

SHATTERING THE STEREOTYPES

Muslim Women Speak Out

EDITED BY FAWZIA AFZAL-KHAN

FOREWORD BY NAWAL EL SAADAWI



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For my loving and supportive husband and children: Babar, Faryal, and Naader.

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Terrorist Chic

~ HUMERA AFRIDI

It over New York City, there are signs of a startling new fashion—"terrorism" is becoming trendy. My first sighting of this peculiar phenomenon happened a month ago in Hiroko's Café on Thompson Street in SoHo. Sipping my kiwi juice, lamenting the fate of this mysteriously unappreciated new neighborhood eatery, I was delighted when an exuberant young woman waltzed into the restaurant from the snowy night. She appeared to know the owner—I gathered this, as I eavesdropped, from her ecstatic narration of her recent shopping spree. She deconstructed her outfit, filling in details of the location of the vintage store; waxed lyrical on the wonderful winter sale at Barney's; and, finally, shared her feelings for what she was wearing, starting with her fur-lined boots, embellished with turquoise beads and suede trimmings, and finishing with her fuchsia hand-knitted woolen cap whose flaps framed her cheekbones.

"Doesn't this make me look like a terrorist?" she asked as she primped it snug over her scalp for emphasis. "It's so cute. I adore it!"

Moments later, she tripped into the snow-shrouded street and, with the courage of a freedom fighter, fought the blustery wind on her way to BOOM.

There is something about the urban psyche that is enticed by the outlawed and the condemned. Though not in the articulate manner in which PLO red-and-black checkered scarves became a fashion statement, references to accessories ostensibly worn by terrorists are, nevertheless, entering the popular vocabulary. The problem is that although Dubya is exhorting American citizens to notify authorities of all suspicious or "terrorist type" people or activities, no one really knows exactly what a terrorist looks like, wears, and what he or she—is it even probable to say *she* when referring to a terrorist in America?—ought to be doing in order to qualify. Hence, the collective imagination of the city is inflamed by the lure of the elusive and fueled, additionally, by the curious disjunction between the established threat of terror and any concrete presence of terrorists and their activities.

Color-coded in pumpkin-orange and with its own special corner on the CNN screen, the alert for domestic terrorism has been at a persistent and unprecedented high. It sits there numbly like an allergen

report of the atmosphere. How long until this shade of orange becomes the hot new color for leather jackets, branded by avant-garde designers as "terrorist-orange"?

The word "terror" has never before enjoyed so much attention in American usage—in newspaper headlines, as the subject of cover stories and in ordinary conversations, it inhabits various parts of speech, proving itself grammatically versatile. "Terrorism" is also rather rapidly developing an extra dimension. By a syntactic ruse employing stealth and repetition, the word terrorism has become conflated with Islam and now, by extension, every Muslim is a potential terrorist in America today. Thus, as we engage in the new American pastime of terrorist-spotting, we shouldn't overlook the resurgence of baubles bearing "Allah" in Arabic calligraphy that went into brief hibernation following September 11. Those who were hesitant to display their faith in the furor that followed the Trade Center attack are now vehemently sparkling with jewels boasting Arabic calligraphy. Are these accessories to be read as a sign of defiance, a symbol of terrorism? Or as signifiers of resistance and subversion of the popular notion of a terrorist? Are they deserving of attention at all?

Posturing as a terrorist in order to recreate the aura of the terrorist or as a form of sympathy for the invisible enemy may also be becoming de rigueur. A fortnight ago, at Bar Priti on Sixth Avenue and Bleecker, as I was savoring the marrow of a succulent capretto, the heated overtones of a conversation happening two tables down caught my attention, in part because the buzz word terrorist was being tossed liberally. I listened shamelessly: "I was fuckin' suicidal when I was sixteen," the twenty-something woman of indeterminate origin was saying. "You think if I could attempt it living the bored, privileged life I had, I would even for a moment hesitate blowing myself up for the benefit of my community if I was forced to live a deprived, disenfranchised life in a fuckin' Palestinian camp?" The man sitting across from her was visibly uncomfortable. He squirmed and cast discreet glances around him. Several diners simulated conversations while focusing on the young woman's diatribe. "They think they're doing us a favor by only asking for the men to be fingerprinted. You think my eighty-year-old grandfather who escaped genocide is capable of being a terrorist if he visits this country? I... I am more likely to be a terrorist on the loose than him. But they're not fingerprinting me! Hah! What imbeciles!"

But just as soon as a new trend emerges, the Canal Street knock-off also simultaneously and stealthily infiltrates the streets such that the untrained eye, the world is democratically designer, and even the scornful connoisseur's confidence in her ability to discern the genuine article in a swamp of fakes is seriously challenged by the often meticulous quality of the reproduction.

So it was that in the beautifully appointed PoggenPohl and Hastings showroom off Union Square, the woman jerked her head back and said, "Oh... But you are so modern!" She tucked her chin into her neck and held this peculiar, unnatural posture as she studied me with a furrowed brow. I cleared my throat in anticipation of the price of the stunning embossed basin displayed in the shop window. But the woman was evidently distracted and she seemed disappointed somehow by my answer to her question, *Where is that accent from?*

The saleswoman's eyes roamed liberally over my body, swallowing my woolen cap, my beige Banana Republic quilted jacket, chocolate corduroy pants and magnetic Nike sneakers while her fingers began to frantically sift the pages of a folder that balanced on her lap. "It's *very* expensive," she said and again her indigo-penciled eyebrows puckered. Her face was a mold of dismay and disapproval. "I haven't found the page just yet but I can tell you it's *extremely* expensive." She then directed her gaze upon my husband.

The sibilance of rustling paper filled the room. Outside the night was cold and the city glimmered. It was Martin Luther King Day. I thought, even in Manhattan, one ought not to walk into boutiques unless one is appropriately attired and accessorized, especially if one can be mistaken for a terrorist. My fingers felt naked without my Ceylon sapphire; I regretted my sneakers. (We had taken our dogs for a walk through Washington Square Park, then dashed out to window shop for our loft renovation before stores shut for the day. There'd been no time to change but then that's what I loved about New York City: the unspoken tolerance of sartorial anarchy, an unwillingness to read people exclusively by their clothes.)

"You're really from Pakistan? Really? I'm surprised they let you into the country, you know, with the kind of terrorism you have there?" She emerged from her folder, nullifying forever all possibility of learning the price of the sink.

"Why wouldn't they let me in the country? Pakistan is an ally in the

war against terrorism," I countered in a well-honed pacific voice. "Have you considered your own home-grown terrorism? Remember Oklahoma?" This was my post-9/11 mantra.

"Yeah, we have our weirdos in Mississippi, but God they're not like the terrorists you have in your part of the world. That's the problem with this country. We let everyone in. I mean, I'm here because my grandparents came from Europe." She clutched her black pashmina shawl tightly around her. (I wondered if hives would be induced if I notified her that her pashmina hailed from the land of "terrorism.")

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to question your right to be here, but look at all the beautiful things America offers you." She gestured extravagantly at the showroom. "Look how we treat our people in America! That's why they want to come here. I'm saying we've created problems not being careful who we let in."

I wondered: had she sampled chai at Starbucks? Was she aware that Kashmir was more than just the exotic code name for the multi-colored slate that is a popular choice for contemporary American kitchens and bathrooms? And the invisible labor that went into my clothes, her products... but I was getting carried away. This is what jingoism does. It makes you take sides that you don't necessarily want to be on or even defend.

"We didn't come here to talk politics with you..." my husband started.

"Listen, you two look like real intelligent people and so modern," she said in a conciliatory tone. Don't take it the wrong way, I mean, it's just with all this stuff going on in the world. Anyway, you surprised me when you said you were from Pakistan; you sure don't look like you are."

The equanimity of many Americans is ruffled when the appearance of a potential terrorist is disarmingly ingenious, pedestrian even. Panic ensues when a possible terrorist looks like just another ordinary city-dweller sans *hijab* in the case of women, sans *hirsute*, *dun exterior* in the case of men. And when the ostensible victims of terrorism think they've spotted their perpetrator in a crowd—based on a hunch, based on an inarticulate fear—and they brand that person a terrorist—a person who, it turns out, is innocent—then one has to question the validity of their sense of themselves as victims. By wreaking havoc in the

life of the misidentified “terrorist,” have they not been the ones to terrorize and to have created a victim in the process? As bewildering, arbitrary, and awkward as it may be to hunt out a terrorist in a crowd, many New Yorkers, emboldened by the president’s words, still feel compelled to do so in defense of their city.

Equally discomfuting is the experience of being mistaken for a potential terrorist. To know that I have the absurd capacity to terrorize a saleswoman and render her incompetent at her job terrifies me! And yet in the current political atmosphere, I would be lying if I said I was entirely averse to the seduction of this strange and ambiguous power. There is bitter appeal in witnessing someone’s confusion as she trips over my identity, as she wonders how I, a Muslim woman from Pakistan, and by default, a potential terrorist, could look so ordinary and at the same time hail from that feared region—how I could blend into the crowd and yet have an accent that betrays my roots.

Meanwhile, “terrorism” in its various permutations is here to stay; it has found its way into pop culture. There is something cutting edge about recreating the aura of a terrorist for those who have the luxury to dabble in the exercise from the safety of Caucasian exteriors. But unlike other trends—nose-piercing and tribal tattoos—appropriated from other cultures, terrorist chic may be the most egregious one cast in the deepest ambivalence.

A Letter to India: In Manto’s Spirit

~AYESHA JALAL

Uncle Sam

At the height of the cold war when America was about to sign a deal by which, in return for military assistance, Pakistan would commit itself to combating communism in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, the great Urdu short-story writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, who lived in Lahore, wrote a series of facetious letters to “Uncle Sam.” In one of these letters written on February 21, 1954, Manto wrote:

Regardless of the storm India is kicking up, you must sign a military agreement with Pakistan since you are seriously concerned about the stability of the world’s largest Islamic state. And why not. Our mullahs are the best counter to Russian communism. Once military aid starts flowing, these mullahs are the first people you should arm.

They would need American-made rosaries and prayer-mats.... Cutthroat razors and scissors should be at the top of the list, and also American hair colouring formulas. That will keep these chaps happily in tow. I think the only purpose of military aid is to arm these mullahs. I am your Pakistani nephew and can see through all your moves. Anyone can now become too clever by half, thanks to your style of politics.

“Once these mullahs are armed with American weapons,” Manto predicted, “the Soviet Union with its communist propaganda will have to close shop in this country.” He could visualize the situation clearly: “Mullahs, their hair trimmed with American scissors, wearing pajamas stitched with American machines in conformity with the *Sharia*... and possessing American made prayer mats too. Everyone would then quickly fall into line and read only your name on their rosaries.”⁵

In a previous letter, the nephew had asked his respected uncle for a tiny atom bomb so that he could emulate America’s “good work” in Hiroshima by hurling it on the mullahs and having the pleasure of seeing them go up in smoke. Since such a gift might raise suspicions in India, Manto took care to suggest that America should sign a military pact with New Delhi as well. They could then dump all the discarded arms and ammunition from World War II on the two countries. That would keep the American defense industries in productive business. Like Jawaharlal Nehru, he too was a Kashmiri, but thought Nehru should be