

# FACEBOOKING HALAL

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## INTRODUCTION

During the past year, the “*Halal* issue”, along with other “Muslim issues” such as the *hijab* and the *purdah*, have roused much anti-Muslim sentiments in Sri Lanka. Different groups have employed different means of expressing their views on this issue. State and non-state news agencies have brought it to the notice of the community through both electronic and print media. However, the focus of this research is how these issues have been tackled or dealt with at a more informal level via social networking sites, mainly Facebook. As I see it, what you see “published” and “shared” on this virtual space is not merely a reflection of what is taking place at a more physical level in society. In *The Hyper-realism of Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard discusses how photography, mass production, television, and advertising have resulted in the creation of what he terms a “hyper-reality” that is far from the “real” world. Similarly, as a result of the greater freedom to express oneself on the online space, “facebooking”, too, leads to the construction of a “hyper-reality”, especially in relation to the “Muslim issues” that are discussed in this paper. While creating this “hyper-reality”, the action of posting information on social networking sites like Facebook also adds a certain “hyper-realistic” dimension to one’s identity, that is different from one’s “real self” in the outside world.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was mainly carried out by observing a series of twenty-six images that were initially posted on Facebook and were later compiled into an email and forwarded with the title “Sinhalese, open your eyes”, which the researcher, too, received in November 2012. This material was then analysed using Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Jean Baudrillard’s *The Hyper-realism of Simulation* and Veena Das’s *Life and Words*. Since this study involves a discussion on identity, a certain amount of introspective study was also carried out.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

“Sharing” content on Facebook attaches a certain element to your identity, depending on the content that you “share”. Even though the material you make public is not in your own words, the fact that you choose to publish it under your name on this cyberspace makes a statement. It shapes and fixes your identity according to the party you are supporting. Therefore, even though some may see “*Halal*” or the *Hijab* and the *Burqa* as merely “Muslim issues”, this is not the case.

Not only are identities shaped and created on Facebook, but the identities of both “the Sinhalese” and “the Muslims” are questioned as a result of this “Face booking”. When the researcher, as a

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“Sinhalese”, speak about these issues on Facebook, the questions asked are like “since when are you concerned about such matters?” and have my identity as a “Sinhalese” questioned. “The Sinhalese” must “prove” that they are “true” “Sinhalese” by sharing these anti-halal and therefore anti-Muslim sentiments on Facebook. Those who question these extremist posts are seen as either effeminate or cowardly or as unpatriotic and non-“Sinhalese”.

An email the researcher received in November 2012 carried a series of Facebook posts exhibiting anti-Muslim sentiments. The title or “subject” of this forwarded email was “Sinhalese, open your eyes...” These online Facebook posts and the action of “sharing” them on one’s Facebook page or forwarding the email to those who sympathize with these anti-Muslim sentiments creates a sense of togetherness or group identity. Therefore it is not only one’s individual identity as a “Sinhalese” or a “Muslim” that is created, but a sense of belonging to a larger community is also instilled in the “sharer” of the information since it is addressed to “Sinhalese” and is intended to be shared amongst them. In such instances, collective identity is given prominence over that of the individual.

Interestingly, certain Muslims, too, seem to feel a necessity to prove their “true Sri Lankanness” at times when their belonging to the Sri Lankan community is questioned. When Muslims were accused of supporting Pakistan, a “Muslim nation”, during international cricket matches against Sri Lanka, certain Muslim individuals felt that they needed to defend themselves against such accusations. They, too, used the Facebook space for this purpose by “sharing” a picture of two boys at a cricket stadium holding up a poster that read “Even though we are Muslim, we support Sri Lanka”. This shows that they, too, believe that it is wrong to support any other nation when playing against Sri Lanka and that you automatically become a traitor by not doing so. Therefore the Facebook space becomes “a site of struggle” amongst different groups when it comes to proving their identities.

Following the anti-*Halal* and the anti-cattle slaughter campaigns, the next step launched by the Buddhist extremist group *Bodu Bala Sena* (B.B.S.) was the anti-*Hijab* and *Niqab* petition. Similar to the two previous anti-Muslim campaigns, this movement, too, has gained much precedence on the cyberspace. According to the Colombo Telegraph, the *Bodu Bala Sena* (B.B.S) C.E.O. posted the following on his Facebook account on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 2013: “Ban of face covering cloths”. He had also posted the official web link of the Government of Netherlands’ decision to ban clothing that covers the face, which states,

The government has reaffirmed the decision to introduce a general ban on wearing clothing that covers the face in public. It believes that people need to be able to look each other in the eye and interact with recognisable faces. Open communication is vital in public places. Wearing clothing that covers the face is not appropriate in an open society like the Netherlands, where participation in social intercourse is crucial.

Interestingly, such Facebook posts allow fellow “facebookers” to express their views directly and within a very short time, unlike with other forms of print and electronic media. It also creates a space for debate amongst groups with opposing points of view. The aforementioned post by C.E.O, Bodu Bala Sena for example, has generated comments from individuals and groups with both pro-B.B.S. and anti-B.B.S. sentiments. Some of these commenters preferred to keep their “true” identities hidden by resorting to “fake” profiles such as “Peace Lanka”, whereas others used their “real” identities and displayed a photograph of themselves in their “profile picture”. The choice of remaining anonymous or revealing one’s “true” identity is left to the facebooker, depending on how concerned they are of the consequences of their online dealings.

Speaking of identities and the ability to express oneself, it would be worthwhile looking at how Gayatri Spivak discusses the gendered subaltern figure in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. Here, she states that the abolition of Sati or widow sacrifice in India by the British has been generally understood as a case of “White men saving brown women from brown men” (1994: 93). In the present Sri Lankan context, we are faced with a case of Buddhist men “saving” Muslim women from Muslim men. However, it is interesting to note that the Buddhist men are not so much concerned with saving Muslim women as with saving the “nation”. In an online petition that was launched on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2013 urging the Ministry of Defence to ban the burka in Sri Lanka, the petitioners had stated:

We believe that the government should Ban the Burka.

It’s a threat to *national* security.

This is still officially a buddhist country and it should not go out of its way to appease foreign ideologies. This isn’t even just a religious symbol, considering some Islamic countries have bans

It is a symbol of oppression of women in foreign countries.

We call on the government to Ban the Burka immediately. (Emphasis added)

The immediate concern of the petitioners is “national security”. It is almost as a means of justifying their actions that they state that “it is a symbol of oppression of women”. Therefore it is more about the image of the Sinhala Buddhist “nation” than about the status of Muslim women.

Whatever be their ultimate motive or reason behind the demand to ban “face covering cloths”, it is interesting that the object being discussed is women and the entire discourse is carried out by men. It is men who discuss what women should or should not wear. The Muslim woman has no voice here. In *Life and Words*, Veena Das discusses a similar situation in relation to the abduction of women during the Partition of India and Pakistan and the later restoration of these women to their families. She refers to this “restoration” of women as “a social contract between *men* charged with keeping male violence against women in abeyance” (2007: 21 emphasis in original). Similarly, in the present Sri Lankan context, the B.B.S. presents the practice of face covering as a “symbol of oppression of women”, and they seem to take it on as their duty to “protect” the Muslim women from what they see as an oppressive religious patriarchal system, while themselves advocating restrictions on dress for Sinhala Buddhist women, such as the prohibition of wearing sleeveless blouses or short skirts when entering temples.

When Spivak talks of Sati, she notes that a justification for this rite presented by the “brown men” is that “the women actually wanted to die” (1994: 93). In the Indian context that Das talks about, she points out that not only the men, but the social workers and the women’s movements, too, had assumed “that they knew best what the women’s true preferences were” (2007: 28). In the present Sri Lankan context, as a response to the accusations leveled against them by Buddhist extremist groups such as the *Bodu Bala Sena*, the Muslim men speak for the Muslim women by stating that they actually want to wear the *burka* and *niqab*. Again the Muslim woman is left without a voice and is spoken for by her male counterparts. This speaking for the Muslim women, too, is done through the online space with the use of Facebook posts.

As a response to the petition demanding a ban on face covering cloths, an online petition campaign urging “ban the BBS” was launched on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2013. The petition reads,

The Bodu Bala Sena has long been suppressing freedom and multiculturalism in Sri Lanka. Their actions, speeches and brutal approaches to other races and creeds in the island are not only undemocratic, but contain elements of Nazism. Under the guise of protecting Buddhism they are refusing others the right to practice and to live within the bounds of non-Buddhist life. Muslim shops are attacked, Halal packaging has been discontinued, Christian churches are attacked, and the Eucharist desecrated. Now the BBS wants to ban women from wearing the Niqab and the Burqa. *This is not Buddhist*, it is not decent, it is not human. Please sign this petition in solidarity with those who support basic dignity and the freedom to live within one's chosen religious and cultural beliefs. (Emphasis added)

However, what is noteworthy here is that the anti-B.B.S. petitioners, like the pro-B.B.S. petitioners, have their own concept of what "real" Buddhism is. While condemning the B.B.S. for their religious extremism, the petitioners highlight that "This is not Buddhist". Therefore they, too, become agents in constructing "Buddhist" and "Non-Buddhist" identities on cyberspace.

## CONCLUSIONS

Much of the anti-Muslim religious extremism carried out by groups such as the *Bodu Bala Sena* on internet social networking sites like Facebook is at a distance from the "real" world. Jean Baudrillard discusses this phenomenon:

In his essay *The Hyper-realism of Simulation* (originally published in 1976), Jean Baudrillard asserts that the use and abundance of media, signs, and symbols has so bombarded our culture that "reality itself, as something separable from signs of it ...vanished in the information-saturated, media-dominated contemporary world" (1018). Photography, mass production, television, and advertising have shaped and altered authentic experience to the point that "reality" is recognized only when it is re-produced in simulation. Truth and reality are mediated and interpreted to an extent that culture can no longer distinguish reality from fantasy. Baudrillard terms this blurring of mediated experience and reality "hyper-reality."

Posting anti-*Halal* and anti-*Hijab/nikab* messages on Facebook in the recent past, too, can be seen to exist at a "hyper-realistic" level. Much of the anti-Muslim hatred that we thus find on the online space is not directly expressed in the "real" world. Most people, as I myself was, are initially made aware of the existence of such sentiments via such cyberspace posts. Therefore there is a blurring of "reality" and this "hyper-reality".

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard adds, quoting Littré, that "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (4). In other words, the sharing of anti-Muslim posts on Facebook and other social networking sites and web pages not only creates a "hyper-reality" in which such sentiments exist, but the act of posting and sharing these opinions in itself results in creating and making "real" such sentiments in those who might not have previously cultivated such feelings. Even though we may think that what we see on Facebook, for example, is a heightened reflection of what happens at a more physical level in "real" society, it could, in fact, be vice versa. Therefore, greater attention must be paid to this creation of "hyper-reality", in order to better understand how it impacts "reality".

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