



How Headscarves Have Shaped Muslim Experience in America

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How Headscarves Have Shaped Muslim Experience in America

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Abstract

This study focuses first on the role of the headscarf in creating space for Muslim women in the social fabric of America and shaping their American experience. I examine the symbolism of the headscarf from two different perspectives:

1. In the first, the headscarf symbolizes a Muslim woman's identity by embodying the concepts of "Islamic feminism" and "Islamic activism," both of which involve covered one's hair as a sign of modesty. Some Muslim women view the headscarf as denoting backwardness, believing that it oppresses women, and they choose not to wear a headscarf. For others, the headscarf is regarded as symbolizing a Muslim woman's aspirations for modernity and liberation.
2. The second perspective focuses on the symbolism of the headscarf when worn by a Black Muslim-American woman, in particular those who are active in Nation of Islam. I provide a brief history of Nation of Islam, and the role of women in the organization, especially since among native-born Muslims in America the largest group describe themselves as black. Thus, this thesis also focuses on the role of the headscarf in the lives of Black American-Muslim women.

The central question framing this study is: Why do some Muslim women wear headscarves in what is often regarded as an anti-Islamic climate? Given my focus on Muslim women in the United States, I analyze how Muslim-American women develop their self-image, how they identify, interact, and negotiate for themselves and within the social fabric of America as women, as Muslims, and as Americans.

Women express their feminist views in different ways, and this thesis considers feminism in a different light, that is, through modesty. I argue that the use of the headscarf as a symbol has various implications for Muslim women and means different things to different people depending on the meaning they attach to it. What it means to one person is not necessarily the same meaning as for another. At the same time, forcing Muslim-American women to wear (or not wear) a headscarf can also be understood as oppression or violation of women's rights. In some cases, wearing a headscarf increases women's mobility in society and helps them progress and develop. In other cases, wearing a headscarf limits women's mobility.

I argue that for Muslim-American women, the headscarf is more than a symbol of religious piety or a cultural statement. Rather, it is better understood in terms of one's identity and as a symbol of feminism and activism. This is the case both for women who veil and for those who choose not to veil.

Dedication

To my beloved parents, brother, and sisters, for teaching me about the most essential elements of life: love, honor, and duty.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Asher Orkaby, my thesis director, for his guidance, priceless advice, and encouragement every step of the way.

I thank Professor Doug Bond, my research advisor, for his critical comments and countless corrections of my work.

Special thanks also goes to Professor Ali Asani and Professor Paul Beran for their unwavering assistance and positive impact on the way I see and examine questions. I will always be grateful for that insight.

Table of Contents

Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vi
List of Figures	ix
I. Introduction	1
Thesis Questions and Hypothesis	6
Thesis Research	7
The Importance of This Research	10
II. Literature Search and Methodology	12
Methodology	16
III. Background	19
IV. The Rise of Black Muslim Women	22
Prospects for Change	28
V. Challenges Facing Black Muslim-American Women	29
Negative Stereotypes	29
Beauty and Identity	31
Ambassadorship	33
Clothing for Black Muslim-American Women	36
The Economic Impacts of Islamic Fashion	39

VI.	The Politics of Headscarves.....	45
VII.	My Interviews with Muslim Women Who Are Taking Off Their Headscarves ...	50
	“Why Did You Choose to Wear or Not Wear a Headscarf?”	50
	“To Them, We are Not Good Muslims”	52
VIII.	Conclusion	54
	Appendix 1. Interview Questions	57
	References.....	58

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Anti-Muslim Assaults At Highest Level Since 2001	2
Figure 2.	American Muslim Population to Double by 2050	3
Figure 3.	Examples of Women’s Headscarf Styles.....	4, 5
Figure 4.	Women in the U.S. Congress, 1965-2015	23
Figure 5.	London: An Anti-Islamophobia Poster.....	34
Figure 6.	Boston: An Anti-Islamophobia Poster.....	35
Figure 7.	Ibtihaj Muhammad Holding the First <i>Hijab</i> -Wearing Barbie Doll	38
Figure 8.	<i>New York Post</i> Illustration for Article: “ <i>Hijab</i> Barbie Toying With Us”	39
Figure 9.	A Piece from Dolce & Gabbana’s First Collection of <i>Hijabs</i> and <i>Abayas</i>	42
Figure 10.	Gigi Hadid on the Cover of <i>Vogue Arabia</i>	44

Chapter I

Introduction

The bombing of the World Trade Center towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, and its aftermath, still resonate through American life today. With it came a rise in racial intolerance and negative attitudes among Americans toward Muslims, including a surge in the number of assaults on Muslims. According to a study by Katayoun Kishi, “The FBI reported 257 incidents of anti-Muslim hate crimes in 2015, the most anti-Muslim intimidation crimes reported in any year since 2001”¹ (see Figure 1). The number included 91 aggravated or simple assaults motivated by anti-Islamic sentiments.²

This report is especially true for Muslim women who wear headscarves because the headscarf has become a public symbol of Islam, making it much easier to identify a Muslim woman. According to a 2008 report by the American Civil Liberties Union Women’s Rights Project: “69% of women who wore *hijab* reported at least one incident of discrimination, compared to 29% of women who did not wear *hijab*.”³ According to a report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, “In 2006, there were 154 cases of discrimination or harassment in which a Muslim woman’s head-covering was identified

¹ Katayoun Kishi, “Anti-Muslim Assaults Reach 9/11-Era Levels, FBI Data Show,” Pew Research Center, November 21, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/21/anti-muslim-assaults-reach-911-era-levels-fbi-data-show/>.

² “Hate Crime Statistics, 2001,” FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 2001. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2001>. (Accessed November 19, 2018.)

³ Alyssa E. Rippy, and Elana Newman, “Discrimination Against Muslim Women,” Women’s Rights Project, American Civil Liberties Union, 2008. <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/womensrights/discriminationagainstmuslimwomen.pdf>.

as the factor that triggered the incident.”⁴ And further: “The most common complaint in these cases was being prohibited from wearing a head-covering, which accounted for 44 incidents.”⁵

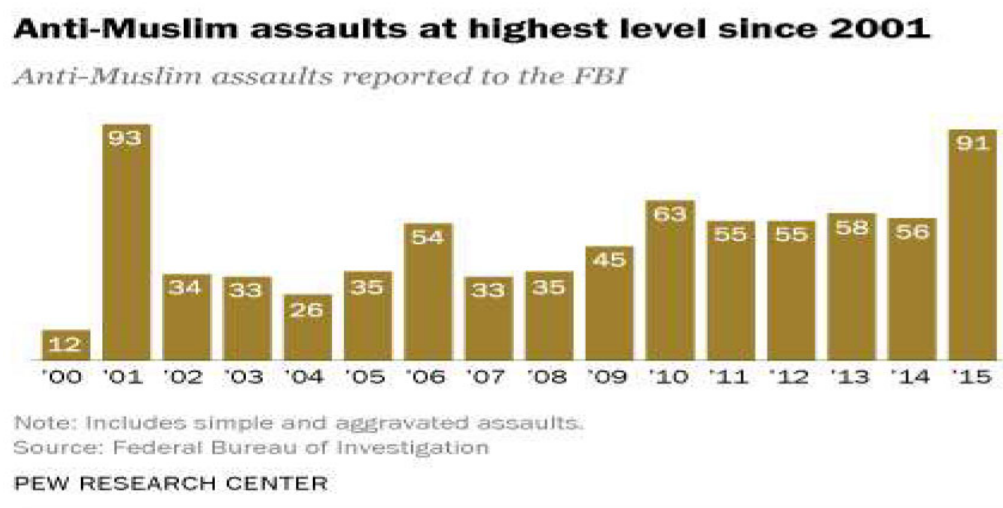


Figure 1. Anti-Muslim Assaults at Highest Level Since 2001.

Source: Kishi, 2016.

A study by the Public Religion Research Institute confirmed that many Americans have a negative view of Islam in general and of Muslims Americans specifically. In fact, 43% of Americans do not consider Muslim Americans to be part of the American religious community.⁶ Muslims are frequently portrayed by the media and some political leaders as intolerant and violent people. In a study for Pew Research Center, Katayoun

⁴ Council on American-Islamic Relations, “The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States,” Note 2. 2007. <https://www.cair.com/images/pdf/CAIR-2007-Civil-Rights-Report.pdf>.

⁵ Council on American-Islamic Relations, Women’s Rights Project, 2006. <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/womensrights/discriminationagainstmuslimwomen.pdf>.

⁶ Public Religion Research Institute, “American Attitudes on Muslims,” November 7, 2011. <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/11/fact-sheet-american-attitudes-on-muslims/#.Vxkpp5Mwj1I>.

Kishi found that “almost half of American adults (49%) think at least ‘some’ Muslims in the U.S. are anti-American, including 11% who think ‘most’ or ‘almost all’ are anti-American.”⁷ Notwithstanding these statistics, Islam also is considered to be the fastest-growing religion in America. According to Pew Research, “By 2040, Muslims are projected to become the second-largest religious group in the U.S. after Christians”⁸ (see Figure 2).

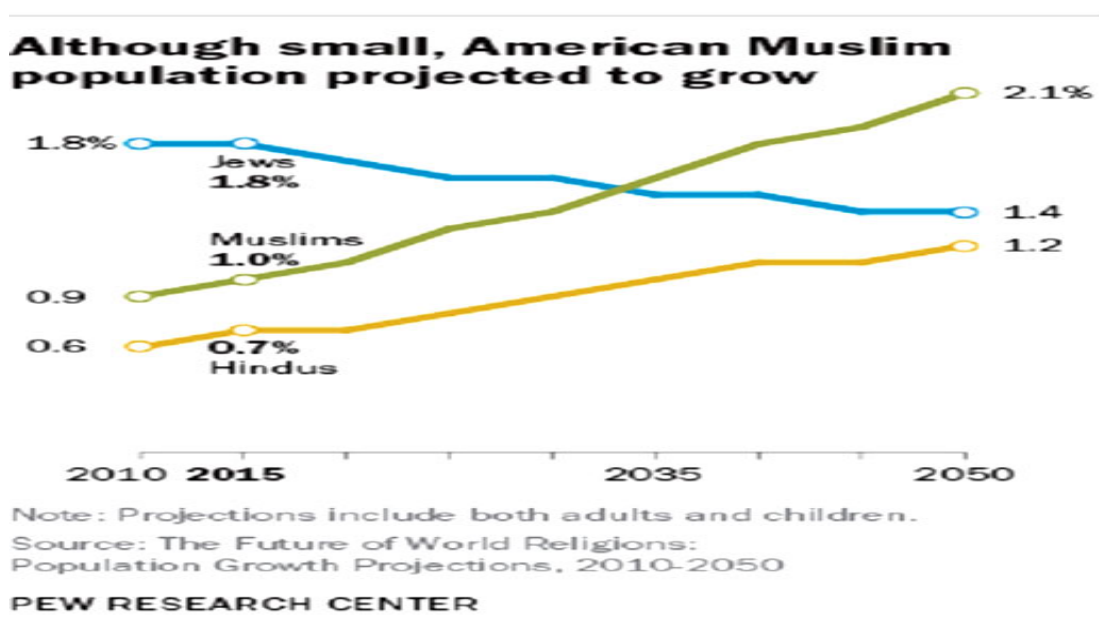


Figure 2: American Muslim Population to Double by 2050.

Source: Pew Research Center, January 2017.

I will explore the rise of racial intolerance and negative attitudes toward Muslim-American women in the United States, especially those who wear headscarves. The

⁷ Kishi, “Anti-Muslim assaults.”

⁸ Besheer Mohamed, “A New Estimate of the U.S. Muslim Population,” Pew Research Center, January 6, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/>. (Accessed November 19, 2018.)

headscarf has become a key element in Muslim women's fashion in American society (see Figures 3(a), (b), and (c)), demonstrating how, in some cases, a piece of cloth was transformed into a “battle flag”⁹ that became a catalyst for feminism and activism in Muslim-American women's self-images, individually and collectively. In sum: a fuller understanding of the role of the headscarf as part of the public face of Islam as well as a symbol of Muslim women's identity and Islamic activism is useful for gaining a better understanding of Islam in the United States.

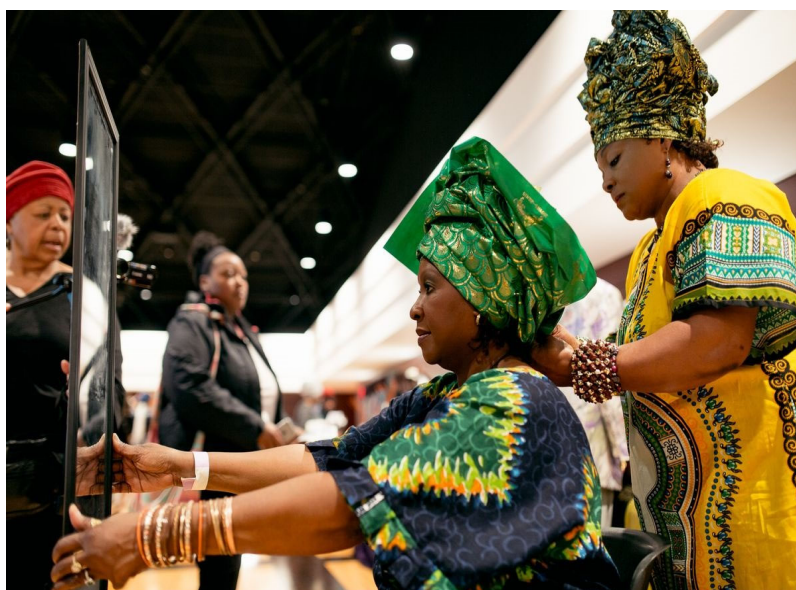


Figure 3(a). Examples of Women's Headscarf Styles.

Source: Aghajanian, 2016.

⁹ Polly Toynbee, “Was It Worth It?,” *Guardian*, November 12, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/13/afghanistan.comment>.



Figure 3(b). Examples of Women's Headscarf Styles.

Source: Aghajanian, 2016.



Awa Ba in a Nigerian Gele



Melanie Pohl in a Jewish Tichel

Figure 3(c). Examples of Women's Headscarf Styles.

Source: Aghajanian, 2016.

Thesis Questions and Hypothesis

This thesis addresses the following questions:

- Why do some Muslim women in the United States wear a headscarf?
- How have Muslim-American women used headscarves to create their own place in the social landscape of the United States?
- What is the impact of cultural clothing in creating and developing the identity of a Muslim-American woman?

I hypothesize that the decision to wear or not wear the headscarf is much more than a symbol of a Muslim woman's religious piety or a desire to make a fashion statement. Most Muslim-American women consider the decision in terms of whether to assert their identity and/or as a symbol of their belief in feminism and activism.

Daniel Shapiro, founder and director of the Harvard International Negotiation Program, argues that the "primary function of identity is not merely to stay alive or pass along your genes, but to find meaning in life."¹⁰ In that context, *feminism* can be defined as a range of political movements, social movements, and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social equality among the sexes.¹¹ *Activism* can be defined as a political, ideological, or social effort to seek rights and justice and to influence social change. In the framework of feminism and activism, this thesis considers the use of headscarves among Muslim women in the United States as a tool for reconstructing their identity, perhaps even nation building.

¹⁰ Daniel Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 15.

¹¹ Mary E. Hawkesworth, *Globalization and Feminist Activism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 25-27. See also: Chris Beasley, *What is Feminism?* (New York: Sage, 1999), 3-11.

Thesis Research

As part of my research, I examined the history of Islam in America and explored several historical events in the U.S. that led to the re-emergence of Islam and headscarves in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. I explored the role of headscarves among converts to Islam who view the headscarf as a symbol of “power and knowledge”¹² as well as a “discipline”¹³ that creates a unique “space” in the American social fabric.

I also looked at the role of Black Muslim women who were or are members of Nation of Islam, one of the oldest and most recognized Black Muslim groups in the United States. I considered the African-American concept of mainstream Islam because doing so brings greater understanding to the complex religious identities of African-American Muslim women and to the evolution of the Afro-Islamic school of thinking. I looked into the role of veiling in Nation of Islam and attempts by its members to return to an “original [African] identity,”¹⁴ as well as the idea of building a Black nation in America.

To present a broader view that defines individuals as well as the collective American-Muslim identity, I built on three theories:

- (1) William James’ Theory of Self,¹⁵ to define individual identity, “I and Me”;

¹² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1981), 92–102.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).

¹⁴ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 209.

¹⁵ W. E. Cooper, “William James’s Theory of the Self,” *Monist*, 75, no. 4 (October 1, 1992): 504–520. <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist199275425>.

(2) Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory,¹⁶ to help define collective identity, "*We and Them*"; and

(3) Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*,¹⁷ to define the space surrounding these identities in the American social fabric.

In his book *The Principles of Psychology*,¹⁸ William James discusses the components of self as *I* and *Me*. He argues that *Me* is the part of self that is "empirical me," while the *I* is part of "the pure Ego."¹⁹ Daniel Shapiro, in his book *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, uses James' theory to argue that self is "a story not just told, but also felt."²⁰ In other words, "the story you tell yourself, the *Me* and your embodied experience the *I*,"²¹ is what James describes as individual identity.

For Henri Tajfel and his student John Turner, social identity is a portion of an individual's self concept in a group that explains intergroup behavior. According to Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, intergroup behavior is motivated by group categorization, and self-concept is inseparable from group concept. They argue that there are two separate yet interdependent cognitive processes: on one side are cognitions that are motivated for positive group (self) image relative to other groups; on the other side are cold cognitions that are group classifications used as a shortcut to determine how to

¹⁶ Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

¹⁸ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890).

¹⁹ Cooper, "William James's Theory of the Self."

²⁰ Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, 12.

²¹ Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, 12-13.

behave. According to Tajfel and Turner's theory, intergroup behaviors are illustrated through social categorization processes and minimal group paradigm.²²

According to Bourdieu:

Habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of generation, and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules.²³

My primary source data and my analysis focus on identity reconstruction and creating a space influenced by race, gender, and country of origin. Some parts of the ethnographic descriptions and interviews presented in this research are based on long-term fieldwork conducted by Leila Ahmed,²⁴ Bayyinah S. Jeffries,²⁵ and Jamillah Karim.²⁶ Other descriptions and interviews are based on my own fieldwork conducted in the Greater Boston, Massachusetts, area.

Among immigrant women, I worked with two groups: (1) those who came from countries where wearing a headscarf is not mandatory, and women could decide to wear or not wear a headscarf, and (2) women who wore a headscarf because it was required by law (in Iran). This enabled me to identify and develop narratives from Iranian-American

²² Henri Tajfel and John Charles Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior." In William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 7-24.

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

²⁴ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Also: Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

²⁵ Bayyinah S. Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise No Higher Than Its Women: African American Muslim Women in the Movement for Black Self-Determination, 1950-1975* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

²⁶ Jamillah Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender Within the Ummah* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

women who characterized themselves as Muslim and who formerly wore the headscarf in Iran. However, after immigrating to the United States, many of the women from Iran decided not to wear a headscarf. In fact, after interviewing them I discovered that they considered the headscarf to be a tool of oppression of Muslim women.

The Importance of This Research

This research is important because it centers on Muslim-American women collectively and individually, as well as their identity as influenced by race, gender, and country of origin. I examine veiling and unveiling as one way Muslim women negotiate their space in America's social fabric. My research seeks to identify and add to a fuller understanding of Muslim-American women's individual and social identities, and the role of the headscarf as part of that process as the public face of Islam.

I focus on contemporary discussions about Muslim women's experiences in America, and how the headscarf has been used to make room for both the veiling and unveiling camps as symbols of two different perspectives. In one camp, a headscarf is a symbol of a proud Muslim woman's identity and acceptance of concepts such as "womanism," "intersection feminism," and "Islamic feminism," which include long dresses and covered hair as demonstrations of modesty. On the other side, a headscarf is viewed by others as a symbol of backwardness and oppression of women, and not wearing a headscarf indicates aspirations to modernity and the liberation of Muslim women. In this context, taking Alice Walker's definition, a *womanist* can be defined as a feminist of color who seeks rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for

women and men in the totality of their existence.²⁷ Alia E. Dastagir defines “intersectional feminism” as “the understanding of how women’s overlapping identities—including race, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation—impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination.”²⁸ I consider the social, political, and economic impacts of the headscarf in the evolution of contemporary meaning of veiling and unveiling.

Caveat: Due to cultural complexities and the numerous variations of Muslim women’s head coverings, I narrowed my topic to consider only headscarves. I did not expand the scope of my research to include other types of Muslim women’s coverings, such as the *burqa*²⁹ or *niqab*.³⁰ I suggest this as a topic for future research.

²⁷ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden: Womanist Prose* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

²⁸ Alia E. Dastagir, “What is Intersectional Feminism? A Look at the Term You May Be Hearing a Lot,” *USA Today*, 19 January 2017.

²⁹ The *burqa* is a full-length dress worn by Islamic women, which fully covers the body including the face and eyes.

³⁰ The *niqab* is a head covering and scarf worn by Islamic women, which conceals the face but leaves the eyes visible.

Chapter II

Literature Search and Methodology

To provide context for this discussion of wearing the *hijab*, I perused selected secondary sources by scholars who write about the experiences and fundamental concerns of Muslim-American women. Those concerns include identity, family, employment, and education, as well as the roles of race, gender, and religion in women's desire to affect social change. To understand these topics from a woman's perspective, this study largely draws upon works written by female scholars.

Among these sources is Harvard Professor Leila Ahmed, who holds the Victor S. Thomas chair and is the first professor of women's studies in religion at Harvard Divinity School. In her book, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*,³¹ Ahmed explores the role of women's dress and describes her encounters with what she calls the "old guard" and the new generation of educated female leaders in the American and Canadian Muslim communities. She discusses changing attitudes regarding Muslim women's dress in contemporary Egypt and its connection with the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic fundamentalism, and Islamic patriarchy. She acknowledged that she started her research with her own prejudices: "I thought this was going to be connected with fundamentalist Islam or patriarchal Islam."³² Her childhood

³¹ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*.

³² Omar Sacirbey, "Leila Ahmed, Harvard Divinity School Muslim Scholar, Wins Prestigious Grawemeyer Award," *Huffington Post*, November 30, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/30/leila-ahmed-grawemeyer-award_n_2220953.html.

memories of women with headscarves included memories of Muslim Brotherhood scarf-wearing extremists “who bombed places.”³³ Ahmed provides outstanding insight into the community and experiences of Muslim women in America whom she considers to be feminists and activists.³⁴ Ahmed discusses some of the reasons that led to the re-emergence of the headscarf among university-educated and professional Muslim women in the United States.³⁵ However, she does not discuss how encounters between races and ethnic groups affect Muslim Americans’ approaches to wearing or choosing not to wear a headscarf.

Bayyinah S. Jeffries’ book, *A Nation Can Rise No Higher Than Its Women*,³⁶ provides fascinating insight into the world of Nation of Islam women. As one of the most significant Black Muslim groups during the U.S. civil rights movement and Black Power era from 1950 to 1975, Jeffries offers descriptions, interviews, and fieldwork that she conducted in the United States and the Bahamas. She observed different Nation of Islam’s temples, and interviewed some of the female members of the original Nation of Islam. However, she does not explore the experiences of non-Black Muslim Americans or those Black Muslims who practice different sects of Islam in America, including their approaches to wearing or rejecting the headscarf.

³³ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 3.

³⁴ Sacirbey, “Leila Ahmed.”

³⁵ Rachel Aspden, “*A Quiet Revolution* by Leila Ahmed – Review,” *Guardian*, 20 May, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/20/quiet-revolution-leila-ahmed-review>.

³⁶ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*.

Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam is written by Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim, both scholars of Islam in America.³⁷ They offer insight into the experiences of Black Muslim women in Nation of Islam and why some left this faith tradition. The authors sought answers to questions such as: what was it like to be a woman, independent of a husband or father, in Nation of Islam? How did Nation of Islam shape the lives of women who left it for Sunni Islam? The scholars provide helpful background about the development of power dynamics in Nation of Islam after Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, and the transition from Nation of Islam to mainstream Sunni Islam, which led to opportunities for women's direct participation in the leadership of their community and more progressive involvement in America's social fabric. In the words of Lynda, a Sunni Muslim woman: "The Nation gave me a place to develop the confidence that I needed. It was a womb that got me ready to come into the world."³⁸

Gibson and Karim argue that, for some members of Nation, the "introduction of Sunni Islam and efforts to domesticate Islam in the U.S. context came as a 'mercy' to a community already deeply divided along theological lines."³⁹ The authors discuss differences between Louis Farrakhan's resurrected community and the older notions of Nation of Islam. They examine some of the challenges that Farrakhan's community faced, and the progress of women's leadership roles in the new Nation of Islam under Farrakhan's leadership.

³⁷ Dawn-Marie Gibson, and Jamillah Karim, *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam* (New York: New York University Press), 2014.

³⁸ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 1.

³⁹ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 57.

Gibson and Karim also discuss attempts from both Warith Deen Mohammad's community and Louis Farrakhan's community to build bridges between the communities, highlighting their failures and successes. In the words of Nicole, a Muslim woman, "We're still one *ummah*⁴⁰ at the end of the day."⁴¹ However, the authors do not explore the experiences of immigrant Muslim women and their approaches to wearing or rejecting the headscarf.

In *American Muslim Women*, Karim discuss concepts such as "Islamic feminism," which she calls "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm."⁴² She examines the role of race, ethnicity, and social class in shaping Muslim women's experiences in America, and attempts to find an answer (from a woman's perspective) to the question: "What does it means to be Muslim in America after September 11, 2001?"⁴³ She provides fascinating insight into the racially diverse and divided Muslim-American community and examines the "differences within a common heritage" and various encounters between race and religion. She helps readers understand the complex religious identities of contemporary Muslim-American women within a patriarchal movement and the role of race, gender, and religion. However, she does not explore the experiences of immigrant Muslim women who come from countries where wearing a headscarf is mandatory by law, nor does she examine their approaches to wearing or rejecting the headscarf.

⁴⁰ *Ummah*: the world community of Muslims.

⁴¹ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 194.

⁴² Margot Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no.1 (Winter 2005): 15.

⁴³ Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 1.

On the subject of identity reconstruction, I drew from three types of primary sources: newspaper and magazine articles, books, and interviews with Muslim-American women. *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* each carried various articles that were helpful. I also read several issues of *Muhammad Speaks*, a periodical publication by and for Black Muslim Americans, which has had female Black Muslim journalists since the 1960s.

Methodology

All of Harvard's Institutional Review Board policies on the use of human subjects in research have been adhered to throughout this research.⁴⁴ As these policies relate to identity reconstruction influenced by race, gender, and country of origin in three different American Muslim communities, I tested the above considerations and issues using a combination of *comparative methods* ("the use of comparisons among a small number of cases")⁴⁵ and *case study methods* ("the internal examination of single cases").⁴⁶

Some parts of the ethnographic descriptions and interviews presented in this research are based on long-term fieldwork conducted by Leila Ahmed in Egypt and the United States. She observed Muslims in mosques, in social gatherings, and in official

⁴⁴ Harvard University, Committee on the Use of Human Subjects: University-Area Institutional Review Board at Harvard. <https://cuhs.harvard.edu/>.

⁴⁵ Alexander L George, and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 18.

⁴⁶ George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 18.

meetings in the United States and Egypt. She interviewed some key female Muslim-American figures.⁴⁷

Other ethnographic descriptions and interviews presented here are based on fieldwork conducted in the United States and the Bahamas by Bayyinah Jeffries.⁴⁸ She observed the workings of several Nation of Islam temples and interviewed some notable female members of the original Nation of Islam as well as people who were involved with Nation of Islam from 1950 to 1975. I also used Jamillah Karim's descriptions and interviews of some American Muslim female key figures.⁴⁹

The rest of the ethnographic descriptions and interviews that I present in this thesis are based on my own fieldwork conducted in the Greater Boston area of Massachusetts. As a resident of Cambridge, Massachusetts for the last six years, my own familiarity with the immigrant Iranian-Muslim community in this area was helpful. Owing to the complexities of time and travel, I limited the scope of my ethnographic research to the Greater Boston area.

To gain a fuller sense of what is happening in Muslim communities around Cambridge, I observed different groups of Muslim women at Harvard University events, at the Islamic Society of Boston in Cambridge, and at a few other Muslim social gatherings in Cambridge. I also personally interviewed several Muslim women in the Cambridge area.

⁴⁷ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*.

⁴⁸ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*.

⁴⁹ Karim, *American Muslim Women*.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and some understandable hesitancy among the female interviewees, I interviewed each woman separately unless she wished to be interviewed in the presence of a third person. I used the same set of qualitative, open-ended questions for all the interviewees (see Appendix 1 for the interview questions). For reasons of professionalism and interviewees' safety, if an interviewee so requested, I did not use a recording device. I do not reveal the identity of interviewees or provide any information that might enable them to be identified. Each interviewee was assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Chapter IV

Background

Terrorism, such as the World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001, and the 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, intensified anti-Muslim sentiment in America and provoked the rise of racial intolerance and negative attitudes toward Muslim Americans. Thus, women who choose to wear a headscarf are immediately transformed into a visible symbol of their religious and cultural identification. That said, however, women wearing veils or headscarves is not a new phenomenon.

Women in ancient Assyria, Greece, Rome, as well as Byzantine and Persian societies, all wore a veil because it was viewed as a mark of social rank that was “reserved for aristocratic women and forbidden for prostitutes and those of lower social status, who were punished if they were caught in head coverings.”⁵⁰ Liana Aghjanian, an Armenian-American journalist, wrote:

In Judaism, women who were married were required to cover their hair; this is a practice still observed in some Orthodox Jewish communities today. In Christianity, veiling was a requirement for women who entered a church, and still is in certain traditions. St. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians explicitly reference this, stating that “every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.” The veil also denoted women’s submission to men. “A man ought to not cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God,” Paul wrote. “But the woman is the glory of man . . . for this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Liana Aghjanian, “The Complicated History of Headscarves,” *Racked* (December 20, 2016). <https://www.racked.com/2016/12/20/13988300/head-scarves-history-hijab-gele>.

⁵¹ Aghjanian, “The Complicated History of Headscarves.”

New religious converts often found that conversion was not easy, especially if a Muslim woman chose to cover her hair, since it was easier to identify her as a convert if she wore a headscarf. Some Muslim-American women “were fired from places of employment, fell out of favor with family members, and were thrown out of their homes; others received harassing calls and visits by local and national government officials.”⁵² In an interview with Jeffries, Sister Melvina said:

The reaction to me becoming a Muslim . . . Oh, it was hard, you know? People resent you. They first think you’re crazy. That’s number one. You know, you change your dress attire and you’re talking about your eating habits, you know. I can remember my father telling me “How dare you say ‘I’m not eating such and such?’” I was raised like. . . . So, you know they labeled me as insane, a crazy person. No person came around or supported me, no, not for a long time. I would say for about 20 years.⁵³

By 2017, however, being fired from a place of employment occurred far less frequently—or at least it is not as obvious as it was in the past. For example, when Karim asked friends who wore a headscarf if they had encountered problems (related to their headscarf) while looking for a job or working at a current job, one woman told her:

I had a hard time finding a job. My next-door neighbor questioned, “You haven’t found a job yet, have you?” I answered, “No.” Then he said in a stealth voice, as if he was revealing a conspiracy: “The reason you don’t have a job is that they are not going to hire you with that thing on your head. They don’t like that. They are afraid of you.” A chorus of laughter filled the air, reflecting our agreement on the absurdity of the man’s statement. Then one of the girls responded, “I’ve worn *hijab* on all of my interviews and I’ve gotten every job I’ve interviewed for, from Burger King to the public library.” . . . All of us agreed that we had never had to compromise our notions of Islamic dress codes to get a job.⁵⁴

⁵² Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 68.

⁵³ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 70.

⁵⁴ Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 85-86.

It must be said, however, that Muslim women also face suspicion and unfriendly challenges from members of their own race, ethnicity, and religion when they try to reach out to other Muslim communities in the United States. For example, Syeeda, a member of the Black American-Muslim community, told Karim in an interview that when she was in college, she used to study the Qur'an and pray with her Arab and South Asian Muslim female friends. She said:

I started wearing a head covering as the other women did, drawing my *hijab* over my ears and upper neck. . . . But once I started covering, people in the community made an issue of it. . . . Instead of asking, "Why do you feel like you have to cover?" they would ask, "Why are you covering like that? Isn't that like the Arabs?" I feel like the dress issue conjures up many different emotions among MAS [Muslim American Society, former name of the WDM community] people. When they see me, they think I've lost something, like I don't know who I am.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 157.

Chapter IV

The Rise of Black Muslim Women

Interactions between America and the Islamic world date back to fourteenth century. John L. Esposito, Professor of Religion and International Affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University and Founding Director of the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, noted in his book *Islam: The Straight Path*, that “20 percent of the African slaves brought to America from sixteenth century to nineteenth centuries were Muslim.”⁵⁶ For a variety of reasons, during the process of slavery African slaves’ languages, beliefs, and costumes were replaced with those of their masters. Esposito claims that the emergence of African-American Islam in the twentieth century was seen by many converts as a return to the “religion of Black Man” and “original [African] identity,” an approach to “resist the religion white supremacists” and “blue-eyed devils.”⁵⁷

Therefore a brief history of Islam in the United States, as well as the evolution of the American-Afro-Islamic school of thinking and its attempt to return to “original [African] identity” and build a Black Nation in America, is useful for guiding this paper’s intention to better understand Muslim communities in the United States, particularly its female members.

⁵⁶ Esposito, *Islam*, 209.

⁵⁷ Esposito, *Islam*, 209.

According to Esposito, Timothy Drew (1886-1929), better known as Noble Drew Ali, who founded the Moorish-American Science Temple in Newark, New Jersey, was the first Black American to convert to Islam.⁵⁸ But it was under Elijah Mohammad, a follower of Wallace D. Fard Muhammad's teaching of "blue-eyed devils,"⁵⁹ and the "religion of Black Man,"⁶⁰ that the Black Muslim movement gained real traction and widespread media coverage.⁶¹ In 1938, one critic, Erdmann D. Beynon, described the Nation of Islam as a cult that rose from a "chain of movements arising out of a growing disillusionment and race consciousness of recent Negro migrants to northern industrial cities."⁶² But a Pew Research study found that among native-born American Muslims, the largest group "describe themselves as black."⁶³

Although Nation of Islam was founded in the 1930s, Black Muslim Americans were featured for the first time in mainstream media in a 1959 documentary by Louis Lomax and Mike Wallace titled *The Hate that Hate Produced*.⁶⁴ Lomax and Wallace argued that Nation of Islam was an anti-white Black nationalist organization, and that the African-American Muslim women's movement for self-determination was a "subgroup

⁵⁸ Esposito, *Islam*, 209.

⁵⁹ Esposito, *Islam*, 209.

⁶⁰ Esposito, *Islam*, 209.

⁶¹ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 51.

⁶² Erdmann D. Beynon, "The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit," *American Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 6 (1938): 894.

⁶³ Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: No Sign of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism," August 30, 2011. <http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-1-a-demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>.

⁶⁴ Louis Lomax, and Mike Wallace, "The Hate that Hate Produced," videocassette, July 1959.

and by-product” of the larger African-American Muslim movement.⁶⁵ Lomax argued that women in Nation of Islam “play a minimal role” and were treated as second-class members.⁶⁶ He believed that women’s roles were insignificant and that without hostile American responses toward Black Americans, Nation of Islam would never have gained traction.⁶⁷ Later, in his book *When the Word Is Given*, Lomax argued that “Black Muslims are [part of a] male-centered organization.”⁶⁸ He describes Nation of Islam as a “Chicago-based theocracy . . . [and] one of the few religions ever produced by the American experience.”⁶⁹ I argue that Lomax fails to address the fact that there had to be more than a “subgroup and byproduct” mentality to induce these women to endure the challenges they faced.

A closer look at women’s participation in American society and the resources available to them in the 1950s and 1960s, shows that women in general and Black women in particular had only limited share participation in the power dynamic of the economy, society, or politics for a variety of reasons including gender inequality, which was widespread at the time. For many Black women, Nation of Islam was the only way to improve their socioeconomic status. According to a 2015 Pew study, in 1965 only 39% of women were employed. The same study showed that in the U.S. Congress of 1964, only

⁶⁵ Abdul B. Naeem, (ed.), *Moslem World & U.S.A.*, Special Issue, 1956. https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2014.150.11.13?destination=explore/collection/search%3Fedan_q%3D%252A%253A%252A%26edan_fq%25B0%25D%3Dp.edanmdm.indexedstructured.name%253A%2522Naeem%252C%2520Abdul%2520Basil%2522%26edan_local%3D1%26op%3DSearch. (Accessed 2 December 2018.)

⁶⁶ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 6-7.

⁶⁷ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 7.

⁶⁸ Louis E. Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X and the Black Muslim World* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1963), 81.

⁶⁹ Lomax, *When the Word is Given*, 17.

two representatives were women (see Figure 4). In 1965, only 9% of women enrolled in college and graduated compared to 16% of men.⁷⁰ Black unemployment was twice that of whites,⁷¹ and women, especially Black women, almost never held leadership roles.

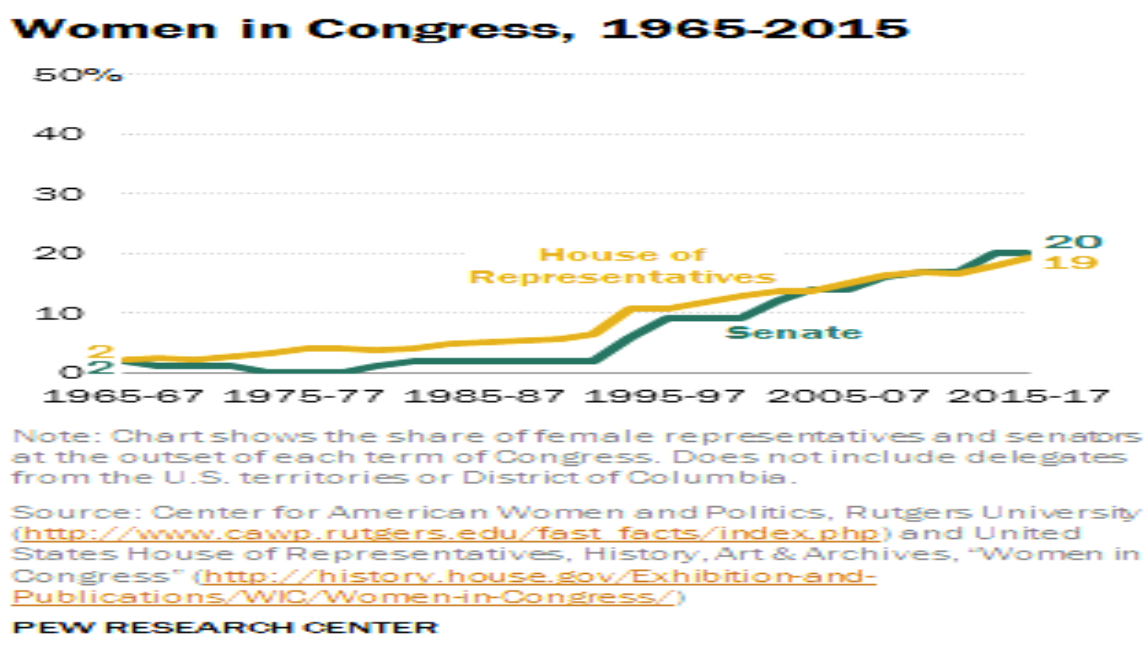


Figure 4. Women in the U.S. Congress, 1965-2015.

Source: Pew Social Trends, 2015.

⁷⁰ Pew Social Trends, "Report: Women in Leadership," Chapter 1, January 14, 2015. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/chapter-1-women-in-leadership/>. (Accessed 19 November 2018.)

⁷¹ Drew De Silver, "Black Unemployment Rate is Consistently Twice That of Whites," Pew Research, August 21, 2013. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites/>. (Accessed 19 November 2018.)

E. U. Essien-Udom, a self-described “black-power professor” who was inspired by *Garveyism*⁷² and *Pan-Africanism*,⁷³ and author of one of the first studies of life in Nation of Islam, states in his book *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America*:⁷⁴ “[Sister Levina] joined the Nation, like most Muslims, because she wanted to improve herself.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, he argues:

Many women believe that the Nation is a place to find responsible family men and . . . husbands for themselves. . . . Members claim there is no hierarchy in the Nation . . . because “all Moslems are brothers and sisters and they are all equal.”⁷⁶

Jeffries interviewed several women who joined Nation of Islam from the 1950s to the mid-1970s. The interviews give insight into the community of Black Muslim women and their experiences in Nation of Islam. For example, in a 2008 interview, Sister Dela, a member of the original Nation of Islam, stated:

The people who joined in the 1940s and early 1950s were trying to change, you know someone was taking an interest in them to get back into society and clean themselves up. So you had that group, okay. Then the brothers dressing in suits, opening doors, helping, oh, my goodness, we weren’t accustomed to that. They [the men] weren’t accustomed to that. . . . People saw the change in people that they knew or that was close to them and they liked it. . . . They liked what it was doing for other people. . . . That’s how we grew so fast. Okay, and when you grow so fast, people came in for

⁷² “Garveyism” describes the body of thought and organizational activities associated with Marcus Mosiah Garvey of Jamaica. Christopher R. Reed, *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/502.html>. (Accessed 10 January 2019.)

⁷³ Andy Lanset, “Marcus Garvey: 20th Century Pan-Africanist” New York Public Radio (NYPR), February 15, 2013. <https://www.wnyc.org/story/250329-marcus-garvey-20th-century-pan-africanist/>. (Accessed 10 January 2019.)

⁷⁴ E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

⁷⁵ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 85.

⁷⁶ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 101.

different reasons. Some came because they saw a gravy train. This was the late 1960s.⁷⁷

Black Muslim women's experiences became more complicated in 1967 when Nation of Islam standardized the dress code for its female members. The new uniform (including head coverings) was modeled after the uniform of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).⁷⁸ Many Nation of Islam women saw the uniform as a "protection," a relief from "being a piece of meat in the streets"; others saw it as "boring."⁷⁹ Gibson and Karim argue that one of the reasons Clara Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's wife, joined Nation of Islam was "the Nation's ideals of respectability and patriarchy."⁸⁰ Despite their varied reasons (political, spiritual, social, familial, educational, and economic) for joining Nation of Islam, each of these women "ended up claiming the religion for herself some years later."⁸¹ In a 2008 interview, Sister Melvin, a member of Nation of Islam, revealed: "Really, I was joining to take the pressure off of me."⁸² Sister Intisar and her husband joined Nation of Islam together, but she "joined on account of her husband."⁸³ In an interview with Jeffries, Sister Intisar said:

⁷⁷ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 72.

⁷⁸ The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL) is a black nationalist fraternal organization founded in 1914 in the United States by Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant. The Pan-African organization enjoyed its greatest strength in the 1920s in the U.S. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Negro_Improvement_Association_and_African_Communities_League. (Accessed 10 January 2019.) See also A. A. Amatullah Rahman, "She Stood By His Side and at Times in His Stead: The Life and Legacy of Sister Clara Muhammad, First Lady of the Nation of Islam" (DA thesis, Clark Atlanta University, 1999), 85.

⁷⁹ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 51.

⁸⁰ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 8.

⁸¹ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 52.

⁸² Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 52.

⁸³ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 52.

My heart didn't really get into it until Minister Jeremiah gave me the opportunity to be the Captain. And my mother knew this. Once, my husband and I came into the Nation, you know how you talk about it all the time. . . . But see, my mother, true to her character, she saw that what we were doing was beneficial. She was not opposed to the benefits that accrued to us.⁸⁴

Prospects for Change

When Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam died in 1975, the next day his seventh son, Wallace D. Muhammad (also known as Imam Warith Deen Muhammad), became Supreme Minister of Nation of Islam. Under his supervision, Nation of Islam changed its name to American Society of Muslims, and by 1978 the vast majority of members of the original Nation of Islam had converted to traditional Sunni Islam.⁸⁵ In an interview in 2010, Khayriyyah Faiz, an original member of Nation of Islam before converting to Sunni Islam, described the transition to Sunni Islam in the U.S. context as a “mercy” to the Muslim-American community.⁸⁶ However, Karim argues that Black Muslim Americans, in particular the followers of Warith Deen Muhammad, are in reality practicing orthodox Sunni Islam. Still, “American Muslim identity translates into ‘American Islam,’ a version of Islam that, in the view of many immigrants, can never be as authentic as the Islam practiced in the countries from which they came.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 72.

⁸⁵ Don Terry, “W. Deen Mohammed: A Leap of Faith,” *Hartford Courant*, October 20, 2002. <http://www.courant.com/chi-021020-mohammedprofile-story.html>.

⁸⁶ Khayriyyah Faiz, personal interview conducted by thesis author, June 8, 2010.

⁸⁷ Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 41.

Chapter V

Challenges Facing Muslim-American Women

Muslim women in the United States today have diverse experiences and in some cases unfriendly challenges, especially if they choose to wear the *hijab*. Their experiences vary depending on their family, their community, even the local temple and its associated community. It is also clear that for many Muslim women, wearing a headscarf is about more than practicing their religion. Wearing the headscarf or choosing not to wear a headscarf represents the complexity of a Muslim female's aspirations for self-determination and her individual identity within the American social fabric, even as it is also one way women interact or negotiate with Islam. Taken together, the fundamental concerns of Muslim women include identity, family, and education, as well as the roles of race, gender, and religion.

Negative Stereotypes

A closer look at the negative stereotypes of Black American women as unfeminine and sexually loose is evidence that racism and sexism toward Black women is historically legitimized but masked. Author Patricia Collins presented four virtues that are encompassed in the ideology of "true womanhood," each one based on popular American literature of the mid-nineteenth-century. She believed that these four virtues—

piety, purity, submissiveness, domesticity⁸⁸—inherently excluded African-American women because the virtues represented “opposing definitions of womanhood and motherhood for white and Black women.”⁸⁹ Instead, Collins presented a different set of stereotypes, which she argued were better suited for describing Black women: “mammy, matriarch, welfare recipient, and jezebel.”⁹⁰ She called these “controlling images.” For example, the jezebel image characterized Black women as sexually loose. To counter such a “controlling image,” Black women in Nation of Islam were forbidden to wear clothing that in any way resembled secular fashion trends—nothing that the Black male Nation leader deemed to be “vulgar, immodest, or indecent attire.”⁹¹

Black Muslims confronted these negative stereotypes by replacing them with reverse definitions of such language. Instead, Black women were taught that they were symbols of honor to be protected from any form of assault by the white race. In the words of Wallace Deen Muhammad: “Black women are the Mothers of Civilization, and by nature, they are the most beautiful women on earth.”⁹²

⁸⁸ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-152.

⁸⁹ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 28.

⁹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1990), 67.

⁹¹ Wallace Deen Muhammad, “Impact of Islam on the Muslim Women,” *Muhammad Speaks*, Special Edition, 1961: 7.

⁹² Muhammad, “Impact of Islam,” 7.

Beauty and Identity

A woman's sense of beauty reflects her identity—an idea that is taught in Islamic communities. This led Black Muslim women in America to create their own proud Black Muslim identity and nurture their own ideas of natural beauty. They believe that how they present their beauty reflects their identity and strengthens the way they interact or negotiate within the Islamic community and the American social fabric overall. The importance of redefining the notion of beauty among Black Muslim women is better understood in terms of transforming one's self-image, and as individual and collective identities in the Black Muslim community as a whole, rather than in terms of gaining or losing freedom.

A closer look at the *Muhammad Speaks* editorials and columns in the context of 1950s and 1960s feminism reveals that women in general and Black women in particular were redefining normative concepts of self image and beauty in women. Jeffries argues that “by rejecting the taxonomy of American white normative modes of beauty, Nation women created their own Black identity and ideas of attractiveness emphasizing character and skill.”⁹³ He also said that editorials and columns, such as “Natural Beauty” in multiple *Muhammad Speaks* issues, defined Islamic views of modesty and illustrated a woman's Black identity.⁹⁴ Jeffries noted that almost every issue of *Mohammad Speaks* from 1961 to 1975 contained inspiring messages related to Black identity and Black self-image:

“We Respect and Love Our Women”;

⁹³ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 96.

⁹⁴ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 96.

“Children Must Be Prepared”;

“The Black Women is the Mother of Civilization”;

“Know Yourself”; and

“We Must Go for Self.”⁹⁵

As these slogans show, topics like “Black identity” and “Black self-image” play a key role in Nation of Islam teachings and literature. In an article in *Muhammad Speaks*, Sister Claretha X confirmed:

Give your children images of themselves in the books you give them to read. This has been one of the themes that we at the school endeavor to carry out daily in our history classes: the achievements of black men and women everywhere.⁹⁶

Makeup, often a component of beauty, was considered “an extravagant financial waste to Nation’s pocket book.”⁹⁷ In an article in the *Muhammad Speaks*, Tynetta Denear argued:

The Muslim Woman . . . never wears makeup as it represents the daring unnatural visage of something peculiar to nature, for nature adorns creation with all its features when it is created and born and makes provisions for its natural development and growth which should not be the tampered with or altered by man.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Jeffries, *A Nation Can Rise*, 81.

⁹⁶ Sister Claretha X, “Graduation Address: Whoever Controls Schools, Controls the Future,” *Muhammad Speaks* (April 1962): 12.

⁹⁷ Tynetta Denear, “Why No Make-up? Cosmetics Produce Two People in One: Not for Our Women,” *Muhammad Speaks* (February 1962): 24.

⁹⁸ Tynetta Denear, “Muslim Woman is Model Personality,” *Muhammad Speaks* (June 1962): 15.

Ambassadorship

Another challenge many Muslim women face is the idea that Muslim women who wear headscarves are inherently ambassadors of Islam and Muslims. This is especially true regarding Muslim women in the U.S. Since most American women do not wear a headscarf, those who do make their identity publicly visible. For Muslim woman in the Europe and North America, the headscarf has become the most recognized symbol of Islam. Thus, many Muslim-American women who wear a headscarf do so with the knowledge that they become *de facto* ambassadors for all Muslims and for Islam in general. However, this notion takes several different forms. Rasmieyh Abdelnabi from Illinois, who wore a headscarf for 14 years, stated in an interview:

I'm the kind of person who likes to walk into a room and be unnoticed. When you wear *hijab* and you walk into a room, everyone notices you; everyone stares at you; everyone makes assumptions about you. . . . When you put the scarf on, you have to understand that you are representing a community, and that is huge. That's a huge responsibility. And I don't know if it's for everyone.⁹⁹

In contrast, Malika Lamia Arafa, a student at Florida State University, embraces the visibility that her headscarf gives her: "It's kind of like walking around with a billboard saying, 'I'm Muslim!' It's a perfect conversation opener."¹⁰⁰ Arafa embraces her ambassadorship:

When I see someone staring at me in a store or wherever, I'll . . . casually approach them and ask, "Excuse me, ma'am/sir, do you have any questions about Islam or the *hijab* that I can clear up for

⁹⁹ Asma Khalid, "Lifting the Veil: Muslim Women Explain Their Choice," National Public Radio (NPR), 21 April 2011. <https://www.npr.org/2011/04/21/135523680/lifting-the-veil-muslim-women-explain-their-choice>.

¹⁰⁰ Daniella Abinum, "The *Hijab* Lesson: Muslim Student Uses Her Headscarf to Teach About Islam," *USA Today College*, 20 October 2015. <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/10/20/muslim-hijab-education/>.

you? Anything you saw in the news that you want to talk about?”
And people usually do have questions.¹⁰¹

Another example is Jamillah Karim, a Black Muslim woman from the WDM community, who makes a conscious effort to “increase her visibility and outreach to African Americans.”¹⁰² She said she adopted the headscarf after seeing examples set by South Asian and Arab women. She seeks to “create a new meaning for the *hijab*”¹⁰³ by consciously wearing a more colorful headscarf “as a way to reconnect with African Americans [and to] demonstrate that even as individuals move across ethnic spaces with tension, their travel constantly creates links among different spaces and between past and present.”¹⁰⁴

Among government and non-government agencies that are fighting Islamophobia in their informative and educational materials (see Figures 5 and 6), women are often shown wearing a headscarf in their depictions of the face of Islam.



Figure 5. London: An Anti-Islamophobia Poster.

Source: Smith, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Abinun, “The *Hijab* Lesson.”

¹⁰² Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 114.

¹⁰³ Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 114.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE WITNESSING ISLAMOPHOBIC HARASSMENT

A bystander's guide to helping a person who is being targeted



This guide was originally written and illustrated by Maerli (potsmaerli). It was translated into English for the Middle Eastern Feminist. It was reformatted by the City of Boston with the artist's permission.

CITY of BOSTON



Mayor Martin J. Walsh

Figure 6. Boston: An Anti-Islamophobia Poster.

Source: Domonoske, 2017.

In another example, in April 2017, Austria's far-left President Alexander Van der Bellen asked all Austrian women to wear headscarves. He believed such action would

highlight solidarity with Austrian-Muslim women as one way to fight “rampant Islamophobia.”¹⁰⁵

Clothing for Black Muslim-American Women

Under the supervision of Louis Farrakhan, the American Society of Muslims and the new Nation of Islam began to relax certain rules, particularly the dress code.¹⁰⁶ For example, Nation of Islam hosted designer competitions and fashion shows such as Project Modesty, which are open to girls and women age 14 to 24.¹⁰⁷ In the words of Nisa Islam Muhammad: “Project Modesty will clothe our girls with the garments that will reflect their beauty and culture without being tight, revealing or skimpy.”¹⁰⁸

However, much of the new fashion advertised in Nation of Islam literature for women is not easily identified as Islamic clothing.¹⁰⁹ For example, in *The Final Call*, a newspaper founded in 1979 by Louis Farrakhan, Farrakhan’s wife Khadijah was photographed with several Nation women advertising a selection of fashions—none of which included hair coverings.¹¹⁰ Farrakhan’s granddaughter enjoyed considerable success in the modeling industry, and some believe that her career choice helped revise

¹⁰⁵ Lizzie Dearden, “Austrian President Calls on All Women to Wear Headscarves in Solidarity with Muslims to Fight ‘Rampant Islamophobia,’” *Independent*, 28 April 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ Nisa Islam Muhammad, “Project Modesty Contest Comes to Saviours’ Day,” *Final Call* (12 February 2009): 36.

¹⁰⁹ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 147.

¹¹⁰ Charlene Muhammad, “New Ready-to-Wear Collection by Mother Khadijah Farrakhan’s New Apparel,” *Final Call* (28 August 2012): 36.

his views on the profession.¹¹¹ After all, “the nation’s fashion designers benefit exponentially from a preexisting consumer base and market.”¹¹²

In an article in *Muhammad Speaks*, columnist Tynetta Deanar accused Black women who choose to pursue secular fashion trends of “playing the part of copycats” in a “white women’s wardrobe.”¹¹³ But other Black Muslim women question the expectation that they will wear long dresses and cover their hair in order to illustrate their modesty and Black identity. Ula Yvette Taylor found that some women in Nation of Islam view wearing a long dress as a “badge of oppression”; others seemed to find power in it.¹¹⁴

The demand created by Nation of Islam for clothing it deemed suitable led a number of Nation women to venture into the fashion business. Gibson and Karim found: “Women were encouraged to purchase their uniforms from the NOI’s clothing factory or, when possible, from their local temple. . . . This helped create substantial employment opportunities for Nation women.”¹¹⁵

Flash forward to November 13, 2017, when Mattel Toy Company, makers of the popular Barbie doll, announced the latest doll in its “Shero” collection. It was modeled after Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first Muslim American to compete in the Olympics while wearing a headscarf (see Figure 7). Sejal Shah Miller, Mattel’s vice president of global

¹¹¹ Audrey Muhammad, “A Virtuous Conversation: The Nation’s Next Top Model, Jamillah Farrakhan,” *Virtue Today* (Winter 2008): 11.

¹¹² Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 147.

¹¹³ Tynetta Deanar, “Dress Should Identify Black Woman,” *Muhammad Speaks* (July 1962): 27.

¹¹⁴ Ula Yvette Taylor, “As-salaam alaikum, My Sister, Peace Be Unto You: The Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the Women Who Followed Him,” *Race and Society* 1, no. 2 (1998): 180. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1090952499800436>. (Accessed 5 December 2018.)

¹¹⁵ Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 51.

marketing, said: “Ibtihaj is an inspiration to countless girls who never saw themselves represented, and by honoring her story, we hope this doll reminds them that they can be and do anything.”¹¹⁶ Later that day, Ibtihaj herself posted on Twitter: “I’m proud to know that little girls everywhere can now play with a Barbie who chooses to wear *hijab*! This is a childhood dream come true.”¹¹⁷



Figure 7. Ibtihaj Muhammad Holding the First *Hijab*-Wearing Barbie Doll.

Source: BBC, 2017.

Some critics question whether a Barbie wearing a *hijab* is “empowering” for girls (see Figure 8). Maureen Callahan, a *New York Post* reporter, argued:

These abuses and humiliations of women in the name of religion are often defended by the women themselves, posited as choices

¹¹⁶ Julia Horowitz, “Barbie’s First *Hijab*: Meet the New Ibtihaj Muhammad Doll,” CNN, 13 November 2017. <http://money.cnn.com/2017/11/13/news/barbie-hijab-ibtihaj-muhammad/index.html>.

¹¹⁷ Ibtihaj Muhammad, Twitter, @IbtihajMuhammad. <https://twitter.com/IbtihajMuhammad/status/930149787222945792>.

they make. But that's illogical. In such fundamentalist religions, women have very few, if any, choices to make. It's misogyny under the guise of religion, nothing more.¹¹⁸



Figure 8. *New York Post* Illustration for Article: “*Hijab Barbie Toying With Us.*”

Source: Callahan, 2017.

The Economic Impacts of Islamic Fashion

It is clear that the Islamic fashion market is thriving. A report titled “State of the Global Islamic Economy, 2014–2015” by Thomson Reuters stated: “Muslims spent \$266

¹¹⁸ Maureen Callahan, “*Hijab Barbie Toying With Us,*” *New York Post*, 16 November 2017. <https://nypost.com/2017/11/16/barbies-hijab-doesnt-empower-it-oppresses/>.

billion on clothing and footwear in 2013, and that number is expected to nearly double to \$484 billion by 2019.”¹¹⁹ Abdul Rahman Saif Al Ghurair, a member of the Dubai Islamic Economy Development Centre board, said in an interview: “The lack of a global Islamic clothing brands presents a unique opportunity for U.A.E. fashion designers.”¹²⁰ In fact, in 2013 U.A.E. opened the Dubai Design District (colloquially known as D3),¹²¹ to facilitate the U.A.E.’s move to become an Islamic fashion capital—and it is now being challenged by Turkey’s Muslim clothing industry and its self-styled “Islamic Fashion Revolution.”¹²²

The growing demand for clothing that is modest but fashionable in a market with a rapidly expanding capacity¹²³ has led the clothing industry and financiers to reconsider their approach to the Islamic fashion market. The fashion industry in general and world-famous designers in particular are welcoming this trend by presenting their so-called “modest collections” in runway shows, online, and in mainstream stores. Ramadan, the holiest month of the Islamic calendar, in recent years has become “a month of extravagant spending” that designers and merchants seek to capitalize on.¹²⁴ According to

¹¹⁹ Thomson Reuters, “State of the Global Islamic Economy: 2014-2015.” 2016. https://www.flandersinvestmentandtrade.com/export/sites/trade/files/news/342150121095027/342150121095027_1.pdf.

¹²⁰ Ryan Gorman, “The Islamic Fashion Business is Booming,” *Business Insider*, 9 April 2015. <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-islamic-fashion-business-is-booming-2015-4>.

¹²¹ Dubai Design District (D3). <http://www.dubaidesigndistrict.com/>.

¹²² Tim Arango, “Turkey’s Islamic Fashion Revolution,” *New York Times*, 17 September 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/world/europe/turkeys-islamic-fashion-revolution.html>.

¹²³ Pew Research Center, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050,” 2 April 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

¹²⁴ Ruth La Ferla, “For Ramadan, Courting the Muslim Shopper,” *New York Times*, 24 June 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/fashion/for-ramadan-courting-the-muslim-shopper.html>.

a study by London-based Euromonitor International, “Like Christmas, a religious context serves as a reason for families and friends to buy gifts. . . . The Ramadan consumer is likely to emerge in the same way as the Christmas shopper as a global phenomenon.”¹²⁵

In 2014, during a week when the European Court of Human Rights upheld France’s ban on the *burqa* and *niqab*,¹²⁶ fashion design house DKNY unveiled its first-ever Ramadan-themed collection, styled by Dubai-based designer Tamara Al Gabbani and *Kuwaiti Styles* magazine fashion editor Yalda Golsharifi.¹²⁷ In 2015 H&M featured a Muslim girl in a headscarf in an online ad.¹²⁸ Tommy Hilfiger launched its first 2015 Ramadan collection,¹²⁹ with even more pieces for its 2016 Ramadan collection.¹³⁰ Oscar de la Renta, Mango, and Monique Lhuillier quickly followed suit, producing modest Ramadan collections.¹³¹ In 2016 Dolce & Gabbana launched its first collection of luxury

¹²⁵ Lydia Gordon, “Ramadan and Consumers: 2012 Trends,” *Euromonitor International*, 19 July 2012. <https://blog.euromonitor.com/ramadan-and-consumers-2012-trends/>.

¹²⁶ Max Benwell, “Is the European Court Right to Uphold France’s Ban on Veils?” *Independent*, July 1, 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/iv-drip/is-the-european-court-right-to-uphold-frances-ban-on-veils-9576708.html>.

¹²⁷ Bina Shah, “DKNY’s Ramadan Collection Shows that Muslim Dress Means More than the Burqa,” *Independent*, 2 July 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/dknys-ramadan-collection-shows-that-muslim-dress-means-more-than-the-burqa-9579469.html>.

¹²⁸ Katie Rogers, “H&M Features *Hijab*-Wearing Model in New Campaign,” *New York Times*, 29 September 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/fashion/trends/hm-features-hijab-wearing-model-mariah-idrissi-in-new-campaign.html>.

¹²⁹ Alexandria Gouvía, “Tommy Hilfiger Launches Exclusive Ramadan Collection,” *Emirates Woman*, 15 June 2015. <http://emirateswoman.com/tommy-hilfiger-launches-exclusive-ramadan-collection/>.

¹³⁰ Caterina Minthe, “The Tommy Hilfiger Ramadan Collection is Coming—But Will it Resonate with Middle Eastern Ladies?” *Vogue*, 24 April 2016. <https://en.vogue.me/archive/legacy/tommy-hilfiger-ramadan-2016-collection-middle-east-exclusive/>.

¹³¹ Aisha Gani, “Dolce & Gabbana Launches Luxury *Hijab* Collection,” *Guardian*, 7 January 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/dolce-gabbana-debuts-luxury-hijab-collection>.

*abayas*¹³² and *hijabs* (see Figure 9), which Forbes called “their smartest move in years.”¹³³ The same year, Danish sportswear brand Hummel designed the first soccer jersey with a built-in headscarf for members of the Afghanistan women’s national soccer team.¹³⁴ In 2017, Nike launched it “pro *hijab*” for female Muslim athletes.¹³⁵



Figure 9. A Piece from Dolce & Gabbana’s First Collection of *Hijabs* and *Abayas*.

Source: O’Connor, 2016.

¹³² A loose over-garment dress worn by some Muslim women.

¹³³ Clare O’Connor, “Dolce & Gabbana Launches *Hijabs* and *Abayas* as Middle Eastern Luxury Market Hits \$8.7 Billion,” *Forbes*, 6 January 2016. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2016/01/06/dolce-gabbana-launches-hijabs-and-abayas-as-middle-eastern-luxury-market-hits-8-7-billion/#1109f1c91403>.

¹³⁴ Tom McGowan, “Afghanistan Unveils Soccer Kit with *Hijab*,” CNN, 8 March 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/08/football/afghanistan-football-team-hijab/index.html>.

¹³⁵ Laila Kearney, “Nike to Launch High-Tech *Hijab* for Female Muslim Athletes,” Reuters, 8 March 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nike-hijab/nike-to-launch-high-tech-hijab-for-female-muslim-athletes-idUSKBN16F2N1>.

Going beyond a singular focus on fashion, two studies by Bain and Co. reported that sales of personal luxury goods in the Middle East hit \$8.7 billion in 2015,¹³⁶ up from \$6.8 billion the year before.¹³⁷ While one might argue that such numbers cannot always be attributed directly to Islamic fashion, at the very least the trend proves that the modest Muslim fashion industry is flourishing.

Amani al-Khatahtbeh, founder of MuslimGirl.com, in an interview with the Catalan daily newspaper *ARA*, said: “There’s one thing we fail to understand, and it’s that forcing a woman to remove her headscarf ends up being the same as forcing her to put it on.”¹³⁸ Likewise, when Gigi Hadid, a Palestinian-Dutch supermodel, was featured on the cover of the inaugural *Vogue Arabia* issue (see Figure 10), it caused considerable controversy. Mohieb Dahabieh, *Vogue Arabia*’s special projects director, said: “To some it’s the rejection of women objectified, to others the reverse. When the argument ends, and taking eras into retrospect, I wonder which of the two will be considered the most loaded fashion item: the corset or the veil.”¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Claudia D’Arpizio, Federica Levato, Daniele Zito and Joëlle de Montgolfier, “Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study Fall-Winter 2015,” Bain & Company, 2016. http://www.bain.com/Images/BAIN_REPORT_Global_Luxury_2015.pdf.

¹³⁷ Claudia D’Arpizio, Federica Levato, Daniele Zito and Joëlle de Montgolfier, “Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study Fall-Winter 2014,” Bain & Company, 2015. http://www.bain.com/bainweb/PDFs/Bain_Worldwide_Luxury_Goods_Report_2014.pdf.

¹³⁸ Júlia Manresa, “I Wore the Headscarf in Order to Come Face to Face with Islamophobia,” *ARA*, 19 May 2017. https://www.ara.cat/en/wore-order-to-face-Islamophobia_0_1798620202.html.

¹³⁹ Mohieb Dahabieh, “Why Gigi’s *Vogue Arabia* Cover Matters,” *Vogue*, 3 March 2017. <http://www.vogue.co.uk/article/vogue-arabia-gigi-hadid-cover>.



Figure 10. Gigi Hadid on the Cover of *Vogue Arabia*.

Source: Bare, 2017.

These examples highlight the complexities of Muslim women's self-image, their concepts of "Natural Beauty," and issues involving long dresses and covered hair as an illustration of modesty and a woman who is proud of her race, ethnicity, and identity. Rather than viewing Muslim-American women's dress and appearance in terms of suppression or liberation, it seems clear that Muslim-American women in general and Black and immigrant Muslim women in particular are redefining the concepts of beauty and self-image for themselves.

Chapter VI

The Politics of Headscarves

The topic of headscarves worn by Muslim women in the United States has been highly politicized in ways that often have a negative appeal to certain political groups, especially those that favor isolationist rhetoric and restricted immigration policies. In her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*,¹⁴⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod argues that in recent years politicians have often used the subject of “the oppression of Muslim women” and the advancement of women’s rights to make a case for the “war on terrorism.” In a radio address, former First Lady Laura Bush, stated:

Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.¹⁴¹

Two days later Cherie Blair, wife of British former Prime Minister Tony Blair, issued a similar statement.¹⁴² Yvonne Haddad argued that the war in Afghanistan had “become a virtuous war . . . and we were going to liberate the women of the Muslim world. It is important for Muslim women in America to speak out and make clear that no

¹⁴⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹⁴¹ Laura Bush, “Brutality Against Women and Children,” Radio Address, November 17, 2001. <https://www.georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/>. Accessed 10 April 2010.

¹⁴² Cherie Blair, Press conference on Taliban and women, November 20, 2001. <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO0111/S00149.htm>. Accessed 10 April 2010.

one is beating you up to make you wear a scarf.”¹⁴³ Leila Ahmed said that Islam, with its signature *hijab*, “began to take root in America through immigrant activism and by way of international connections between Islamists and African-American Muslims.”¹⁴⁴ In an interview, a young Black-American Muslim women told Ahmed:

When people stare at me when I am on the T [Boston’s underground subway system], I find myself thinking that if there’s just one woman out there who begins to wonder when she looks at me “why does she dress the way she does?” and begins to notice the sexism of our society—if I’ve raised just one person’s consciousness, that’s good enough for me.¹⁴⁵

Columbia University Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in her book *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that “white men saving brown women from brown men” has a long history. Ahmed calls it “colonial feminism.”¹⁴⁶ These thoughts illustrate how the notion of “liberating” women in the Muslim world has been used throughout history as a means of legitimizing colonial domination and foreign intervention. Susan Carland, author of *Fighting Hislam: Women, Faith and Sexism*,¹⁴⁷ stated:

The assumption is that Muslim women need to be extracted from the religion entirely before anything close to liberation or equality can be achieved. . . . Commonplace is the firm conviction that sexism against Muslim women is rife, most often coupled with the utter disbelief that women who challenge sexism could exist, let alone that there are many of them, that they are not a new phenomenon, and that Muslim men often support them in their efforts. I often wonder how people can be so comfortable presenting these attitudes directly to me, a clearly identifiable

¹⁴³ From Haddad’s talk at the Islamic Circle of North America Annual Convention, 2002. Author’s notes.

¹⁴⁴ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 12.

¹⁴⁵ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 8.

¹⁴⁶ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 54.

¹⁴⁷ Susan Carland, *Fighting Hislam: Women, Faith and Sexism* (Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2017).

Muslim women in a *hijab*. They do not appear at all uneasy in making it apparent just how bad they think life is for any and all Muslim women, and how unengaged they believe Muslim women to be in confronting the sexism they invariably face.¹⁴⁸

Immigrant Muslim women seem to be redefining, to some degree, normative Western concepts of free women. One way to do this is by rejecting Western dress codes and creating their own American-modern-female identities and ideas of attractiveness. Tayyibah Taylor, founder of *Azizah*, a publication for Muslim women, describes her underlying rationale as undercutting an “internalized sense of inferiority” after she immigrated to Canada at the age of seven. Taylor hopes her magazine will be a platform “for the woman who does not apologize for being a Muslim and does not apologize for being a woman.”¹⁴⁹

Some activists go even further. Amani al-Khatahtbeh’s the founder of *Muslim Girl*, a popular US-based online magazine for Muslim women, stated in an interview, “I wear the headscarf in order to come face to face with Islamophobia.”¹⁵⁰ She says: “We’re one of the most visually identifiable religious minorities in the country. For that reason, we’ve kind of become like lightning rods for people who want to express that hatred they’re feeling.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Susan Carland, “If You Want to Know About Muslim Women’s Rights, Ask Muslim Women,” *Guardian*, May 6, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/07/if-you-want-to-know-about-muslim-womens-rights-ask-muslim-women>.

¹⁴⁹ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 265.

¹⁵⁰ Manresa, “I Wore the Headscarf.”

¹⁵¹ Stephanie Convery, “*Muslim Girl*’s Amani Al-Khatahtbeh: ‘We Decided to Make the Conversation About Us,’” *Guardian*, August 24, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/aug/25/muslimgirls-amani-al-khatahtbeh-we-decided-to-make-the-conversation-about-us>.

In an interview in 2002, a Muslim-American woman of Arab-Caucasian decent and a convert to Islam explained to Leila Ahmed why she wears the *hijab*:

I wear it as a way of calling for justice for minorities. For the same reason as some of my Jewish friends wear a yarmulke: as a way of openly identifying with a group that people have prejudices about and as way of saying “Yes, we’re here, and we have the right to be here and to be treated equally.”¹⁵²

Amani al-Khatahtbeh states in her website: “We’re normalizing the word ‘Muslim’ for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.”¹⁵³ After a trip to her ancestral homeland of Jordan, al-Khatahtbeh decided to wear a headscarf, a decision she talked about in an interview: “My mother doesn’t wear it, I’m the only woman in my family in the United States who wears it. The first day, before going through the school door, I burst into tears, I was so afraid of being rejected.”¹⁵⁴

In her book *Separate Worlds*,¹⁵⁵ Hanna Papanek describes the *hijab* as “portable seclusion” because it enables women to move within segregated living spaces while still observing the community’s requirements of separation of women from unrelated men.

Lila Abu-Lughod calls them “mobile homes.”¹⁵⁶ Susan Carland says:

Jasmin Zine, a Canadian scholar, once observed that not just our actions but also our very identities are constantly being shaped by dual, competing discourses that surround us. There’s the fundamentalist, patriarchal narrative, persistently trying to confine the social and public lives of Muslim women in line with the kind of narrow, gendered parameters that are by now so familiar. But there are also some western feminist

¹⁵² Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 8.

¹⁵³ <http://muslimgirl.com/>

¹⁵⁴ Manresa, “I wore the headscarf.”

¹⁵⁵ Hanna Papanek, *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1982).

¹⁵⁶ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

discourses that seek to define our identities in ways that are quite neocolonial: backward, oppressed, with no hope of liberation other than to emulate whatever western notions of womanhood are on offer. This wedging chimes with my experience, and it's a problem because, as Zine argues, both arms deny Muslim women the ability—indeed the right—to define our identities for ourselves, and especially to do so within the vast possibilities of Islam.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Carland, "If You Want to Know about Muslim Women."

Chapter VII

My Interviews with Muslim Women Who Are Taking Off Their Headscarves

Many Muslim women reject the idea of long dresses and covered hair as an expression of modesty and thus a requisite part of their Muslim identity. A number of Muslim women I interviewed, who wore headscarves while living in Iran, now view headscarves as symbols of backwardness and the oppression of women; they describe their decision to unveil as “liberation.”

“Why Did You Choose to Wear or Not Wear a Headscarf?”

Some interviewees told me they looked forward eagerly to wearing a headscarf at the age of 9 (the age of mandatory *hijab* in Iran), but they soon changed their minds. When I asked why they wanted to wear a headscarf when they were 9 years old, a 26-year-old graduate student told me: “From the first grade at school the teachers kept telling us, ‘It is a sin if you expose your hair to a non-related man.’ I was very afraid of committing a sin.” Another interviewee, a 30-year-old Iranian-American Muslim doctoral student, said: “I wore my headscarf all the time, even when I went to bed, during the first two days of school. I was so afraid I would go to hell.” Clearly, children’s religious indoctrination is a strong motive.

Ultimately, however, family is the major factor in children’s upbringing. When I asked these and other women what made them to change their minds, they said it was their parents who encouraged them not to wear a headscarf. In some cases, they had a

long and serious discussion with their parents regarding the concepts of God, sin, heaven, and hell. A 36-year-old doctoral student said: “My father is an atheist, and he convinced me to not wear a headscarf.”

Many women have two separate lives: one in public, veiled; the other unveiled but in secret. This was not always the case, however. One interviewee, a single mother in her mid-30s with two graduate degrees, told me she wore a headscarf until age 15. She said: “It was easy when I was around my mother’s family since they were very conservative Muslims and all the females were wearing headscarves. But it was more challenging around my father’s relatives since they were all Western educated seculars.” Another interviewee who wore a headscarf until the age of 15 told me she stopped wearing it when her old teacher who had convinced her to wear the headscarf tried to sleep with her.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, an editor of *Provocations*, a series of short polemical books, argues: “All religions cast women as sinners and temptresses.”¹⁵⁸ She cites two classics: Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*,¹⁵⁹ and Moroccan Fatema Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*.¹⁶⁰ Alibhai-Brown believes that “the veil [is] a tool and symbol of oppression and subservience.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, “As a Muslim Woman, I See the Veil as a Rejection of Progressive Values,” *Guardian*, 20 March 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/20/muslim-woman-veil-hijab>.

¹⁵⁹ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Books, 1980).

¹⁶⁰ Fatema Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).

¹⁶¹ Alibhai-Brown, “As a Muslim Woman.”

Rasmieyh Abdelnabi, 27, from Illinois, grew up attending an Islamic school and used to wear a headscarf. In an NPR interview, she said she worries about offending fellow Muslims with her opinions, so during discussions about the *hijab*, she tends to keep silent. “I sometimes feel that talking about *hijab* is like talking about abortion in mid-America.”¹⁶²

“To Them, We are Not Good Muslims”

The topic of women’s rights and freedom is another key theme among immigrant Muslim women. One of my interview questions asked: “What do you think about Muslim women who wear the headscarf in the United States?” Interviewees who used to wear a headscarf frequently responded positively—or that was what I thought at first. One of the interviewees, a Ph.D. student in chemistry, replied: “This is a free country.” Another who is a medical doctor in Boston said, “A woman can wear anything she wants.”

But when I asked “What if a majority of women in your workplace chose to wear the headscarf?,” then the women who wore headscarves became “the others” in the view of many interviewees. One is a dentist who used to wear a headscarf, and her response was, “I’d quit!” When I asked why, she said, “To them, we are not good Muslims, and as soon as they have a chance they are going to force us to wear a headscarf.” Another interviewee who has a doctorate degree said: “I have seen that before. At first they [women wearing the headscarf] seem peaceful, and they talk about democracy and free will, but then they force everybody to wear the headscarf. That is how it happened, I have

¹⁶² Khalid, “Lifting the Veil.”

seen it before.” I understood at once that she was talking about the 1979 Revolution in Iran. One of the interviewees, a self-described feminist architect, went even further and called them, “They [women who wear the headscarf] are the enemy. They are not going to be as sympathetic with us as we are with them when they have the upper hand.”

However, when I asked them, “If your husband hires a female secretary would you prefer that she wears a headscarf or Western clothes?” A 26-year-old graduate student answered, “I would want him to hire the one with the headscarf.” Another interviewee, a 36-year-old Ph.D. student said, “I prefer headscarf over Western clothes, but in fact I wish my husband would hire a man!” Even among women themselves, this attitude illustrates the enduring conservative attitude toward the way women dress. Ironically, this limits Muslim women’s job opportunities because wives press their husbands not to surround themselves with women in the workplace. But if those female employees wear a headscarf and dress modestly, they could expect more job opportunities and greater acceptance from other women.

It was clear in my research that Muslim women who do not wear the headscarf have mixed views regarding the motives of women who do wear the headscarf. In public, espoused a liberal position toward Muslim women who wear the headscarf. But, when pressed about situations in their personal and work life, they expressed much stronger opinions.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion

Wearing the headscarf has a number of symbolic implications for Muslim women, with a range of opinions depending on the meanings applied individually and collectively. This study of race, gender, and religion vis-à-vis the role of the headscarf in the life of Muslim women in the United States has implications for Muslim Americans, African Americans, activism, the economy, nation building, and Muslim identities in the United States.

In preparing for this study, I took supporting evidence from the extant literature and other available data. I conducted interviews that support the complexity of Muslim women's experiences with headscarves. I found that in many cases choosing to wear, or not wear, the *hijab* transformed women's self-image—sometimes individually, sometimes collectively—in the reconstruction of their identity as Muslim women in the United States.

This study suggests that rather than viewing Muslim women's dress code in terms of suppression or liberation, or the gain or loss of freedom, I found a broader view that shows how American Muslim women use headscarves to define a normative concept of beauty in themselves and the women around them. A woman's beauty reflects her identity and thereafter influences the way she interacts or negotiates as a woman, as a Muslim, and as an American.

Black Muslim women created their own proud Black identity coupled with ideas of natural beauty focused on modesty, character, and skill. Concepts such as “Islamic feminism” and “Islamic activism” often included long dresses and covered hair as an illustration of modesty and not just piety in the view of many people.

My research found that in the 1950s and 1960s, Black women had limited socioeconomic resources and limited political activities, and in general few women were found in any leadership roles. For many Black women, Nation of Islam was the only means by which to change and improve their socioeconomic status.

This study presented evidence that immigrant Muslim women from countries such as Iran, where state law required women to wear the headscarf, tend to see the headscarf as a symbol of oppression. But when pressed about situations in their personal and work life, they expressed enduring conservative attitudes toward the way women dress. In fact, Muslim women in the United States, where wearing a headscarf is not required, tend to use the headscarf as an instrument to make their identity visible and to create their own unique space in society.

Ultimately this study suggests that the headscarf means what he or she chooses it to mean; also that what it means to one person is not necessarily what it means to another. In some case, wearing a headscarf increases a woman’s mobility and resources in her society and helps her progress and development. In other cases, wearing a headscarf limits women’s mobility and progress. Thus, rather than viewing Muslim women’s use of the headscarf in terms of gaining or losing freedom, this study offers a broader view that defines Muslim women’s dress codes in terms of establishing their identity. Forcing or

indoctrinating women to wear or not wear a headscarf can both be understood in terms of oppression and a violation of women's rights.

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

- Please introduce yourself: (name, age, education, occupation, marital status, children, residential neighborhood, etc. both in Iran and in the United States)
- What is/was your primary reason to wear/not wear a headscarf in Iran/the United States?
- Did laws, religion, social contracts, social class, government/nongovernment organizations, culture, work, education, environment, commute (to different parts of the city/country), family, friends, or others have any impact on your view/decision/behavior in Iran and in the United States? Please elaborate on that.
- Did your view/decision/behavior have an impact on others' view/decision/behavior in Iran and in the United States? For example, if your spouse/significant other wanted to hire a woman, what might be your thoughts and concerns about the way she dresses? (headscarf, modest, provocative, etc.) Please elaborate on that.
- Was there any incident, time, or place (public and/or private) that made you question or change your view/decision/behavior in Iran and in the United States? Please elaborate on that.
- Would you like to share your perspective, thoughts, and/or experiences?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

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