

Buy a bikini. Go easy on  
the prayer. Sink a few  
coldies. Then you'll be  
true blue, mate. Muslim  
Australians are being  
asked to "fit in" but, asks  
Randa Abdel-Fattah,  
who has the right to  
define what is Aussie?  
And why do we need to?

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## Veils and Vegemite

**"Do you ever wish you were fully Aussie?"**

This question was posed to me by a teenage girl in a Sydney school last year.

"What do you mean by fully Aussie?" I asked.

"Um ... like Anglo, you know?" There was no malice or sarcasm intended. The girl was sincere, and simply curious as to whether I yearned to be liberated from what she saw as the shackles of my hyphenated identity as an Australian-born Muslim of Palestinian and Egyptian heritage, to take refuge in the more convenient and legitimate hyphenated identity of Anglo-Aussie.

My first reaction was to laugh. Unfortunately, her sentiment could not be attributed to a naive, schoolgirl view of Australian identity and citizenship. It was the kind of construction of Australian identity I have been hearing for some time now – from politicians, journalists, radio hosts, public figures, none of whom can hide behind the excuse of puberty or inexperience in life.

When the political rhetoric is spun, demands are made for citizenship tests, Australian values are invoked to justify an "us and them" mentality, some migrants are deemed less Australian for their inability to speak English, a ban on the hijab is called for in

secular schools and the deportation of an Australian citizen of Egyptian background is demanded because of outrageous comments he has made, it becomes blatantly obvious who our government and spin doctors have identified as the so-called ideological threat to Australian values.

"Muslim" and "Australian" are widely perceived as being mutually exclusive, as polar opposites. One does not need to adopt a victim complex to arrive at this rather obvious conclusion. Muslims – whether Australian-born, migrants or converts of convict ancestry – are the new Public Enemy No 1. Such an enemy has been constructed because, like it or not, Australians have been undertaking a rather urgent and almost parasitical soul-searching exercise since September 11, 2001. Our status as Australians feeds off the un-Australian status of others. We can only feel truly Australian by measuring ourselves against those we deem to be truly not.

As somebody who falls readily into the category of "other", I am curious as to why Muslims – and indeed people who qualify for the crude misnomer "of Middle Eastern appearance" – are on this side of the deep and bitter chasm that has been created in Australia. There is a fracture in our society and, rather than feel optimistic



it healing. I feel increasingly apprehensive it becoming worse.

because the criminals who attacked on September 11, 2001 professed to be (although their actions clearly abrogated claim)? The language of the "coalition willing" has only ever been coloured with cents about the "terrorists attacking our life" and "our values". By the crude logic of locks and politicians anxious for votes, the 'ted alliance of the terrorists with Islam s Australian Muslims and Australians of background (because the misconception every Arab is a Muslim) equally suspect of antagonistic to "Australian values".

HERE HAVE BEEN VARIOUS ATTEMPTS TO define Australian values: a fair go, egalitarianism, gender equality – all values, itics have pointed out are universal human, certainly not values over which Australia im intellectual property rights.

ever, the way in which the debate plays out strates that it is not a general values delow Muslims view labour laws, free trade, vironment or capitalism has never been at art of the issue. The values debate has pifocused on women's dress and attitudes to social norms (such as alcohol, a day at the or sexuality). Integration, fitting in, assimit doesn't matter whether you belong to a or recycle your plastic, it's whether you bikini to the beach, date, or can join in a who-got-more-pissed-on-the-weekend ay morning water cooler conversation that pivotal points that rate you on the 1-10 f What Makes You Aussie.

is why that young schoolgirl asked me r I ever wished I was fully Aussie. I'd just ed that observant Muslims don't drink or take drugs, don't have boyfriend/girlfriend nships and don't wear bikinis or swimsuits beach or pools. There were a lot of don'ts alk and the girl, rather than seeing these atter of personal choice, took pity on me. r assessment of me as different and weird tely reflects a widespread wariness among neral population about overt religion.

the place of observant Muslims in a secular hat conjures up this irrational fear and the tion that Muslims represent an ideological . to a secular lifestyle. It is not a Muslim's ul beliefs in heaven and hell, the big bang, nism or Darwinism. It is the hijab, the beard, lto prayer, the fasting during work hours, the g during lunch breaks, the self-discipline indulging (even in moderation, even in tiny in the things our society promotes as norul acceptable (having a drink, relationships e of marriage, trying a joint) that seem to be the point of divide. For Muslims, such remain taboo. We are considered outsiders e some of our social norms and moral are undeniably different. One could say we l-fashioned, but we are proudly so.

n't think the divide that has made Muslims e "the other" is based on race, colour or e. It is a divide based on religious observatians and Greeks may go to church on y or wear a cross around their necks, but late, enjoy a drink and have the appearance ous anonymity. The religious observance explicit, and that is why their "integration" veived as a success of multiculturalism, as the Australian-ness of a non-drinking a bloke who steps out of work to go pray at

FROM MUSLIMS view labour laws, free trade, environment or capitalism has never been at the heart of the debate. The debate has primarily focused on women's dress and attitudes to alcohol and sexuality.



I don't need to feel "fully Aussie": (above) author Randa Abdel-Fattah (previous page) 10-year-old Somali-Australian Isir Mohamed and her companions wear their Australian flags as hijabs to celebrate Harmony Day last March.

lunchtime, or a woman at the bus stop with a suit and hijab on, it suspect.

Well, what about Orthodox Jewish women, I hear you protest. As a symbol of modesty, they cover their hair with a wig and expose their real hair only to their husbands. And what about nuns who also wear a veil? And Mormons, who have strict dress codes and also do not drink? So many similarities between Islam and other faiths and yet for every five or more documentaries a week about Muslims, Muslim women or the veil, there are virtually none about the almost identical principles of modesty found in Judaism, or Paul's admonition to women in Corinthians that their hair should be cut off if it is not covered.

It is Islam that has the public fascinated and on edge. Perhaps it is because of the increasing size of the Australian Muslim population. Do we accept people as Australians as long as we can manage the size of their minority status? The less noticeable they are, the more acceptable they become?

Time and time again, the values debate has centred on the role of women in Islam (perceived as oppressed) and the role of women in the West (championed as liberated). In the recent past, Prime Minister John Howard has called for "some Muslim migrants to learn English and treat women better in order to fit in with Australian values". He later defended himself, saying he was referring to a small section of the Muslim population.

The qualification was laughable. If the Prime Minister was so genuinely concerned about women's rights in religion, he should not have stopped at Muslims. What of Orthodox Jewish men who each day say, "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hasti made me a woman"? No headlines about that. And is Christianity so innocent? According to Ecclesiastes 25:19, 24: "No wickedness comes anywhere near the wickedness of a woman ... Sin began with a woman and thanks-to her we all must die." Anglican women are still struggling to be ordained in Australia's supposed utopia of female liberation. Our society is notably silent when other religions deny women their rights. And yet, when a Muslim displays a patriarchal, misogynist attitude, the public and our politicians are outraged, as though – God forbid – there are no sexist, chauvinistic non-Muslim men.

That our sports heroes have been embroiled in shocking scandals involving the degradation (and alleged rape and sexual assault) of women is forgotten. That there have been gang rapes perpetrated by Anglo-Australians (whose ethnic identity is never revealed) is ignored. That there have been reports of date-rape drugs being administered on cruise ships is met with silence.

The hypocritical way in which the Sheikh Taj el-Din al Hilaly affair unfolded is a case in point, for while the Sheikh's comments were undoubtedly appalling, the reaction of the Prime Minister, politicians and the media exposed a superiority complex on the part of those who raise Western standards of masculinity as the yardstick. The "us and them" card was whipped out. We respect women. We believe in equality. We stand for liberation. They believe differently. Was the ferocity of public indignation elicited by the words in the sermon, or by the fact that the person giving the sermon was Muslim? After all, comments that imply women invite rape by the way they dress have been made by members of the judiciary. Barristers routinely seek to tender evidence as to the way a rape victim was dressed in order to impugn her credibility. No public or political frenzy there.

The effect of this marginalisation on Australian

Muslims frightens me. It is simply naive to think that the political discourse and Aussie! Aussie! Aussie! Oil Oil Oil rhetoric is aimed at empowering Muslims – migrants and the Australian-born – or inspiring a sense of citizenship in them. It is no stretch of my cynicism to see the rhetoric and puffed-up chests of "our values or go home" as an appalling vote-grabbing exercise. Stir up the politics of resentment under the pretence of a celebration of Aussie pride. The result is alienation, defensiveness and, among young Australian Muslims, confusion about one's identity and place in the only country one knows as home.

I know of such confusion because I have felt it many times. The kind of identity politics that has been thrown up by the pressure to define Australian values and identity hit me straight in the eye on a trip I took to Sweden last year. I was invited to speak at the Gothenburg Book Festival in September 2006, and it was there that I befriended a Swedish journalist and rap artist, Nabila, who was raised in Sweden but born in Lebanon to a Kurdish mother and Lebanese father.

As we mingled with other international guests, one person asked Nabila: "Do you feel Swedish?"

"Yes," she replied. "Until you asked me."

When we reflected on her response later that day, I asked her: "What about your Kurdish and Lebanese background? How does it impact on your identity?" She gave me a nonchalant smile and then shrugged. "To be honest, I'm tired of defining myself. Am I Swedish? Am I Kurdish? Am I Lebanese? I'm all of these things, and none. Sometimes I'm more Swedish than Kurdish, sometimes I'm more Lebanese than Swedish. In the end, I'm just me."

Her answer resonated with me. It so perfectly encapsulated an ideal of a nation which to position one's sense of self. As idealistic and naive as her expression of self-definition was, I longed for the freedom to detach myself from hyphens and labels and the need to prove loyalty to one part of my identity at the expense of the other – something that seemed to underpin the values debate back home. At times I felt intensely Australian; my chest swelled with pride at the sound of an Australian accent in the streets of Gothenburg. Listening to Palestinian writer Soud Amiry talk about her marvellous book, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*, I felt intensely Palestinian and craved to walk the streets of Jerusalem again. Eating at an Egyptian restaurant in Stockholm, I instantly connected with the owner and reminisced with him about the chaos and magic of Cairo.

THE INCONSISTENCY IN MY EMOTIONS AND devotions used to faze me. It used to arouse in me a sense of disloyalty and insincerity. But Nabila showed me that there is no weakness in loving many things with equal strength. I returned to Australia conscious, for the first time, of the utter fluidity of my identity. I don't need to feel "fully Aussie". Not because I am not of Anglo background (I don't believe Anglo equals Australian), but because it is an impossible demand of a country founded on immigration to expect a pure demarcation between citizenship and heritage. One's past, whether ancestral or as a migrant, necessarily shapes one's present. The issue is the place of this construction of self in Australia's future. GW

Randa Abdel-Fattah is the author of *Ten Things I Hate About Me* and the award-winning *Does My Head Look Big in This?* This is an edited version of an essay in the current edition of *Griffith Review*.