Cultural responses to face coverings: a South Asian woman's perspective

Rina Arya

School of Arts and Humanities
University of Huddersfield
Queensgate
Huddersfield
HD1 3DH

Email address: r.arya@hud.ac.uk

Abstract

The commentary conveys the views that three women with South Asian backgrounds have to face coverings, which have become mandatory in certain places in the UK during Covid-19. All three women made connections between wearing face coverings and the practices of veiling associated with Islam, and the conversations that ensued explored the ramifications of the action of covering their faces in relation to cultural memories, isolation and discrimination.

Autobiographical note

Rina Arya is Professor of Visual Culture and Theory at the University of Huddersfield, UK. She has written about the artist Francis Bacon (Francis Bacon: Painting in a Godless World, 2012), abjection (Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature, 2014; Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture, 2016) and a number of articles on spirituality and contemporary art. Her main area of research now is the crossover between material culture and religious studies and she is currently working on a book about the cultural appropriation of Hindu symbols.

In a recent study conducted by the author (May 2020) about changing patterns of worship during Covid-19 in the UK, the theme of face coverings was raised independently by three women, not *apropos* of any of the questions put to the participants. Two Muslim and one Hindu woman all viewed the government's initiative of face coverings as a source of ethnocultural anxiety because of the visible similarity they found with Islamic practices of

veiling. Their commentaries, explored via interviews held on June 23rd 2020, spoke of how self-conscious the action of having to cover their face made them, and how it made them feel more exposed, more vulnerable. They also expressed feelings of guilt about their anxieties because they knew that the government's initiative was in the interests of the safety of the nation and, significantly, all volunteered the information that their fears were *not* about contracting the virus. This complex but very significant finding warranted investigation in its own right, and it is this that forms the subject of this research note.

The three participants responded to a call to share their experiences for a project about worship during Covid-19 and completed a questionnaire, where they were given the opportunity to be interviewed about their views. All three opted for an interview. These participants were three out of a total of sixty-one respondents, out of which eleven identified as belonging to the Muslim faith, and twelve to Hinduism. For current purposes they will be described by their forenames, which they gave consent to doing: Sadia, Farhana and Divya. Sadia is a twenty-two year old psychology student at her local university in the North of England. Born in Wakefield, her parents from Pakistan, she is a practising Muslim who identifies strongly with her faith but did not feel, in most cases, that Covid-19 affected her faith practices. She spoke how the timing of it had affected the way Ramadan was celebrated and in general said that, whilst she missed her university friends, she identified as a 'homebody' and liked being able to spend more time in her family home. Farhana is a thirty-five year old homemaker from the Midlands who came to the UK from Dubai five years ago. Married with two children, aged seven and five, she experienced anxiety during lockdown because of the upheaval it caused to her routine. Her husband worked nightshifts and she had greater responsibility for childcare and the running of the home. Divya is a thirty-two year old accountant living in Luton and is from a Gujarati family. Her parents came to the UK in the 1980s. She lives in an extended family with her husband of two years and her parents-in-law. She felt panicky, a word she used herself, about the pandemic and stated how high her anxiety levels had been since lockdown.

The three women responded to the nine questions given to them in the questionnaire which asked them to respond to questions about the impact (if any) of lockdown on their beliefs and practices.[i] At different stages of their interview, and without any leading

questions or cues, they each brought up the imposition of face coverings, a measure to reduce infection transmission, as a source of anxiety. This was because of the perceived associations that covering the face in this health context had with their cultural habits and practices of veiling the face. Throughout history and across the world people have worn masks and face coverings in ritual contexts (Inglis 2017) to project personal and social identities (Inglis and Almila 2020, 252). The Islamic veil is 'polysemic' (Winter 2008) and invites interpretations of different discourses – political, religious, patriarchal, feminist, sectarian, aesthetic – which are not often accurately identified or are indeed mixed up (Almila 2019, 2673-2693).

2020 saw the publication of a number of articles that addressed the politics of face coverings (see Inglis and Almila 2020). The practices of masking and the politics of it have become major social phenomena in most parts of the world, a central feature of public life, and this merits critical attention, a point made by Inglis and Almila (2000, 252, 251). Within this broader category are articles that explicitly connected face coverings used during Covid-19 and those used by Muslim women as a symbol of their identity politics (Sealy 2020; Piela 2020; Begum 2020). Whilst cautioning against 'superficial symmetry,' Thomas Sealy (in May 2020) argues how Muslim women, 'vilified for covering their face in public' have suddenly attained 'social acceptability' (https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/global-extremes/there-difference-between-niqab-and-face-mask/ Accessed 26 August 2021). This echoes views in Anna Piela's April 2020 study that discuss the ubiquity of the sight of masks in society where she argues how Muslim women are feeling safer in their newfound acceptability; 'Nobody is giving me dirty looks'. The face covering has been reconfigured, she argues, depoliticised, and stands as a universal symbol of social responsibility or collective action (https://theconversation.com/muslim-women-who-cover-their-faces-find-greater-acceptance-among-coronavirus-masks-nobody-is-giving-me-dirty-looks-136021/ Accessed 26 August 2021). Tahmina Begum's excellent article 'Veiled racism' speaks of the dissonance of advocating the face covering for Covid reasons and the hate crime association with Muslim women veiling their faces for religious and cultural reasons. She foretells of Muslims no longer being the 'covered-minority'; what was in June 2020 a prospect and now a reality (https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/face-covering-mask-racism-muslim-hate-crime-niqab-burqa-a9587476.html/ Accessed 26 August 2021.).

The visual crossover of face coverings and Islamic veils was featured in a fashion collection. During Paris Fashion Week in February 2020 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51672753/Accessed 26 August 2021) the designer Marine Serre, who had used facemasks in earlier collections, designed a range of outfits (with matching facemasks) some of which resembled the forms of Muslim dress.[ii] The location of such a show is ironic given France's entrenched secularist stance towards the veil. France became the first European country (on April 11, 2011) to ban the full-face Islamic veil in public places, stating that veils oppress women and are an affront to the republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13038095/ Accessed 26 August 2021). Serre was bold to run together the face mask as a symbol of social and collective activism during Covid times and the ongoing emotionally charged volatility of the symbol of the Islamic veil in France. The association of face coverings and Islam has also been seen more locally in *ad hoc* studies. In a curious piece 'Take up Hijab Against Coronavirus' the author, Anjana Basu, an Indian woman takes to performing the identity of a Muslim. After experimenting with various scarves Basu came up with the solution of fashioning what resembled non-specific Islamic headwear (which she misidentifies as a hijab) as a practical Covid measure whilst vicariously adopting the identity of a Muslim woman, walking down the streets of Kolkata.[iii] Studies of this kind are important as they draw attention to a parallel that is of existential importance to women from certain religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The results from my own study convey the complex and often contradictory feelings of the consequences for women from South Asian backgrounds having to wear face coverings. What follows is an account of each of the participants' experiences and a conclusion highlighting areas of future research.

The resurfacing of uncomfortable memories

Sadia was preoccupied about the issue of having to cover her face and kept returning to it throughout our one-hour interview. She was implicit in her verbalisations after being asked what her concerns were. "It's not about the virus at all … I understand that covering up [sic] the mouth needs to be done as it will stop the virus from spreading if people talk, sneeze or cough but there is something about covering my face that makes me feel uncomfortable. It just took me back to being seventeen when I realised that my culture was different to

English ways. I wasn't allowed to wear the same clothes my friends in college had. Mum bought me baggy tops. I was allowed to wear jeans but everything else was restricted. And when we went to see family in Bradford I had to wear a hijab. I didn't like that as people just stared at me". Sadia went on to elaborate how although the hijab technically only covered her hair – it felt like her face was being veiled because it was hiding a part of her that had formerly been visible. This period in her life was difficult, she said, as she struggled to understand where she belonged; not feeling fully Pakistani or British. She stated how her Muslim female friends felt similarly. In follow-up questions I tried sensitively to tease out how talk of face masks or coverings led to the resurfacing of uncomfortable memories. Sadia explained that it wasn't initially the *mention* of them that had bothered her but more the *sight* of them, especially of people in the UK wearing them, which made the experience more real for her. The symbol of a face covering was stark for her. "I heard on the news about Chinese people wearing face masks in Wuhan way back in March when things were getting bad in the UK but it didn't bother me too much. It's when I saw a scientific reporter on BBC news talk about different face masks that were best to prevent the spread of infection … that's when I started to feel weird, very weird. And it was also when I started to see people in town [in Bolton] and presenters on tele wearing them. It was very hard for me to see this". The presence of face coverings on the news and on the streets around Sadia made her feel self-conscious because it was a palpable reminder of her past when she was negotiating her identity.

Unpacking this further with Sadia, it seemed that it had taken her a number of years to feel comfortable with "being different," as she put it. When she was younger she realised that the rituals and festivals she had at home were not shared by many of her friends. The clothes she wore, the food she ate, the languages she spoke; all these varied according to the contextual setting she was in. As a child she found these differences exciting and it made her more interesting to her indigenously English friends. This attitude changed, however, as she moved into womanhood. During this time Sadia became more conscious of ideals of female beauty that did not correspond with her looks and it was during these years, when she was in the Sixth Form (aged seventeen) that she also started to wear a hijab. She felt that this was a barrier for her; and excluded her from being in the "in crowd" in school or college. This made her want to retreat from her family culture because she was

made to feel like she didn't belong, and did not like being singled out for that. In most cases people were curious about some of the beliefs and practices she held, such as why she had to fast during certain points of the year, but some attention was negative and translated into ignorant comments or racist jokes which affected her deeply.

Reconstructing the fragments of conversation from the interview, it transpires that Sadia believed that talking through the narrative helped her confront her anxieties more squarely. The typology of face coverings is vast as are the motivations for wearing them (Inglis and Almila, 2020). She associated face coverings (for Covid-19) with Islamic culture and she believed the public would also do similarly. This was a source of anxiety for her because she had spent much of her early years trying to blend in to mainstream Western white culture. The wearing of face veils cast her in the role of 'other' and made her feel like an outsider, and she was concerned that public awareness of this might incite racial violence to Muslims. "People always take the mickey about what Muslim women wear whether the burqas or niqab and send these stupid memes … half the time they don't even know the differences and they don't care anyways. I've had friends who have had their hijabs pulled or people asking them silly questions about it. And most of these people are my own age." (To clarify: Sadia was referring to the perpetrators as being her own age). When questioned whether people wearing face masks would make her feel uncomfortable and how she'd feel about wearing one herself, she replied "When I think about why I'm asked to do it for the safety of others … that I understand and will get used to it, if I have to wear one … but it does make me wary and nervous. I just want to be left alone … maybe I'm worrying too much … it was just coming across the mask in such an obvious way. It wasn't something I thought I'd have to deal with but … anyways".

Drawing attention to difference

Farhana too raised face coverings as being of concern to her but her perspective was different. Farhana had come to the UK from Dubai fairly recently and talked a lot in the interview about her period of adaptation to British life. She spoke of the strangeness of having to settle quickly and adjust to British culture. The niqab, something she wore without giving much thought to in Dubai, became for her a form of activism; a symbol of her spiritual affiliation and nationalism. "It took a lot of time to get used to wearing it in England because

there are few women who do. Birmingham and London have more Muslims than many places but compared to Dubai, it is less. People used to stare at me when they saw me. They would not say anything but they stared a lot. On trains, buses, in shops. Sometimes people talked loudly because they thought I couldn't hear them well … or so I thought". She spoke of how the situation had worsened in the last two years where she had been more negative comments by strangers because of her niqab. She spoke of how some people hurled terms of abuse to her whilst others kept their distance as if she stood for something "dangerous", a term she used. The incidents and experience of racism reported by Farhana during our conversation about her identity and right to live in the UK could possibly be attributed to hostile attitudes as a result of Brexit.

Farhana believed that having to wear face coverings as a result of the pandemic would draw negative attention to her own practice of veiling and, unlike the findings reported in Piela's empirical study (of 2020, and 2021), for example, Farhana believed that this could deepen the discrimination she had faced. "I see that with my niqab I'm covering my face which will help prevent me from spreading anything to anyone else but I'm worried that I'll be told to wear a regular mask or something. What do I do then? I don't want to not wear my niqab. I don't want people to say anything hurtful to me." She talked more about compromises that might have to be made, such as wearing a face mask under the niqab as a measure, and seemed to want to find a compromise that she was comfortable with. She also expressed fear about track-and-tracing and felt that greater surveillance might make her more vulnerable because she was visibly different. Like Sadia, Farhana was keen not to draw attention to herself and just wanted to stay under the radar. She repeated several times how she did not want to get in trouble, or get anything wrong and felt emotionally isolated because she could not go and visit her extended family in Dubai, something she had previously planned to do in her next official holiday.

Non-Muslim South Asian women and face coverings
Divya was the most explicit out of the three women about her distress and expressed her views about face coverings at the outset of the interview, explaining that the reality that face coverings may become customary really troubled her. She too was apologetic for

feeling that her personal anxieties were clouding her judgment of the bigger picture and contextualised her feelings as follows:

"I understand that the most serious priority is to make sure that people are safe until a vaccine is found and covering the face is the best way to prevent this. I understand that it's not comfortable for others to have to do this because it's not easy to breathe, talk and for glasses-wearers like me, they steam up when it gets hot but my main problem with this is because if I start wearing a face covering it'll lump me with Muslim women and then I might have to go through the anti-Islamic hatred that they have to go through. ... Do you know where I'm coming from?"

Divya was suggesting that her identity as a South Asian woman, irrespective of her religious affiliation, grouped her with Muslim women because of the associations that she believed the public held about Muslims tending to be from South Asia. A disclaimer is needed at this juncture. As I am a South Asian woman, an insider to Divya's cultural identity, she felt able to open up to me about this issue and assumed that I would share her concerns or identify with her. She sought reassurance from me that she wasn't being racist or anti-Muslim but more that she felt that Muslims were at greater risk of victimisation in the UK and elsewhere, because terrorist acts committed by Islamic fundamentalists had skewed public opinion of the religion. And this, in turn, she believed, had made other South Asian groups more vulnerable to hate crime. She believed that much of the victimisation of Islamophobia was directed at women because they stood out as visibly different due to their dress. She spoke about having to do *ghungat* (the tradition of covering one's head as a mark of respect) in the presence of her father-in-law and brother-in-law when she first married but that over time this tradition had become relaxed. She felt relieved at not having to undertake such rituals outside the house, in public, where cultural differences were liable to become a source of discrimination. Talking to Divya reminded me of the theoretical idea that women's bodies are often the locus of cultural norms; it is here that we see boundaries and regulations being made and unmade (see Craik 1993). In this context the Muslim body is where restrictions about modesty and family honour (*izzat*) are seen and this explains the rationale behind covering the body in all forms of Muslim dress for women. Dress is a visible target and the objections raised and bans made in particular European countries such as

France regarding the rights to protect women from covering up which is seen as oppressive are apiece with that (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13038095/ Accessed 26 August 2021).

"The average white British person is not able to tell Muslim women apart from Hindus and so one obvious way of doing this might be through a face covering. If a woman has her face covered then they can assume that she's Muslim. I'm worried that when we have to start doing this, I can get mistaken for a Muslim and then I'll be subject to abuse that I've been able to escape from until now." This raises a paradox discussed by Inglis and Almila that, whilst the very act of face covering during the pandemic is a safety measure, from a medical perspective, for someone from a visible ethnic minority background it might make them more vulnerable (2020, 254).

 Divya was persistent in her claim that having these anxieties did not mean that she wasn't distancing herself from her beliefs about equality and her Muslim friends, of whom she was very close, but that she was reacting to her primal fears about safety. One way of preventing this might be to think more carefully about the mask that I wear, I mean if it's a medical-looking one then I'd be safer – also from a science point of view – than I would if it was a *dupatta*[iv], which I might have otherwise used".

Concluding remarks

All three participants made connections between face coverings and veils in the Islamic tradition, and expressed anxieties about the similarities because of the discrimination they feared. They experienced conflicting feelings because, on the one hand, they understood the importance of complying with government recommendations, but they feared what could result from the perspective of their cultural identities. My study was conducted at a relatively early stage of the pandemic (from May to the third week of June 2020) when the UK government was making strong recommendations about face coverings but they had not yet been formally enforced. Since then the wearing of face coverings have become mandatory in a number of areas of public life and its widespread use in the potentially foreseeable future use may have a bearing on the way the participants and members of those cultural or religio-ethnic groups feel and also what they've experienced.[v]

Piela's 2020 study argues that that fewer Muslim women are experiencing overt discrimination in this climate because of the growing ubiquity and normalisation of face coverings, which she misconstrues as a sign of tolerance. The fact that 'nobody is giving dirty looks' does not indicate there is greater acceptance. It may show that less attention is given to these groups but to infer anything stronger is unwarranted. More research needs to be done in this area. In speaking to Muslim women about their experiences, Begum speaks of hopes they have in the future that having to adopt face coverings may increase the understanding and compassion of others who cover their face, specifically in this context, Muslims (https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/face-covering-mask-racism-muslim-hate-crime-niqab-burqa-a9587476.html/ Accessed 26 August 2021).

But, as my study shows, the broader opinion of South Asian women is relevant. The reality of casual realism results in the grouping together of peoples of South Asian backgrounds without heeding to differences. This means, as is the case with Divya, the non-Muslim participant, having to wear a face covering can trigger uncomfortable memories experienced by her counterparts, a fact which drove her to choose more carefully her face covering to ensure that it did not resemble a vestment worn by Muslim women. Future research needs to consider the viewpoint of South Asian women from other religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the specific practices of veiling, both within Islam and more generally South Asian women's cultural and religious traditions, need to be developed as these are not uniform and have different implications.

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[i] 1. How has lockdown affected your beliefs with respect to religion? 2. How has lockdown affected your practices with respect to religion. 3. What are your views about online religion? 4. What are the most important things you've learnt with respect to your faith during lockdown? 5. Prior to lockdown how did you worship? 6. How do you think you'll feel going back to your place of worship after it reopens? 7. Do you think you will continue to make use of online resources in your religious practices? 8. Do you feel supported by leaders or representatives of your faith? 9. Are there any other points you'd like to discuss that haven't been raised in the survey/interview, or any further comments you'd like to make?

[ii] Some of the outfits obscured the face entirely.

[iii] The subtext – Basu, presumably from a Hindu background – of a Hindu woman pretending to be Muslim in India is interesting.

[iv] The *dupatta* is a long scarf that is worn by women from the Indian subcontinent. Draped in a certain way it could possibly resemble Muslim dress, and this was undoubtedly what Divya was attempting to avoid.

[v] Piela's second study, a year on, addresses the situation a year on. Her findings show how wearing the niqab had become a much more accepted option among the pandemic masks (https://theconversation.com/one-year-on-muslim-women-reflect-on-wearing-the-niqab-in-a-mask-wearing-world-154045/Accessed 26 August 2021).