The female body - covered in a burka or uncovered in a bikini - is a subtle subtext in the war against terrorism. The United States did not engage in this war to avenge women's rights in Afghanistan. However, our war against the Taliban, a regime that does not allow a woman to go to school, walk alone on a city street, or show her face in public, highlights the need to more fully understand the ways in which our own cultural "uncovering" of the female body impacts the lives of girls and women everywhere.

Taliban rule has dictated that women be fully covered whenever they enter the public realm, while a recent US television commercial for "Temptation Island 2" features near naked women. Although we seem to be winning the war against the Taliban, it is important to gain a better understanding of the Taliban's hatred of American culture and how women's behavior in our society is a particular locus of this hatred. The irony is that the images of sleek, bare women in our popular media that offend the Taliban also represent a major offensive against the health of American women and girls.

During the 20th century, American culture has dictated a nearly complete uncovering of the female form. In Victorian America, good works were a measure of female character, while today good looks reign supreme. From the hair removal products that hit the marketplace in the 1920s to today's diet control measures that seek to eliminate even healthy fat from the female form, American girls and women have been stripped bare by a sexually expressive culture whose beauty dictates have exerted a major toll on their physical and emotional health. The unrealistic body images that we see and admire every day in the media are literally eating away at the female backbone of our nation. A cursory look at women's magazines, popular movies and television programs reveal a wide range of images modeling behaviors that directly assault the human skeleton. The ultra-thin woman pictured in a magazine sipping a martini or smoking a cigarette is a prime candidate for osteoporosis later in life.

In fact, many behaviors made attractive by the popular media, including eating disorders, teen smoking, drinking, and the depression and anxiety disorders that can occur when one does not measure up are taking a major toll on female health and well-being. The American Medical Association last year acknowledged a link between violent images on the screen and violent behavior among children. In a world where 8-year-olds are on diets, adult women spend $300 million a year to slice and laser their bodies and legal pornography is a $56 billion industry, it is time to note the dangers of unhealthy body images for girls and women.
Now that the Taliban's horrific treatment of women is common knowledge, dieting and working out to wear a string bikini might seem to be a patriotic act. The war on terrorism has certainly raised our awareness of the ways in which women's bodies are controlled by a repressive regime in a far away land, but what about the constraints on women's bodies here at home, right here in America?

In the name of good looks (and also corporate profits - the Westernized image of the perfect body is one of our most successful exports) contemporary American women continue to engage in behaviors that have created major public health concerns.

Although these problems may seem small in the face of the threat of anthrax and other forms of bioterrorism, there is still a need to better understand how American culture developed to the point that it now threatens the health of its bikini-clad daughters and their mothers.

Covered or uncovered, the homefront choice is not about morality but the physical and emotional health of future generations.

Whether it's the dark, sad eyes of a woman in purdah or the anxious darkly circled eyes of a girl with anorexia nervosa, the woman trapped inside needs to be liberated from cultural confines in whatever form they take. The burka and the bikini represent opposite ends of the political spectrum but each can exert a noose-like grip on the psyche and physical health of girls and women.
General Instructions

For this exam, use ink, write legibly on every other line of your paper, and use only one side of each page. You may use a dictionary, an electronic speller, and a thesaurus.

Print your instructor's name in the upper right-hand corner of this page. Print your own name on the back of the last page of your essay. Turn in your copy of “The Burka and the Bikini” along with your written exam and this sheet. Failure to follow directions will disqualify your examination.

Essay Format

Your assignment is to write a 500-700 word essay addressing the prompt given below. This essay must include an introductory paragraph, several central paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. The first paragraph must identify the author of the article, give a short summary of its content, and provide a clear and identifiable thesis statement. Each central paragraph must be based on a topic sentence that supports your thesis and that is developed from a variety of methods, such as explanation and elaboration, facts, quotations, examples, and references to authority. The concluding paragraph must bring the essay to a satisfactory close.

Prompt

The Burka and the Bikini

Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Jacqueline Jackson argue that “American girls and women have been stripped bare by a sexually expressive culture whose beauty dictates have exerted a major toll
on their physical and emotional health.” What do you think of this argument? Write a paper in which you agree or disagree with the stance of these writers. You may support or refute their reasoning as well as introduce ideas of your own.

Final Note

Remember that your general goal is to demonstrate to the reader of your essay that you have understood what you have read and that you have reacted sensitively and intelligently to it. Your specific goal is to write a well-constructed essay of the sort you have been studying and practicing all semester.