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Directed by Pamela Yates. Produced by Paco de Onis. (Women Make Movies, 2006)
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Review of "They Call Me Muslim: Two Women Two Choices about the Hijab"

Allan Scherlen

They Call Me Muslim, a documentary film written, produced, and edited by Diana Ferrero. Italy/France/Iran, 2006, 27 minutes, Color, VHS/DVD, French/Farsi/English (English subtitled) Women Make Movies, NY. \$89 (public library), \$195 (university).

As the reviews of Counterpoise are generally read by more politically progressive selectors of library media, documentary films such as *They Call Me Muslim* may challenge their expectations concerning feminist freedom. Our Western perceptions of a woman draped in a Muslim scarf may too quickly tend toward sympathy for the assumed cultural oppression that forces her to hide her hair and body from the world. But when we hear their stories, a more nuanced understanding emerges; we can see that forcing a woman to remove a garment deemed too oppressively symbolic can be equally abusive.

They Call Me Muslim is a film that ponders government control of personal expression through dress, articulating the complexity and subtlety of such issues through the experience of two women in very opposite cultural circumstances. In one case, Samah, a student from Syria living in Paris must comply with the French decree that women cannot wear "conspicuous religious symbols" in a public school. In her case that includes the hijab headscarf which she feels is an important part of her self identity. In the other case, "K," a very secular, nontraditional woman who lives under the theocratic regime of Iran is required by law to wear the hijab. Both respond—even rebel—to government dictates, to either not wear or to wear the hijab, in their own personal ways.

Samah may clandestinely put on the scarf for prayers in a hidden room of the school while her non-Muslim Parisian friends watch guard and once she is off school ground redrape her hijab for a jog around the park. "K" will step onto the streets of Tehran in the summer wearing a tissue-thin scarf pulled back to reveal most of her hair or in the winter wear a stylish European hat.

The juxtaposition of these two women's very different perspectives on the hijab, the right to wear it and the right to not wear it, invokes broad questions about social control of personal expression and identity. The only argument presented in the film in defense of the French law is that the law helps to protect unscarved Muslim school girls who might be pressured by their male counterparts. Other commentators interviewed question the altruism argument; they speculated on more ominous origins, such as a rise of Islamophobia in France since enforcement of the law seems focused upon those wearing the hijab rather than those wearing other religious symbols, such as crucifix necklaces. Social commentators wonder why the French people, especially progressive feminists, are so concerned with enforcing how much of women's body must be uncovered. "At what length of skirt," one journalist interviewed asked, "are you anti-feminist? Likewise, we should not dictate that the hair must be showing."

The documentary intersperses beautiful images of day and night street scenes of Paris as the camera follows Samah on her walks --and runs-- through the city.

Samah explains how the hijab is a basic component of her spiritual life. Samah and her mother wonder why the French people make such a big deal out of the headscarf. Her mother speculates that if a top model wore a beautiful hijab it would become a fashion statement.

"K" living with the opposite oppression reflects on how women of Iran come to terms with the scarf. "The women have made their own beautiful fashion here with colorful scarves. Everybody is going to find a way to make it fun. It is kind of a sexy game for the girls and women," she says. "The girls go after fashion-- what ever is in Europe they go for it. We cover ourselves but tight. This is our way to rebel...It's a kind of revolution for women."

They Call Me Muslim is a film that will help us all, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, come to terms with our own ethnic and social prejudices, and hopefully serve to build dialog and tolerance concerning human expression of personal and spiritual identity. A beautifully designed work of documentary film art enhanced by a music soundtrack by Ralph Towner, Mark Sowlakis, and Davka, *They Call Me Muslim* should be seen by anyone interested in contemporary Muslim culture and international women's rights.

Allan Scherlen – Appalachian State University