

The Era of the ‘Booty’ and the ‘Burqa’



by **Dr Poonam Madar**, University of Surrey

What’s “hot right now” – not to confuse it with Rita Ora’s track – is the ‘hype’ around ‘A Big Booty’, and this concept seems to be endlessly trending on social media. Perhaps we have *Vogue* to ‘thank’ (or ‘blame’?) for making that initial booty call (no pun intended).

According to *Vogue*, “**We’re Officially in the Era of the Big Booty**” (Garcia 2014), whereby a woman’s sex appeal is increasingly being measured by the prominence of her behind – thus signalling to men that if a woman should ask you if her ass looks big, you’d better say: ‘Hell, yeah!’

But I think that even *Vogue* has underestimated the era that it claims to know so much about. Look a little harder *Vogue*, darling, and you might just see that it is as much about the burqa as it is about the booty; while with one, the fuss is all about that bass, with the other, it’s that you can’t see the face. It would appear that we’re in the era in which both the booty and the burqa have “officially become ubiquitous”.

While *The Huffington Post* responded to *Vogue* by declaring “**Actually, Vogue, The Era Of The Big Booty Began A Long Ass Time Ago**” (Duca 2014), can the big booty, like the burqa, really be assigned to an era? Simply put, NO. For as long as we have been alive, both the booty and the burqa have always been there. The difference is that this era appears to be relentlessly caught up in *celebrating* the big booty, while simultaneously *condemning* the burqa.

But it takes more than just a big, bouncy and plentiful booty to be the cause of much celebration, and it takes more than just a piece of fabric covering a woman’s face to make her the target of condemnation.

Much like *Beauty and the Beast*, ‘the booty’ and ‘the burqa’ play multiple roles in inciting celebration and condemnation respectively. That is, ‘the booty’ *is* as ‘the booty’ *does* and ‘the burqa’ *is* as ‘the burqa’ *does*. As such, both extremities give rise to one big question – if one shows too much and the other shows too little, **where, for women, is the happy medium?**

Let’s start with where the ‘booty’ *is* in this era...

Laying emphasis on ‘the booty’ heightens the nearly (and sometimes completely) naked ways in which popular celebrities are portrayed. From Kim Kardashian’s infamous ‘belfie’ in a white swimsuit (garnering over a million views), to her oil-covered behind on the front of *Paper* magazine (November 2014), from Amber Rose posing in a barely there monokini, to her posing proudly alongside scantily clad Blac Chyna, to Nicky Minaj squatting down in a pink thong for the front

cover of her 2014 ‘Anaconda’ single, are all visible signs that simply a dress or top with a deep plunging neckline just will not crack it.

A lot of bust on show no longer has the risqué factor and so the jury is out: these ‘powerful’ female celebrities need to try – a lot – harder – oh, the pressure... Hence, the sight of ample cleavage, plenty of leg and your crack (or near enough) on full display is likely to have people following ‘your moves all week on Twitter.’ It seems then, that the West just can’t get enough: the less you have on, the more we want of it.

But ‘the booty’ doesn’t just stop there, so let’s consider what it does...

In most cases, and as seen in music videos as well as in Instagram images, there is extreme ‘twerking’, close-up shots of ‘the booty’ bending over a bed or even a woman or two, often drizzled in what appears to be an obscene amount of baby oil, honey, or Vaseline. At times, even the lyrics revolve around the whole ‘booty’. From Rihanna locking booties with Shakira in ‘Can’t Remember To Forget You’, to Jennifer Lopez and Iggy Azalea in ‘Booty’ (which attracted 11 million views within 24 hours) from Nicky Minaj’s ‘Anaconda’ (19.6 million views on the day of its release), to Beyoncé’s ‘Partition’, these are all ultimately signs that that ‘the booty’ goes beyond more than just a ‘twerk’ or two; it promotes the female form as being subjected to sexual objectification for the purpose of pornographic pleasure.

As inviting as ‘the booty’ seems, at the other end of the spectrum lies ‘the burqa’. The burqa appears uninviting, presumably to the male spectator – informing him only too blatantly that his lustful thoughts are unwelcome here. As such, the idea that a woman has to go to this extent to cover up suggests that ‘the burqa’ is a visible emblem of female oppression. But, then again, wearers of ‘the burqa’ might argue that it is a form of female liberation.

It would be naïve, however, to assume that the above is only what ‘the burqa’ represents. There’s no point in beating around the bush: as more often than discussing how a woman might feel about wearing a burqa, ‘the burqa’ instead appears to serve as a symbol of Islam which some in the West have increasingly grown to dislike, fear or even hate. This is evident in instances such as France’s banning of the burqa (and the niqab) (Lacassagner 2013), the countless number of burqa debates (to ban or not to ban, that is the question) that have made it onto television as well as the front page of newspapers across the globe (Behiery, 2013; Nanwani, 2011).

Thus, the sight of ‘the burqa’ appears to conjure up more emotions around issues such as Islamophobia, terrorism, security threats, 9/11, 7/7 and, in more recent times, the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris (January 2015) and the Sousse attacks in Tunisia (June 2015) than it does around the depiction of women. But the jury is out: show us your face so that our security is less in doubt.

Never mind the number of Muslim women (wearing a hijab, niqab or the burqa) who are increasingly subjected to a number of hate crimes every year (Adesina and Marocico 2015), or the fact that Nadiya Hussain cannot simply win a British baking contest without her ‘hijab’ or her ‘religion’ being called into question (Khan 2015) – instead, it is the fears as propagated by the West that take centre stage (Afshar, 2013).

Again, much like Beauty and the Beast, the problem with ‘the booty’ and ‘the burqa’ are not only multiple but also only too clear: while the former appears to be celebrated endlessly, the latter is condemned profusely. And so, it goes beyond how one may be showing too much and the other showing too little. But again, I return to my earlier question: **What about women in all of this? Where, for women, is the happy medium?**

Perhaps that is also the question that Tom Rawles poses in his artwork Extremes which depicts the same woman placed in the extremities of two different cultures; and my guess is that the conversation with women (and men too) is yet to be had...**but when?**

Dr Poonam Madar lectures in Sociology and Criminology, based in London. Her research interests include race, gender, and popular culture. She blogs at: www.poonammadar.blogspot.com and she tweets as @PoonamMadar To find out more, visit Poonam's Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/PoonamMadar

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