IDENTITY, ETHICS AND FASHION: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S DRESS CULTURE IN MALABAR, NORTH KERALA

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Abstract

After the Oil boom of the 1970s in the Middle East, it was the Malabar region which witnessed massive labour migration from the Indian state of Kerala. The migration to the Middle East regions led to multiple advancements in the social and economic sphere of Kerala. In this article, I explore the newly adopted female attire culture, termed purdha in Kerala and its impact. This paper seeks to convey the different debates surrounding this culture like fashion, identity, the idea of hijab etc. Though the Qur'an and the Hadith are said to be the sources of Islamic dress culture, in its practical sense, there exists a lot of diversity. The phenomenon of purdha paradoxically reflects the modern outlook and traditional requirement of hijab. This unique factor of the aforesaid apparel caught wider attention of Muslim women in appropriating it. Generally the fashion is associated with the rise of modern subjects, the form of social mobility, the rejection of tradition and the rise of mercantile capitalism in Europe. Contrary to the general perception, the purdha wearing Muslim women do not look at fashion as a 'run-away' from the tradition. Instead, it is a process of interlacing the new circumstances with the traditional instructions in a creative manner in accordance with the modern life condition. The varying factors like piousness, sexuality, age, gender and modesty are navigated in multiple ways in initiating the subjects to choose fashion clothes. In a diverse country like India, the clothing identity of an individual is connected with different elements like ritual superiority, occupational status, fashion, religious and caste identity. Hence, the topic of dress often appears to be a sensitive medium. The core argument which is brought forth here is that the idea and assumptions associated with cloth in Indian society can be analyzed at more than one level.

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The veil is a complex phenomenon and it has often been situated at the intersection of dress, body and traditional ethics. Most of the studies about Muslim women are concentrated on the viewpoint regarding the Islamic dress-code or the veil. It will be interesting to see why clothing styles hold much significance among the various religious as well as secular practices of Muslim women. The phenomenon called the veil, while not being new, possesses a certain history. The Islamic dress-code or the veil is a symbolic sign of power manifested in different forms. Everything can be forced from outside, except thought.

What is being analyzed here is its historic context. Laila Ahmed argues that it was in the era of colonialism, that the idea about the veil as a symbol of 'female oppression and backwardness' got formed.[1] According to the colonizers, the only way for these colonized societies "to move forward on the paths of civilization" would be if the practices intrinsic to Islam (and therefore Islam itself) were cast off.[2] However, Kahf thinks that the European observations about the veil were always already there. Tracing the image of Muslim women in European literature from the medieval period to the modern era, Kahf says that the European concept about the Muslim women has been there from the 17th century. It is also significant that Kahf, although refusing to cite colonialism as the main cause for negative representations of Muslim women, nonetheless admits that the narratives woven around religion and the veil sought to "create the fiction of a western, a not-oriental, identity-and thus to prepare a supportive culture for colonialism."[3] Judy Mabro's observation on how the women in the oriental world were represented in the European discourse is also somewhat similar. She says that the basis on which the bourgeois society developed was an opposition between the two spheres- the male, that stood for the public sphere of alienated labour, and the female private sphere of self-sacrificing, nurturing, non-alienated labour. This whole structure strived to enforce the ideals of monogamous marriage and portrayed women as passive sexual beings, since their existence was dependent on such propagations.

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[1]

Leila Ahmed, Women *and Gender in Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,1992).

[2]

Ibid, p.43

[3]

Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Women: From Tergamant to Odalisque* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 6.

Therefore, Mabro says that, to have depicted the harem women as ordinary women, who reared children and looked after their home like that of the European women would have undermined the entire construct of an ideal western family life.[4]

Both these authors observe that Europe resorted to such a criticism about Muslim women based on the Victorian ideal of femininity. The Europeans did not always depict them as victims. According to Kahf, the veiled women were given a noble status similar to the Queen in an era when the Muslim world was more superior to Europe, in terms of knowledge, literature and culture.[5]Frantz Fanon thinks that the passive image about the veiled women was created in a bid to depict the Muslim world as culturally inferior.[6]The shift from of the powerful Muslim women to helpless victim itself demonstrates these representations are constructions, contingent upon time, place and culture which cannot be disentangled from issues of political and economic hegemony. Thus the relatively inferior position of the Muslim world transformed the Muslim woman into a damsel in distress, who nonetheless still needed to be saved. In this sense, veiling or unveiling becomes part of a binary representation. Veiled women became a symbol of native cultural inferiority while unveiling became the representation of modernity and emancipation.

The veil has in fact been so central to the constitution of the western modern subject that it has come to signify not only the Muslim women but the third world women who were more generally portrayed as powerless and oppressed.[7]

Colonial feminist attitudes towards Muslim women and the veil continue to inform popular and intellectual culture. The veil became a symbolic field, rather than a mere garment, to project the

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   Judy Mabro, *Veiled half-truths: Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women*(London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 9.

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   Kahf, Op.cit.p.4

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   Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled", *In Veil: Veiling, Representation and contemporary Art*, ed. David A Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, (London: Institute of International Visual Arts in Associations with Modern Art Oxford,2003),7-85

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   Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and colonial discourse," *Boundary* 12, 3 (1984), 333-358.

superior self-identity of the West. In such political contexts, the veil, beyond a mere religious liability, had become a part of resistance and group solidarity. The colonial logic about it had got acceptance in the mainstream Muslim world as well. Also, many of the post-colonial feminists had criticized the approaches of the feminists which harbored Eurocentric or xenophobic arguments.

This new dress culture created fresh discussions in connection with certain binaries such as modernity and tradition, public and private, aspirational and conservative. Another important transformation in the veil was its escalation from a phase called the 'ideal Islamic dress-code' to a 'hybrid' stage. The academic studies entered in the later stage gave much priority to such fashion trends.[8] The analyses of Saba Mahmood and Farzana Hanifa on Islamic dress code link it with the Islamic reformist movements. For them the dress is a part of their piety and submission to the God.

Instead of studying the practice of veiling in a single dimension, I have drawn from the studies which emphasize its multiple dimensions and varied orientations. What I intend to do in this study of the veil's enactment of piety, is to analyze significant concepts such as mobility, fashion, spirituality, religion and agency in a feminist view linking them with the concept of dress. Here Piety is not a purely internal state of mind because there is always a precondition where women have to define their ethics in a new manner which is highly expressive.

Purdha in Local context

In the recent past Muslim dress practices among Kerala Muslims, especially the hijab have attracted much scholarly attention[9]. What informs this renewed interest is the changes brought about in the attire culture of Muslims by the massive migration that took place during the 1970s

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   Emma Tarlo, Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith (New York: Berg, 2010).

[9]

   Philippo, Osella and Caroline Osella. Muslim Style in South India. *Fashion Theory* 11, 2-3(2007); 1-20

Sherina, Banu. Education and Identity Construction Among Muslims in Kerala: A Study of Select Schools in Malappuram District. Phd, Thesis Jawaharlal Nehru University, (2008)

and 80s. Before 70s Kachithuni and Thattom constituted the dressing pattern of Malabar Muslim women. Gulf migration of the 70s resulted in cross cultural interaction between Middle East and Kerala. Purdah dress was one among the many commodities that came to Kerala through this transcultural transaction. The massive socio-cultural changes taking place in Kerala especially in Malabar[10] began to be represented in the movies and other popular mediums of the time. There was an obvious desire on the part of the new upwardly mobile, globalized class to ape the customs and practices of their employment providers in the middle-east. Thus Malabar Muslims who returned from their sojourns in the Islamic middle-east showed a marked interest in adopting the dress code of the upper echelons of the Muslim society. Such was the volume and impact of the Gulf migration that this sartorial shift soon established the standard dress code of the Muslim woman in northern Kerala. It has to be noted that the middle-eastern influence did not impact the dressing styles of men who instead continued wearing their traditional dhotis, lungis or western style garments in the localized forms. Thus a sort of control was established economically and culturally over the corporeal existence of women.

Local Media, Purdah and `medieval' connotations:

Popular weeklies like Mathrubhumi, Malayalam, Kaumudi etc. maintained a skeptical approach to these changes and often identified the changes as reflective of the rise of religious fundamentalism among Malabar Muslims. Such exotic readings often fell far off the mark. This was pronounced in the case of Muslim women's dress code. The intellectual discourse heralded by above mentioned weeklies depicted purdah-clad women as passive and lacking in agency[11].

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Malabar region is a vast area of northern Kerala which lies between the Western Ghats in the west and the Arabian Sea in the east. In the popular discourse Muslims of Malabarare referred to as Mappilas. Historical studies of the term points out divergent opinions regarding the term Mappila but in this study I use the term Mappila in the wider sense in which it is used today i.e. to refer to the Muslims of Malabar.

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Dismissing the complexities involved in the choice of dressing practices, popular Malayalam media argued that there is a lack of choice for Muslim women in the context of dressing practice. Movies released in Malayalam also regurgitated similar notions about the purdah dress culture, although in a nuanced manner. Most often this disparaging depictions were carried out symbolically such that these depictions seemed realistic portraits of the everyday realities of Mappila women. The problem with such simplifying approaches to purdah culture is that it lacks a nuanced understanding of the diverse factors that contributed to the popularity of purdah among Malabar Muslims. This article within its ambit, also seeks to explore the problematic within representation of purdah in popular movies like ThattathinMarayathu and Usthad Hotel. Through a deconstructive reading this article will try to foreground the underlying contradictions within the narratives of these movies. In addition, this paper will also try to look at the various factors that shapes popular Muslim practice of purdah. Muslim women have actively used their sartorial choices to gain more agency in the family and elsewhere using the very theological arguments that were once used to subjugate them.

Any discussion about purdah, or any dressing culture for that matter, requires an in-depth understanding of the debates related to the working of power and agency. There are various approaches towards understanding power. While the classical position maintains a vertical view of power, in which one can stand outside the purview of power and challenge it, more nuanced and critical approach argues that power is pervasive and immanent. This position rejects any possibility of transcending the power structure, for one is always already situated in a power discourse.[12] Hence, the only possibility to engage with the existing structure is negotiations

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I have also diverged from Saba Mahmood's idea of piety, which says that normative Muslim piety is grounded in *physical*manifestations that are prescribed in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The idea of dress (as mere clothing, not `hijab' as virtue ethics) has been used in multiple levels. See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2005.

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Rather than considering power as monopolized by the ruling class Foucault interestingly looks at power as being exercised in the process of subject formation. In his essay "The subject and Power" he identifies three modes of objectification that transforms human beings into subjects. While in first two modes power can be seen to be operating from exterior to the subject in the final Foucault looks at how a human being turns himself to a subject. See, Foucault. The Subject and Power: *Critical Inquiry* 8, 4 (1982). p775-795

through the appropriation of various subversive practices. In the context of dress code also one has to take this into consideration. It is imperative to note here that it is not only purdah that is ideologically inflected and laden with power and control. Rather popular dress codes like saree, jean, suit etc.are also formed within a power structure and perpetuates its existence. In case of purdah I argue that while being a form of patriarchal power expression it also opens up possibilities for negotiation and engagement with it[13]. In this regard the simplistic and reductionist approaches seen in popular movies merits critical scrutiny.

In the movie titled Usthad Hotel, purdah is depicted as something that is forced upon Muslim women which then becomes a hindrance for the individual freedom of educated women like Shahana, the heroine. The only time Shahana wears purdah and burqah is when she goes to the night club for singing. What is reiterated here is the popular liberal notion about Islamic dress code of purdah in which purdah figures as an impediment for the progress and freedom of the individual. There emerges a symbolic and literal spatiality for purdah which is the confines of the household/family. Despite all the negative representation of purdah, interestingly, here purdah emerges as something that enables mobility within a constrictive structure although in a limited sense. Shahana uses purdah as a tool to engage and negotiate with the existing patriarchal structure. Rather than being an object, purdah here becomes a medium that enables Shahana's engagement with the public sphere. This ambiguous role of purdah becomes increasingly relevant when we take into consideration the larger context. Contrary to the general perception, the purdah followers do not look at purdah as a 'run-away' from fashion. Instead, it's a process of interlacing the new circumstances with the traditional instructions in a creative manner in accordance with the modern life condition.

In contrast to Usthad Hotel, Thattathin Marayathu, another movie which also deals with the question of Muslim women's dress code reduces the identity of Muslim women to purdah. The title itself indicates this. Thattathin Marayathu means 'in the cover of thattom.'Here the subject is

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For a detailed exposition on veiling and agency refer to Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*. Mahmood argues that the practice of veiling involves complexities that escape the traditional feminist analysis. Through a detailed ethnographic account of the Piety Movement in Egypt Mahmood shows how the everyday are of the women participants of the movement are agentially informed and calls for a renewed approach to Islamic veiling practices such as hijab.

pushed behind the piece of cloth that she wears and is rendered voiceless. The multiple dimensions of thattom or purdah mentioned earlier gets underplayed here. For example in the scene where the hero inaugurates a purdah showroom Aisha attends the function wearing a purdah and burqah. What enables her to attend this function is her appropriation of purdah for her own purposes in an otherwise constrictive sociality. Here once again contrary to the popular liberal approaches purdah emerges as a tool with which Muslim women negotiate with the patriarchal structure by exercising their agency.

Politics of Identity, Assertion and Dress Code:

The popularity of purdah post 90s is often attributed to the rise of fundamentalism and insecurity within the Muslim community generated by Babri Masjid demolition. It is a bewildering fact that even the so called erudite academicians subscribe to such simplistic and naïve narratives. For example M. Gangadharan argues that purdah is something that is imposed upon Muslim women as per the interest of Muslim men. Though this argument carries some merit, it is generalizing and misses some of the nuances. As an alternative to this "oppressive" dress code Gangadharan endorses Muslim women to adopt Saree like Indian women or Khameez and Churidar/Salvar like Pakistani women[14]. Implied in this argument is that purdah is unquestionably a product of patriarchy. One is then compelled to ask isn't that the same case with Saree and Churidar, for both are symbols of sexual segregation and gendered dress code?

What is lacking in the approaches seen in the popular movies and academic writings is the multiple meanings and possibilities attached to purdah. While for pious women, wearing purdah is emblematic of embodying the religious ethics, fashionable youth women consider it as a symbol of community identity and fashion in addition to religious ethics. It is also considered as indicative of the cosmopolitan idea of a gulf family. Purdah, here, becomes a symbol of class status where one displays ones social status with the purdah one chooses to buy. It is such multiple meanings and possibilities entailed in the practice of purdah that contributed to its popularity among Muslim women.

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Gangadharan, M.*Mathrubhoomi Weekly* 10, 6-11 (2008) p46,47

The fashion clothes cause to initiate subjects where the factors like piousness, sexuality, age, gender and modesty are navigated in a multiple manner. So the ideas and assumptions associated with clothes in Indian society can be analyzed at more than one level. Theology of Islam would be an ideal starting point to examine the sartorial politics of Malabar Muslim women.

Between Fashion and Piety: Locating Muslim Women in Purdah

Though the Qur'an and the hadith are sources of Islamic dress culture, in practice, it exhibits a lot of diversity. Fashion is not a new phenomenon related to Muslim women's dress culture. Fashion industry played instrumental role in popularizing purdah among Muslim women through advertisements; for example, the purdah firms like Hoorulyn, Parvin etc. Generally fashion is related to the rise of modern subjects, the form of social mobility, the rejection of tradition and the rise of mercantile capitalism in Europe. Fashion and gulf migration have played pivotal roles in popularizing 'hijab'. The purdah industry that mushroomed in the second half of 1980s has smoothened the path of popularity of the attire among ordinary Muslim women. The industry relied on the popular concepts like "modest lady" within the regional vernacular language (Malayalam) to boost its sale. In the earlier stage they used images of purdah-clad female protesters involved in the Iran revolution. The industry was incorporating local and international symbols and codes at the same time. Edward Sapir says:

The chief difficulty of understanding fashion in its apparent vagaries is the lack of exact knowledge of the unconscious symbolisms attaching to forms, colors, textures, postures, and other expressive elements of a given culture. The difficulty is appreciably increased by the fact that some of the expressive elements tend to have quite different symbolic references in different areas. Gothic type, for instance, is a nationalistic token in Germany while in Anglo-Saxon culture, the practically identical type known as Old English……..(signifies) a wistful look backward at madrigals and power. [15]

A major reason for this is that the textile industry succeeded in creating an "Islamic meaning" to the attire. It will be interesting to see if the women following the logic of the industry were in such a situation? Or, did they choose purdah by exercising their own agency? What role did

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Cited from, Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,1992), 5

ideology play? The act of dressing is not that much linear, as Joanne Entwistle says in her work. As she says,

The individual and the very personal act of getting dressed is an act of preparing the body for the social world, making it appropriate, acceptable, indeed respectable and possibly even desirable also.[16]

In her argument, dress is at the same time an intimate experience of the body and a public presentation of it. She says that,

Operating on the boundary between self and other is the interface between the individual and the social world, the meeting place of the private and public.[17]

The Islamist women are often critical of the more fashionable and `stylish-purdah' wearers. But fashionable women articulate their social identity in an assertive manner. It is not the essential Muslim identity that the purdah forms, but the purdah rather often makes it possible for women to explore multiple possibilities of expressing their identity. Even though once vibrant traditions of Islamic textual exegesis have fallen by the wayside, its spectral afterlife continues on in matters dealing with `hijab' and fashion. Just as third-world feminism gains itself an autonomy by positing itself against the previous wave feminisms rather than the patriarchal edifice, a monolithic and ahistorical power hierarchy of men is superseded in the 'hijabi' discourse by interdenominational schisms and Sunni-Mujahid, fashionable piety argumentations. It is inscribed into a network of contestations rather than a binary struggle of power struggles.

The dress code of the Mappilas (Malabar Muslims) has also evolved historically as it had happened elsewhere. The men's clothes generally were either white *lungis* with off-white borders or *lungis* which are yellow or green in colour. That is worn in a particular style with its face draped to the left side. They also spot a white cap. For the women, it was generally a dark-blue

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Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press,2000), 7

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Ibid,p.7

lungi, a blouse which is white in colour and a shawl to cover the head. Also, they used to wear various ornaments in the ear and hands. Bangles and anklets were also a common jewelery. Apart from making a big hole on the earlobe for the main dangling earring, another ten or twelve punches are made in the upper part of the cartilaginous ear, which are decorated with jewels. Moreover, a talisman or amulet made of either silver or copper is draped around the waist. Some of the Qur'anic verses are carved on thin plates and inserted in it[18].In the *Sarvavignjanakosham* (Encyclopaedia) too, in the part that mentions the dresses, it is said that the Malayali women had a like for the kasavu (off white) dresses".[19] Muslims and Christians had worn different jewels as part of fashion. Chakkaramaala (chain), Gothambumaala, Aranjanam (waist belt), Mullapumaala, Ashtika, vala (bangle), and makkathemaala were some of the favorites of the Malabar women[20].

As per the narratives of the aged, the trend used to be apparels like silk-lungis, dotted lungis, lungis with borders in diverse colours, and tight kachikupayam. Pre-modern matrices of cross-cultural currents and migrations had impacted the dressing styles of people in those days too.

The Islamic Ulema and Muslim Fashionistas:

The popularity of a rigid Islamic dress-code coincided with the rise of a fundamental brand of Islam. In Islam the dress is the metaphor of the complete vigilance one should have in his/her life. (Those who follow the Islamic dress-code, but in a trendy manner depend on the concept of

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Krishnan,Menon, Sarvavignjanakosham [Encyclopaedia], (Calicut: Basha Institute, 2002).455.

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'dress of beauty' mentioned in the verse to justify their action). According to one of my respondent, Amina Anwary,

"*the idea of dress is used by God in par with the concept of 'fear of God' that one should have in life activities and while interacting with others. What was often figurative, were misinterpreted and taken literally*".

The concept of pious women - especially among the Sunni and Mujahid groups[21] - is defined in different forms and they find the prospects of their social action through that definition. Also the piety of these women was codified in terms of their costumes. In the view of reformist women, they need to explore more spheres to indulge in their life while sticking to the Islamic principles. What is determined through this are the limits (hadud), clearly marked in semitic faiths, to mingle with each other in work, not the concept of a complete barricade (hijab) in between man and woman. However, some orthodox Sunni figures are of a view that it's a facade that covers everything from men that women need for the fulfillment of their piousness. They are against public programmes conducted by the Islamist women. It is this withdrawal of pious Muslim women from the public sphere that often led to their caricaturing and misrepresentations in the popular media and films.

The Sunni orthodox view is that women are not allowed to raise their voice in front of men. The women should concentrate on expanding their area of work within themselves. They believe that the women should be able to conduct such activities without having the presence or help of the men. This is a orthodoxy construct fascinatingly explored by many others including the

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    Major divisions that exists among Muslims

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American popular fiction author Zoe Ferraris in her works `Night of the Mi'raj,'`City of Veils' and `Kingdom of Strangers.'[22]

Purdha thus emerged as an ideology that suffused the mainstream cultural imagination of Malabar. Extremist versions of Islam that the youth in their misguided zeal found fascinating also had their dalliance with the ideologically inflected Purdha. A rational discourse that would have made it possible for the Muslim public sphere to emerge thus fell through thus making it difficult for the inter-faith debates in Islam to be precipitated. This was exploited by the religious right-wing who cashed in on the global rise of Islamic terrorism and Islamophobia. The Islamist women are often critical of the more fashionable `stylish-purdah' wearers. But fashionable women articulate their social identity in an assertive manner. It is not the essential Muslim identity that the purdah forms, but the purdah rather often makes it possible for women to explore multiple possibilities of expressing their identity. Even though once vibrant traditions of Islamic textual exegesis have fallen by the wayside, its spectral afterlife continues on in matters dealing with `hijab' and fashion. Just as third-world feminism gains itself an autonomy by positing itself against the previous wave feminisms rather than the patriarchal edifice, a monolithic and ahistorical power hierarchy of men is superseded in the 'hijabi' discourse by interdenominational schisms and Sunni-Mujahid, fashionable piety argumentations. It is inscribed into a network of contestations rather than a binary struggle of power relations.

The incredible diversity of inter-faith debates and the use of dress code to gain agency by Muslim women were often not properly represented in the media. In conclusion, the reason for such a glaring omission was the lack of a positive popular discourse around the corporeal and sartorial choices of women in general and Muslim women in particular. Such being the case, the `real' nature of the struggles of Muslim women can only be expected to emerge in the future.

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22 Ferraris, Zoe. *City of Veils.* London: Little Brown, 2010. Print.

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