mainstream Western culture. By borrowing Fatima Mernissi’s work, Hamzeh explains that there are three hijabs in the Quran, the visual, with which we are all acquainted, the spatial, that works effectively to set mobility limits on the female body in public spaces, and the ethical, a protector, shielding women from harm’s way.

According to this interpretation, the spiritual hijab is far more prominent in Quranic verse, and the popularizing of certain verses over others “helped the construction and survival of a genderizing discourse challenging Muslim females for centuries.”

Using this framework, Hamzeh examines how this complex discourse plays out and is negotiated in the lives of four Muslim girls residing in the US. “It is not about who put the cover on, and who wore what,” she says, “it’s about that space, and that opportunity for those young girls to question what it means to be told something about their bodies.”

As an academic, Hamzeh concedes that diffusing such ideas is a challenge, “because this is a difficult conversation, to reach as many people as possible I won’t get more than one minute to talk about this, so it has to become accessible to the public in many different ways, including art, theatre and film.”

An upcoming collaboration with Jamil Khoury, Artistic Director of Silk Road Theatre Project based in Chicago, will be one method to entice broader public engagement. Their project, titled The Hijab Cycle, is not limited to the stage, and begins with pedagogical practice. Hamzeh will engage audiences with her recent work, while Khoury records these sessions, amassing material to develop both a documentary and a script. At heart, the collaboration is determined to develop organically as an artistic and pedagogical process rather than a showcased production. The question of who benefits? is one to be revisited throughout.

“It will be a very organic process whereby we learn as we move on – because what I call feminist critical pedagogy is not formulated beforehand, it is something that shapes itself through the dialogue of the participants,” says Hamzeh.

And while this may not be an ordinary theatre production, the principle challenge is one theatre practitioners are only too familiar: Funding. Hamzeh and Khoury are in the midst of convincing potential funders of the project’s novelty, and the sophistication with which it purports to portray the hijab, as a discourse beyond the rehearsed ethical issue of the headscarf’s presence in public. Beyond the conventional lines of argument that often come to surface after scandals like Bill 94 make headlines.


http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wit/index
“The challenge is finding a balance of our visions, basically.” explains Hamzeh. The modalities chosen that best ascertain the subtleties of this very complex and monolithic discourse will be key in striking such a balance, she says. The question of how to run reading circles, in such a way as to facilitate critical inquiry, will be the next challenge when the project begins to take shape in June 2013. And, of course, there is the element of surprise, as “what comes after, when we meet the people is something I cannot predict.”

The ability to access Muslim communities and seek out members willing to participate in a project such as *The Hijab Cycle*, is a hurdle Hamzeh had to overcome for her research project. “I look different, I speak differently, I had to negotiate differently with parents before I was allowed to see the girls, and even when I was seeing them over the course of fourteen months, every time I had an appointment there was a negotiation,” she says.

Critical feminist research requires transparency among participant and researcher and an agreed upon subset of expectations. This proved to be an arduous process, requiring Hamzeh to recreate the tools necessary to engage with the girls, whose story is the focal point of *Deveiling Pedagogies*. Their names are four, Douja, Amy, Abby and Layla, but their stories are multi-faceted and distinctive processes of accommodating self in the world.