THE DISCOURSE OF RE-VEILING: *HIJAB* AND ISLAMIC FASHION

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Abstract

The Muslim veil or *hijab* is often understood to be a sign of piety. This paper attempts to problematize the category of hijab through Foucauldian notions of body and Bourdieu's idea of habitus. There is a noticeable resurgence in the practice of veiling among young Muslim women worldwide. This resurgence is often explained in terms of resistance to Western notions of oppressive veil; challenging the stereotypes in the aftermath of 9/11 whereby by Islam and Muslims are linked to terrorism; assert identity in Muslim minority societies. This resurgence of the veil is accompanied by the rise of clothing brands selling fashionable *hijabs, jilbabs, burqas,* et al. There is emergence of Islamic fashion which claims to be uniting religious values, traditions with fashion. This paper attempts to explore this newer adaptation of the practice of veiling, why and how young Muslim women are wearing *hijabs*, etc. Secondly, this paper would also dwell on the aspect of how the brands selling Islamic fashion should be seen as a feedback mechanism which is covertly popularising notions of 'covered body'.

Keywords:Veil; Hijab; Habitus; Islamic fashion; Modesty

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1. Introduction

The practice of veiling is neither a new phenomenon nor specific to Muslims. In fact, the practice of veiling has existed for thousands of years and even before Islam came into being. Veiling had not been confined to Muslims, rather until the colonial era, the veil was worn by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women (Ahmad, 2011). However, what is peculiar to veiling among Muslims is that is has come to be a marker of religious identity. One who wears a *hijab* is understood to be an observant Muslim, in other words it is closely associated with piety.

The practice of veiling especially amongst Muslim women has aroused much discussion and debate. The debate can be divided along two lines of Euro-American notions about Muslim women as oppressed and Islam as the oppressor (Mernissi, 1991). In fact, "western-ideology feminists (in the East and the West) have dominated the discourse on the veil, viewing it as an aspect of patriarchies and a sign of women's backwardness, subordination, and oppression" (Guindi, 1999: 3). The second line of thought comes from those who believe that veiling or *hijab* should not be seen as a symbol of oppression (Ali, 2005; Bullock, 2002) rather their 'choice' and right to wear a veil.

In addition to these two prominent views, newer studies have argued cases of Islamic feminism and Islamism. There are scholars who argued that "the increase in veiling practices is partly a result of the rise of Islamic feminism. Many Muslim women today are wearing hijab because they are pious feminists, not because they are oppressed or subjugated" (Amer, 2014: 146). Ahmad (2011) on the other hand argued that veiling or wearing of hijab signalled the presence of Islamism rather than piety. Ahmad (2011) argued that political form of Islam has been gaining ground in Muslim societies during 1970s which was mainly fuelled by the Muslim Brotherhood. If we see the spread of the veiling practice from the Middle East to other parts of the world there is much diversity in the practice in fact it cannot be understood as a process of diffusion rather each society has its own context within which this practice is located. The explanations range from indigenizing tradition in Islamic revolution, social class to kinship, et al. Fadwa El Guindi (1999) offered an analysis of the veil, exploring dimensions of identity, modesty, privacy – of space and body, power and resistance. Guindi (1999) stressed that hijab is not only linked to cultural identity but also privacy, space and body.

There are political reasons behind the veiling practice as well. For instance, "until 1979, Saudi Arabia was the only Muslim- majority society that required the veiling of women" (Amer, 2014: 57). Today, there can be named four countries which impose veiling, namely, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Sudan, and the Aceh Province of Indonesia.This points to the fact that the requirement to veil in Muslim- majority societies is a very recent phenomenon, one tied to specific historical and political conditions (Amer, 2014: 57). For instance, in Iran, *hijab* was imposed on women after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. However, it is important to note that the adoption of *chador* did not indicate a rise of piety rather it "symbolized resistance against Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi who had banned the veil in 1936 and imposed Western dress" (Amer, 2014: 57). Turkey on the other hand has a ban on veils in government spaces as it is seen as a sign of backwardness and as an obstacle in progress. Veiling has local and sociocultural meanings.

It is interesting to note that there is a noticeable resurgence in the practice of veiling among young Muslim women worldwide. This resurgence is accompanied by the rise of clothing brands selling fashionable *hijabs*, *jilbabs*, *burqas*, et al. There is emergence of Islamic fashion which claims to be uniting religious values, traditions with fashion, piety with trend. This paper attempts to explore this newer adaptation of the practice of veiling, why and how young Muslim women are wearing *hijabs*, etc. Secondly, this paper would also dwell on the aspect of how the brands selling Islamic fashion should be seen as a feedback mechanism which is covertly popularising notions of covered body and modest dressing.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on data drawn from secondary sources of already existing literature on the topic. I have referred to books, journals on the practice of veiling amongst Muslim women and also referred to websites dealing with Islamic fashion.

3. The category - *hijab*

The term 'veil' is commonly used to refer to women's traditional head, face or body cover. The dictionary meaning assigned to it is "a covering," in the sense of "to cover with" or "to conceal or disguise" (Guindi, 1999: 6). The veil has many attached meaning like that of modesty, identity resistance. The term 'veil' "has no single Arabic linguistic referent, whereas *hijab* has cultural

and linguistic roots that are integral to Islamic (and Arab) culture as a whole" (Guindi, 1999: xi). Muslim veil is believed to be introduced in the seventh century in order to limit indiscriminate group sex. Mernissi (2011) quotes Imam Bukhari and writes that during this period women were seen as aggressive sexual beings who offered themselves to numerous men, reduced men to sexual commodities and denied them the right to fatherhood. While men seen to be passive and unable to resist women's charms and veil was meant to control sexual desire. There are also explanations like that of Hammurabi Code in 1790 B.C. whereby veil was imposed for aristocratic women, while prostitutes were to roam nude (Mernissi, 2011).

In this paper when I use the term veil, it shall be with reference to *hijab* since veil has no Arabic referent. The term "*hijab* - literally "curtain" - "descended," not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men" (Mernissi, 1991: 85).

"The concept of the word hijab is three-dimensional, and the three dimensions often blend into one another. The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight. The root of the verb *hajaba* means "to hide." The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. So we have not just tangible categories that exist in the reality of the senses - the visual, the spatial - but also an abstract reality in the realm of ideas" (Mernissi, 1991: 93).

The term *hijab* finds mention in the Quran seven times and in most of them it does not deal with a dress code rather a separation between people (Amer, 2014: 23). However, it is prescribed that women should dress modestly. This leads one to question the category of 'modesty', what is meant by modest dressing and who defines and exercises control over the idea of 'modesty'.

The distinctive fact about veiling or *hijab* is that it is not a uniform set of dressing in all Muslim societies, there are variations ranging from a headscarf to full length *burqa*, etc. This paper is not an attempt to discuss about the different types of veiling rather point to increased adoption of headscarf or veil by Muslim women who did not wear it earlier and its linkage with Islamic fashion. There are different explanations offered for adoption of veil by Muslim women, some wear it as a sign of piety, some to challenge the stereotypes of orientalist productions that it is

not oppression rather their 'choice', while others try to rectify the image of Islam in a bad light which has now come to be associated with violence and terrorism. It is argued that veil does not confine women rather it has allowed women to actively take part in the workforce along with men.

The practice of hijab has not been a linear, uniform process rather marked by different phases of *veiling, de-veiling, un-veiling and re-veiling.*

In the aftermath of 9/11 and increased prejudice against the Muslims, led some Muslim women to give up *hijab* due to fears of securitization. It is important to note that "the conscious and self-made decision to remove *hijab* is an act that some have dubbed de-veiling, in contrast to unveiling, which describes the forced and violent removal of the veil by an outside agent" (Amer, 2014: 126-127). De-veiling can also be understood in terms of increased knowledge of Islam by Muslim women who believed that it was not a requirement of Islam. In contrast to this, the process of un-veiling is also visible in societies where there are state restrictions on wearing a headscarf. In this paper I have chosen to deal with the last category of re-veiling whereby young Muslim women are increasing opting to wear a hijab, which is interpreted as 'choice'.

The process of re-veiling needs to be understood in two contexts of Muslim majority societies and Muslim-minority societies. In the former, the adoption of *hijab* can be placed under categories of dominant ideology and state imposition on veiling. There is an external agency compelling one to un-veil or re-veil. In Muslim minority societies, the process of re-veiling is primarily associated with assertion of one's religious identity.

4. The idea of *body* and habitus

Michel Foucault (1995) in his work '*Discipline and Punish'* put forward the idea of 'docile bodies'. The body was discussed as an object and target of power. He discussed docile bodies as: "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1995: 136).

Foucault offered a discussion of discipline and how bodies are trained and disciplined in a certain manner. There are methods

"which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called 'discipline'" (Foucault, 1995: 137).

A discussion of Foucauldian notion of 'body' is of relevance here as it can be used to understand the category of *hijab* among Muslim women. What is being stressed here is that, Muslim women can be seen through the lens of docile bodies and internalization of the practice of veiling or *hijab* as discipline whereby they are made to believe that it has religious sanctions and is pious in nature.

In lieu with the above discussion the idea of *hijab* as a choice can also be understood in terms of Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Habitus is a set of dispositions by which individuals perceive the social world around them. It is laid down to a person from his/her earliest upbringing.

"The habitus is precisely this immanent law, *lexinsita*, laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices of co-ordination" (Bourdieu, 2013[1977]: 81).

Habitus can be understood as embodied dispositions whereby one embodies the structures of the world and acts in accordance. Here we can talk of body *hexis*, which can be defined as

"political mythology realized, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 2013[1977]: 93).

If we look at the practice of veiling or *hijab* through the lens of habitus and body *hexis* then the idea of *hijab* as a choice becomes a farce. It is the embodied dispositions, one's idea of modesty and how one should dress gets translated into choice.

5. Islamic Fashion

There is a recent popularizing of the term Islamic fashion. It can be understood in terms of emergence of brands that primarily cater to Muslim women's needs and manufacture *burqas, abayas, hijabs* in accordance with the larger fashion trend and fashion magazines that sell fashionable, branded *hijabs* and *jilbabs* to its readers. The rationale behind the notion of Islamic fashion is bringing together of piety and trend and selling the idea that Muslim women wearing *hijabs*, etc. need not be backward and oppressed, rather they are equally progressive and fashionable and updated. The idea of a modern Muslim woman who wears a veil is being commercialised and promoted by the Islamic fashion industry as someone who was at once modern and religious (Amer, 2014: 152) in other words, *hijabista* – a Muslim woman who dresses fashionably yet modestly adhering to the Islamic dress code. Islamic fashion industry makes effort to sell the idea that *hijab* is chosen voluntarily, not because of coercion.

Today major brands have special collections of *abayas*and *hijabs*. There are online stores like modest hautest, Islamic fashion, etc. which offer fashionable *hijabs, jilbabs, abayas*. The names of these very stores and sites project the idea of 'modesty' in a certain way. The question then is, are these fashionable *hijabs* defeating the purpose of veiling and secondly, are they trying to sell the 'veil' to Muslim women who do not yet support a veil.

This aspect of Islamic fashion, brands incorporating collections of *burqas* and *hijabs* seems to be a strategy to popularize the notion of 'covered body' disseminating conservative ideas of modest and what is a modest dress for Muslim women. It is a covert strategy to further a notion of choice which is actually cultural hegemony.

6. Conclusion

In the preceding pages I have discussed that the adoption of *hijab* by Muslim women need not be understood from a single perspective of piety rather socio-political factors need to be accounted as well. The resurgence of the veil or adoption of *hijab* by young Muslim women needs to be contextualized in terms of habitus whereby *hijab* becomes body *hexis*. Secondly, contextualization of hijab in Muslim minority societies and Muslim majority societies differs, since in Muslim minority societies hijab is worn to assert one's identity.

The rise in Islamic fashion and popularizing of '*hijabista*' needs to be problematized. A simplistic understanding of Islamic fashion as liberating Muslim women from the shackles of backwardness and conjoining of trend and piety which is a woman's 'choice' needs to be thought through. The whole idea of Islamic fashion needs to be discussed from the aspect of commercialisation, consumerism and as a mechanism which promotes the idea of covered body thereby reproducing the embodied dispositions of *hijab* as choice.

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