

Memoir:

Living in a material world

Author:

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This is not a comic-book plot. This is not a Paul Jennings tale. This is real. There are pieces of material floating around in Australian stores, in your well-known fabric establishments such as Spotlight and Lincraft, which, when worn, have the power to transform a woman from an intelligent, articulate, strong character to a passive, muted, oppressed dimwit. The PhD doctor, the university graduate, the TAFE-trained, the well-read, the poet, the mother, the eloquent, the hard-working - no woman is impervious to the evil, twisted power borne within the fibres of this material...

I've gone to supermarkets and had checkout girls take one look at me and start talking to me in slow, deliberate monosyllables. I've stood in queue at a major department store and watched the woman behind the counter cheerfully chatter away with the customer before me. When my turn arrived, she was suddenly sullen and rude; her happy unpunctuated babble was now a strained collection of single syllables and blunt full stops.

I wore the *hijab* as part of my school uniform at King Khalid Islamic College, Melbourne, which I attended for all my high-school years. Usually, I'd rip it off the moment I walked out of the school gate as I was too nervous and self-conscious to wear it in public. It was so uncool and daggy; and besides, I didn't have the courage to get onto public transport with it on.

It was a Friday night, sometime at the beginning of Year 8. I arrived home and was going to go shopping with my mother. We walked out the door and my parents suddenly realised I had changed out of my school uniform but that I'd forgotten the ripping-off ritual.

“Oh yeah, by the way, I’ve decided to wear it from now on,” I told them, as they looked at me with a mixture of awe, apprehension and shock. “You know,” I continued, “full-time.”

That was loose jargon my friends and I had concocted. Full-timers were girls who wore the *hijab* outside of school. Part-timers were girls who wore the *hijab* as part of the uniform only. Casuals were girls who wore the *hijab* whenever they felt like it. Bad-hair day on the weekend and can’t be bothered battling the mousse? Bring on the *hijab*. Trying to impress your friend’s mother so that your friend will be allowed to your birthday sleep-over? Put on the good girl act: go over to her place wearing *hijab*, battling your non-mascaraed eyelashes and making sure you get up to pray one of your five daily prayers outside commercial breaks on *Home and Away* (demonstrates sacrifice).

I lasted until Year 12.

You see, I wanted to study law. All the top-tier firms presented a career fair at various universities to help students decide on their tertiary preferences and to give us a personal feel for life in the law. I noticed all the female lawyers wore short smart suits and had blonde hair. Then we were given the war stories. Interview disasters. Résumé stuff-ups. That sort of thing. We were given tips about what not to wear at clerkship interviews if we wanted to fit in, leave a proper impression. One woman advised girls to wear skirts instead of pants, at least for the first interview. The whole “don’t give the impression you’re resisting traditions, norms ... get your foot in the door and then show them what you’ve got”.

Gag.

After three years of being stared at everywhere I walked, called a nappy head, a tea towel head, a wog, I was now being advised to show some leg to impress the big end of town. So I basically freaked out, went into major meltdown, and lost faith in what my teachers at school had drummed into our heads: you will get a fair go no matter what your religion is. In this great country of yours, you can be whatever you want to be if you work hard for it.

Er, really?

Meet “Neslihan”. After several years’ successful practice as a lawyer at a large city law firm, she approached the managing partner, showed him a photograph of herself wearing a *hijab*, and informed him that, as of tomorrow, she would be attending work dressed accordingly.

After catching his breath, the partner proceeded to quiz my friend about how exactly she proposed to dress and why: Is this your husband’s choice? Are you being forced?

How will the scarf sit on your head? Can any of your hair show? Will there be any problems with your representing male clients? Is this your final decision?

Intelligent, dynamic, capable lawyer one minute. Oppressed, passive dimwit the next.

My mother is deputy director at King Khalid Islamic College. For the past several months she has been conducting interviews of teachers and teachers' aides for the new school year. But something is wrong. Terribly, chillingly wrong. There are young, Australian-born women who have science, psychology, engineering, IT degrees applying for positions as teachers' aides. One woman is from a Middle Eastern country where she obtained her master's and lectured in chemistry at a prominent university. She can't find work here, despite her command of English, and so she is now undertaking her diploma of education so that she can teach primary-school science or Arabic.

Did I forget to tell you most of them are wearing the *hijab*? It doesn't matter how long the lists of academic qualifications and credentials run in their résumés, they simply cannot obtain employment because we all know that a piece of material covering the hair strips a woman of the ability to communicate intelligently, pursue a career, work a remote control. And so they are finding the only means to work is to fall back on Islamic schools; to forget their knowledge of the formulation of atoms in order to assist prep teachers paint collages with their pupils.

How many veiled Muslim women appear as advocates in court? One hears a familiar story: interviews in which outstanding candidates are overlooked because they cover their hair. Some have been told that if they removed their headscarves, the jobs would be theirs.

"It doesn't fit in," they were told. The legal profession is "unfortunately brutal" and they would "stand out". The firm has "nothing against Muslims, but has concerns about how clients would react to a woman wearing a headscarf handling their case".

Hmm. Kind of like Seinfeld's "not that there's anything wrong with that".

Perhaps it's all just mere speculation. Paranoia. A victimisation syndrome.

Really? Perhaps proponents of such theories should try wearing the *hijab* for an hour. Walk down Martin Place, Sydney. Walk among the crowds in Collins Street, Melbourne. Personally submit a résumé to a big firm, a small organisation, a boutique company, a perfume counter at a trendy department store, a five-star restaurant. They should do all that and then revisit their theories on the psychology of the Muslim woman.

In the corporate world, women generally complain about the glass ceiling. Statistics, studies and surveys provide ample evidence of its existence. So for those who worry that

Muslim women are beleaguered by a victim complex, go ahead and add a *hijab* - with all the stereotypical, banal racist baggage that comes with it - to your glass ceiling contender.

The glass ceiling becomes a triple-reinforced concrete ceiling with booby traps and electric fencing.

OK, I hear you. Maybe there is some legitimacy to the concerns that plague our interview panels. Maybe this is how it goes: Hmm, an applicant named Jamila Abdel-Rahman. Now, let's see, how will this honours graduate represent a client who may suspect she is a potential terrorist? Can we be bothered explaining her to our clients, reassuring them that she is capable of performing, when there are other candidates, with good, easily pronounceable Anglo names who, ahem, let's face it, look normal, don't stand out so much? What's the less complicated option?

With perceptions abounding about Muslim women as oppressed and ignorant, and given the hysteria against Muslims in the aftermath of September 11 and the Bali bombings, one indeed wonders how a client or colleague, exposed to a daily barrage of such stereotypes, would react to a Muslim woman advising them on their business dealings, financial status or legal rights.

Of course, one thing is forgotten in the world of employment selection. It's that spirituality is deeply personal. That's right folks. Personal. This piece of material won't have Jamila suddenly break out into Islamic hymns at a boardroom meeting and start preaching salvation. Society has to face the fact that some faiths celebrate spirituality through an overt expression of inner convictions. The *hijab* or Sikh turban or Jewish skullcap are all explicit symbols, but they do not represent a threat or affront to others, and have no bearing on the competence, skills and intelligence of a person.

My very first job interview in the legal field was with a barrister who posted an advertisement in the career centre at the University of Melbourne calling for candidates interested in a clerkship to call him to arrange an interview. The fact that I didn't have to first send in my résumé (which seemed to have been dosed in some kind of extra-terrestrial repellent, judging by the steady rejection letters I had so far received in my attempts to gain a seasonal clerkship) meant that I could get a face-to-face interview without any initial screening process. This is how the interview went:

The barrister took one look at my résumé and academic transcript, let out a polite "ahem" and asked me why I hadn't had any work experience to date. "You've got honours grades. You should have at least one clerkship after four years of a combined arts/law degree."

You think so?

Then he offered, oh so graciously, to share with me the antidote to what had been infecting my résumé to date.

“Do you want to know why you’re not getting any interviews?”

Would love to.

“Simple. Your résumé makes you look too Muslim, too Arab. Do you want me to help you make your résumé fit into a Collins Street law firm?”

Please.

I went in with a four-page résumé. I walked out with one and a half pages.

School name: “King Khalid Islamic College”. Cull it. Just put your TER score.

Languages: “Arabic”. Hmm, tough call. Keep it depending on the type of work you apply for.

Part-time work: “Media liaison officer at the Islamic Council of Victoria.” Hmm, on the one hand you’re publishing articles in *The Age*, getting interviewed on the radio, liaising with journalists. On the other hand you’re at an Islamic Council - out.

Extra-curricular activities: “1998 federal election candidate for the Unity Party - Say No to Hanson.” Definitely a no-no. Could be construed as too activist, too radical.

“Work with ethnic communities, migrant resource centres, refugees.” Keep refugees in, keep ethnic communities out.

Surname? Abdel-Fattah. Fattah. Hmm. Sounds like fatwa, Salman Rushdie, etc. Oh well, what can you do? It’s your surname.

Now what to keep: inter-school high-school debating.

I was also advised to attach a photograph, as I had a “symmetrical face”, and to show the selection panel that I wasn’t wearing a *hijab*.

There is something worse than being demonised, stigmatised, theorised. It’s being tolerated. The word gives me the creeps. There is just something disconcerting about being tolerated in the name of multiculturalism, as though one represents an unsavoury deviation from the wider community, always the external object, to be accepted, endured and suffered. You tolerate a bad smell. You tolerate a loved one’s bad habits. You tolerate your boss’s moods. You tolerate something that is inherently offensive.

Perhaps, with some, the underlying intent is well-meant and noble. But the problem lies in the value judgements and stereotypes embraced by those who presume a so-called right to tolerate. To tolerate is akin to granting a self-righteous assent of approval. It

cannot work without a hierarchy of greater and lesser. Of a subject and an object. Of a judge and a judged.

Let's take the *hijab*.

A vast majority of people perceive the Muslim woman's mode of dress as a sign of inferiority, attributing it to male oppression. Sure, when you hear of the appalling mistreatment of women in countries like Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia it's natural to assume Islam endorses such oppression. However, based on the teachings of Islam, it is clear that the oppression of women in such countries is not *because* of Islam but *in spite* of it. And for Australian Muslim women, the distinction between personal choice (*Islamic*) and external compulsion (*unIslamic*) is crucial.

Unfortunately, the distinction is not often made. A Muslim woman dressed in *hijab* enters a restaurant. Eyebrows rise. Eyeballs burrow holes. There are tut tuts, pity pity, sigh sighs. Sniggers. Heads shake. Behold, the oppressed one has entered!

Nothing could be further from the truth. The essence of Muslim belief is obedience to God - not man, woman, social norms, current trends or popular opinion. The Muslim woman who wears the *hijab* chooses the dress code enjoined by a genderless creator, and is therefore immune to society's fashion dictates. The *hijab* provides her with a sense of empowerment. It is a personal decision to dress modestly according to the command of a genderless creator, to assert pride in self, and embrace one's faith openly, with independence and courageous conviction.

You have every right to think such explanations are a load of nonsense. You may remain sceptical or critical in the spirit of our freedom to agree to disagree. The essence of any rights-based movement is that one gives to every other human being every right that one claims for oneself.

Or maybe that's a little bit of ambitious thinking on my part.

Feminists who fervently proclaim the right for a woman to choose how to dress do so on the purported basis of empowering women with freedom and independence from male yardsticks of beauty. This is a little hard to believe, as it seems that one tyranny has merely been replaced by another - the male yardstick for acceptable dress has now been replaced by a feminist yardstick.

If feminism champions a woman's freedom of choice, then Muslim women who choose to wear the *hijab* as a matter of personal choice, and because they wish to profess their independence from male-driven fashion dictates, are presumably model feminists. But the fact is that these women are invariably attacked for representing the antithesis to so-called feminist values. This demonstrates how little credit these women are given by equating their personal choices and convictions with docility, pitiful submissiveness and

the acceptance of an inferior status to men. Isn't there some saying that no one can make you feel inferior without your consent? Or is that just trite words reserved for trendy-power-to-the-women-of-the-world type literature and pamphlets? Words reserved for an exclusive club. It's certainly not applicable to Muslim women who wear the *hijab*.

Australian Muslims, whether they're wearing the *hijab*, growing a beard, changing their names from Ahmed to Eddy, fasting in Ramadan or getting pissed with their colleagues to "fit in", continue to wonder how long they must withstand being treated as candidates applying for an equal status with other Australians, required to submit a résumé of their faith in order to secure the goodwill and acceptance of other Australians.

I telephone my mother one morning for a chat. "We've been Bolted again," she tells me, her voice etched with despair, fury and sheer frustration. She doesn't need to explain what she means. The high-profile columnist in Melbourne's biggest paper has struck again. It's become a familiar, almost fortnightly exchange. Andrew Bolt, like a storm that attacks a city, wreaking its destructive havoc and passing on its way, has struck again. The headline is "Muslim trouble brewing" (*Herald Sun*, March 28, 2004). In this particular diatribe against Muslims, Bolt warns his readers that "the table of schools' VCE results in last week's *Sunday Herald Sun* exposes a problem among Islamic students that we'd better fix fast if we don't want trouble".

His argument against King Khalid Islamic College is that "for two years [it has] not recorded one VCE result of at least 40 out of 50". Bolt is in a panic to alert readers of the dire consequences: "We know Islamic extremists here are preaching that ours is a wicked society that good Muslims should reject anyway... That we produce resentful youths, incapable of getting decent jobs or even any work at all, for such firebrands to preach at just spells strife ... No wonder we're seeing the rise of so many ethnic youth gangs in our cities. That should be warning enough for our education bureaucrats to get cracking."

Never mind that the college's most advanced pupils (25 to 50 per cent of senior-year students) don't sit for the VCE but instead study the academically challenging International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program (also offered by Geelong Grammar, Wesley College and PLC), which is recognised by the world's most prestigious universities. Never mind that in 2002, half the school's IB students achieved an enter score above 90 and two students achieved more than 99. Never mind that in 2001, 43 per cent achieved more than 90, and in 2000, 53 per cent did so and the top student achieved 99.20.

Never mind the evidence. Bolt continues to have free rein to stir fear, suspicion and resentment of Muslims and use his column to make the abhorrent suggestion that low university-enter scores among Muslim children culminates in the creation of potential

terrorists. Would any other group in Australia be subjected to such a systematic, hateful, racist campaign?

After Bolt's attack on the school, a primary school child approached the college director, her face twisted in confusion and guilt, and asked, "Sir, is our school bad?"

What do you say to children when a leading journalist tells the world that these kids, unlike other Aussie kids, do not have the right to stuff up on their exams, forget what they'd studied, procrastinate, without being demonised as potential bin Ladens?

Have Muslims changed since 2001? If you live as a headline, as a stereotype, as a debatable citizen, is there a temptation to retreat? To go, say, from Jamilah to Julie? To hide your faith in front of your work colleagues? I'm no statistician but there seems to be an overwhelming resistance to this temptation to withdraw to the safety of anonymity. When one opens the newspapers and hears of the expulsion of French Muslim girls from French schools for failing to abide by the new secularism rules or scans television guides with an inordinate amount of documentaries "demystifying" Islam, something is often provoked - defiance and an even stronger will to stand up with pride and conviction in one's faith as a testament to the inaccuracy of the misconceptions and labels. Mostafa insists he will not be nicknamed "Mo". He does not shy from telling his colleagues that he is on his way to pray at the mosque on Friday.

Mixed up in the spiritual reasons for donning the *hijab* is, for some women, a spirit of defiance. The *hijab* represents independence and a refusal to subordinate the right to express faith to societal dictates and assumptions. It takes courage to decide to wear it. With an increasing number of younger Muslim girls and women making that decision, one can only suppose that to do so in the midst of the war on terror, to voluntarily render oneself a visible "symbol" of Islam, suggests that there might just be something more than spirituality at work - perhaps an attraction to living life boldly, courageously, defiantly, with spunk and daring.

If the Arab traders that brought Islam to Indonesia had brought Islam to Australia and settled, or spread their faith amongst the indigenous population, our country today would be vastly different. Our laws, our institutions, our economy would all be vastly different. But that did not happen... Our society was founded by British colonists. And the single most decisive feature that determined the way it developed was the Judeo-Christian-Western tradition. As a society, we are who we are, because of that heritage...

- Peter Costello in the keynote address on National Day of Thanksgiving Celebration in Melbourne, May 2004.

I read that speech and I felt I was being threatened. Threatened against daring to ever think I form a part of my country's heritage, identity and core. I am 25. I have found love and am happily married. I enjoy secure employment. I believe I have been bestowed with enough blessings and luck to resist such threats and to hold tight to who I am. But what about my young Muslim sisters and brothers, a generation behind me, still in school, still trying to forge their identities, still desperately seeking to make sense of their place in this country? Will the threats anger them? Terrify them? Repel them? Sadden them?

Do our leaders care?

Last year, one of the college's top Year 12 students, on her way to school, was waiting at a bus stop. She had one of her VCE exams on that day. A car approached and slowed down.

Rima was spat at.

She remained composed until she arrived at school when she saw a staff member and broke down crying. The teacher tried to comfort her, then got her a clean *hijab*.

There's no doubt that the incident affected Rima's performance in the exam. The subject was one of her strongest and yet it was the one for which she received the poorest mark, barring her from obtaining the enter score she required for her first university preference.

Walid rides his bike to school. One morning, three adult men pushed him off his bike, slashed his pants with a knife and ran off. He deserved it. September 11, remember?

Several months ago rotten eggs were thrown at the college. The scale of this attack was too enormous to suspect a gang of bored, destructive kids. It appeared to have been a planned operation by adults. The gates and all the doors and entrances into the school were coated with rotten eggs. Carpets had to be replaced. The stench was unbearable. The staff and cleaners stayed back late to clean up.

Shortly after the Bali bombings I sat on a bus with a friend who wears *hijab*. The bus driver took a look at us, issued our tickets, and was at once grumpy and annoyed. We took our seats and the bus wound on its way as we gossiped and laughed. Then slowly we noticed that the volume of the radio had been raised, drowning out our voices. A voice on the early-morning talkback radio shouted words of outrage about "Muslims being violent" and how "they're all trouble" and how "Australians are under threat of being attacked by these Koran-wielding people who want to sabotage our way of life and our values". Our faces went bright red; my stomach turned as the bus driver eyeballed us

in the mirror, a triumphant expression on his face, as though we represented a vindication of the words blasting through the loudspeakers for everyone to hear.

It's times like that when you realise that to some people it doesn't matter that you were born here. It doesn't matter that your father has a PhD and is in the world's *Who's Who of Science*; that your mother has a psychology degree, a diploma of education and has worked her way to deputy director of a college that teaches children to feel nothing less than Aussie Muslims. It doesn't matter that you can call no other country except this one home. To some people, you are just an ignorant wog, an evil Muslim, a waste of space on this landscape called Australia. And with leaders who make no effort to correct such views, who generate an atmosphere that allows such poisonous ideas to flourish in a rotting, fermenting citizenship increasingly based on difference and prejudice, it is terrifying to think it even remotely possible that "some people" will become "most people".

Yes, I'm angry. Yes, Australian Muslims are angry. Fed up with labouring under the stereotype of terrorists. Fed up with fear campaigns. Fed up with leaders whose hearts beat to the drums of war and violence. Fed up with the hypocrisy and lies. We do not sit at night and watch the news broadcasts with mere academic disillusionment. We do not utter an abstract tut tut. We are weary of feeling under siege.

There are a great many people who understand, who don't pity but who extend their support, exercise logic and reason, show compassion, apply sensitivity, seek the truth, conduct research, listen to our politicians and journalists with a critical mind. In doing so, they have applied the minimum standards of what it means to be a thoughtful citizen, a fellow human being; to see one another as idiosyncratic individuals whose actions do not represent or stand to be represented by others.

Oh, but if only they were the majority.

Do you want to know how it feels to be an Australian Muslim in the Australia of today?

You are a hyphenated identity.

An Australian-Muslim-Lebanese-female.

An Australian-Muslim-Palestinian-male.

An Australian-Muslim-Turkish-of-second-generation.

Sooner or later you are going to have to learn to come to terms with your identity hyphens - but you have to do that in the aftermath of September 11, the Bali bombings and in the midst of the war on terror. If you are a teenager, you want to get caught up in things like fashion, sport, music, movies, personalities, alliances and the minor dramas of

your family. Yet you will struggle to get on with puberty and the teenage angst thing and have your crushes and go through your diets and perve at chicks while being a prefix to terrorism, extremism, radicalism, any ism.

Do you want to know how it feels to be an Australian Muslim in the Australia of today?

Then turn on the television, open a newspaper. There will be a feature article analysing, deconstructing, theorising about Islam and Muslims in which your fellow Australians will be offered the chance to make sense of this phenomenon called “the Muslim”.

This is what it means to be an Australian Muslim today. It is to try to live against the perception that one represents a synonym for terrorism and extremism. It is to realise that whenever Muslims appear on the world stage, challenging an existing situation, they will be defined as fundamentalists, terrorists. It is to see the faith you embrace with such conviction defiled and defamed because acts that defy Islamic law and doctrine are still prefixed by the media with the word “Islamic”. It is to have the reasonable, peaceful statements of your leaders ignored and the ignorant ravings of the minority splashed across the headlines. It is to be the topic of talkback radio rant and raves.

It is to come to accept that although atrocities are committed in the name of all religions around the world, it is Islam alone that will be judged by the actions of those who purport to be its followers. It is to refuse to lay blame for the behaviour of so-called Christians at the feet of Christ because you respect the intent of Christ’s words and actions and because you know that even those acting in his name are misguided. It is to see Palestinians slaughtered and oppressed by a brutal Israeli occupation that arrogantly parades its defiance and utter contempt of international law and human rights, without pointing at the Torah and disrespecting the great religion of Judaism which you know, as a matter of logic, cannot condone such an unconscionable and heinous occupation.

So what it means to be an Australian Muslim today is that you will often sit alone, in the silence of your hurt and fury, and wonder why it is so difficult for Islam, a religion followed by 1.3 billion people, all of whom cannot be uncivilised, unintelligent, immoral, unthinking dupes, to be treated with the same respect. ■