The Hijabization Process: Some "Mindful" Bodies Uncovered

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This article is based on research trying to find out reasons why a number of young British Muslim women decided to wear the hijab in London. The elements involved in taking this decision were related to identity, social and political questions. Thus, women found in the hijabization process a way to achieve their own identity which was denied by their second generation "hybrid" British Muslim condition. However, this decision can somehow regulate women's bodies and social behaviour despite its liberating aspects from the moment they are publicly identified as Muslims.

This article will try to resume my master dissertation about the hijabization process I studied among a group of British Muslim women who decided to wear the hijab for different reasons in London. My interest in this research subject was motivated by my modest attempt to break western stereotypes by trying to understand why it was important for these girls to wear the hijab, especially for British Muslims in a western country like the UK.

One day in November 2005, a Muslim girl called "Z" approached me whilst reading some posters about Islam at Brunel University. From that moment, we started talking about Islam, and thus she naturally became my gatekeeper and informant as my interest in Islam became hers. She introduced me to her four closest "sisters" ("I", "J", "Z2" and "S"), who were also members of the ISOC (Islamic society) and then became my informants as well. Girls "I" and "J" happened to be the president which helped me to be accepted in the ISOC, to enter the prayer room and to be invited to several gatherings and talks about Islam. These five girls shared with me their recent embracement of Islam and the hijab, a phenomenon that matches the so-called "re-veiling phenomenon" in the UK reported by many scholars but with which it was my first contact. This was due to my lack of experience in being surrounded on a western campus environment by women wearing the hijab, which awoke in me many questions.

Thus, through my previous meetings with my informants, I identified some of the major elements involved in the reasons why the girls adopted the hijab. Those elements appeared to be related to identity, society and politics. Thus, as I was undertaking a master in Medical Anthropology, I used Scheper-Hughes and Lock's theory of the "mindful body". According to this, the body has three dimensions with three different levels of analysis: the individual, social and political body. The individual refers to the embodied self that includes physical and psychological experiences, which include identity aspects, dimensions I found in this hijabization process. The social body refers to "cultural construction about the body" (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987: 15) that help us to sustain and behave in society, thus the hijab could be a good social arrangement. And, finally, the political

body, which provides social and cultural scripts which will regulate the group boundaries that go beyond skin.

The hijab has always been linked to controversy between its oppressive and liberating meanings for women

Regarding the available bibliography, although the study of the hijab remains a complex phenomenon, we find El Guindi's (1999) work provides an important contribution to its study as it challenges the classical meanings of modesty (Abu-Lughod, 1986) and seclusion (Wikan, 1982) attached to it, by stressing that the hijab is not only an act of affirmation of cultural identity but also about privacy, space and body. However, the hijab has always been linked to controversy between its oppressive and liberating meanings for women. Wikan (1982), Mernissi (1985) and MacLeod (1991), for instance, represent the feminist statement of those who consider this practice to be oppressive of women's sexuality; that is, regarded as a threat to civilised society. Whereas Bullock (2003), for instance, considers it to be a liberating act from western consumerism and the tyranny of beauty. Nevertheless, although more background research can be found among people like Ahmed (1992), Badran and Cooke (1990) and Shirazi (2001), I finally followed contemporary anthropological work undertaken in urban spaces, like London, by Tarlo (2005, 2007) and Dwyer (1999, 2000) as my work was more focused on British Muslims in London.

For my study, 14 young Muslim women aged between 19 and 28 from the Middle East, Africa and Asia were contacted and interviewed through a network I built myself through contacts and the Islamic and Arab Society's help. To represent these different voices as clearly as possible, I used open interviews, participant observation and my personal embodiment of the hijab in London to gain a better understanding of what it meant and felt like for my informants to wear it, and to contrast what they considered as advantages, meanings or effects on the viewers (Muslims and Non-Muslims).

Fourteen Muslim girls voluntarily agreed to be interviewed. However, because of previous mistrust, they expressed their wish for their identity to be kept anonymous, which is why I refer to them by the first letter of their names. Nine of them were British Muslims (born in the UK). Five from Pakistan (including my informant "Z"), the rest from Palestine ("J"), Morocco ("I"), Somalia ("Z2") and one "revert" (convert) girl from Jamaica ("So"). The group of non-British Muslims included an Iranian ("Sor"), two Arabs, from Bahrain ("B") and Dubai ("N"), a Turkish girl ("V") and a reverted Hungarian ("No") married to a Turkish man. Although my main interest was to carefully follow this re-veiling phenomenon among British Muslim women, I also used the non-British Muslim group to gain a broader understanding of the variations, in both the forms and cultural meanings of veiling among Muslim women.

The Hijab: A Dress Code or Only a Headscarf?

Introduction

The present social discourse regards Islam as a cultural system where Muslims represent a threat to western lifestyle and democracy, and their cultural practices, such as veiling are seen as an extreme religious symbol. Images of veiled women appear constantly in the media in juxtaposition with war, terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and devastated countries. Thus, although it has not been banned yet in the UK, my informants felt the need to fight for the right to wear it.

Moreover, many scholars have reported the way British Muslims negotiate their dif-

March against war in London (Oihana Marco).

ferences in diasporic communities of the developed world, and construct their new hybrid Muslim identities (Dwyer, 1999) in a specific political situation tainted by an increase of Islamophobia, racism, social inequalities and issues concerning their countries of origin. However, whether the hijab is an act of faith or a youthful act of rebellion for instance towards western political agendas in the Middle East, the truth is that it is a broad, trendy and complicated social phenomenon.

The Hijab

The word "hijab" comes from the Arabic word *hajaba,* meaning to hide from view or conceal. Sometimes called veiling, nowadays the hijab generally refers to the modest covering of a Muslim woman. Hijab is also the name used for the headscarf that women wear on their heads. This headscarf is normally triangular and covers the hair, the neck and part of the chest. It can be made out of different materials and different patterns and colours according to culture and different geographies. As Islam has no fixed clothing standards in the Qur'an, we find many different interpretations in the current Islamic literature regarding what a Muslim woman should cover and how (hijab, niqab, chador, burka…). Those interpretations come from two sources of guidance and rulings: first, the Qur'an, the revealed word of Allah, and second, the Hadiths, or the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, chosen by Allah to be the role model for mankind. The Qur'an says: "Say to the believing man that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands."

Nevertheless, I have found many contradictions in Islamic literature regarding what should be covered, and some people even believe that the hijab is neither mandated by the Qur'an nor sanctioned anywhere in the Hadith (Syed, no date). However, some dress requirements are to be met according to many Islamic sources (Abdullah, 1999: 9-32). These include: modesty, dignity, looseness and thickness, so as not to show the colour of the skin it covers or the shape of the body. The clothing should not attract men's attention to women and should not be shiny so that everyone notices the dress and the woman. In addition to this, women should not dress either to appear as men or as the unbelievers. Thus, I found a quite contemporary interpretation (in some leaflets I was given in the street) of how the unbelievers are represented: "A new trend of complete nudity, immodesty and indecent behaviour that leads them to exhibit everything they have to offer, attracting men and leaving their home in favour of the outside world." (Memon Madani, 2000)

Although we find veiling enables and constrains urban mobility in Istanbul (Secor,

2002), protects from shame (*malu*) in Indonesia (Lindquist, 2004), and guarantees modesty and honour for the Soharis (Oman) and Bedouins (Egypt) (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Wikan, 1982), all my informants highlighted similar meanings: "Ja": "The headscarf only covers the hair, but wearing the hijab implies behaving responsibly, avoiding men... The hijab is about attitude and modesty!" Thus, according to this, the hijab is an act of covering that implies gender boundary and a set of behaviours (modesty, dignity, body concealment...) that represents a decent Muslim woman but also distinguishes her from a non-Muslim one (western) who implies with her exposed body a loss of values. Moreover, as "Za" mentioned, there are other types of dresses closely related to the hijab, the jilbab[1] or the abaya,[2] which are perceived and considered by many women as their last step in modestly achieving what I call the hijabization process.

The Hijabization Process

I have called the hijabization process the way in which women come to wear the hijab. Thus, I will briefly explain the way my informants followed and reported this process by explaining it through the individual, social and political body.

The Individual Body (Identity and Hijabization)

Although I am aware of the broad and complicated different processes that lead each Muslim woman to embrace Islam and adopt the hijab, it seems to appear as a way of negotiating British Muslim multiple identities (religious, ethnical and national) in the West since the construction of identities has been attached to the dress (Dwyer, 1999). Thus, I believe the construction of British Muslim multiple identities is closely linked to the hijab. Identity remains an important issue, especially nowadays as it is a important point of delineating distinctiveness in an increasingly global but religious and cultural diverse world. As "A" told me: "I wasn't westernised, but I wasn't Pakistani either, I was a hybrid kind of thing. One day, I started reading a book about Islam and I found my identity there. I am a Muslim now and that's how I see my identity primarily! Firstly, I am a Muslim and then British-Pakistani. Being British or Pakistani is more related to skin colour, genetic or cultural background but Muslim is my identity… That is more important to me!"

New Muslim identities seem to be emerging through the negotiation of the "cognitive dissonance" which has arisen from young second and third generations' multiple identities

New Muslim identities seem to be emerging through the negotiation of the "cognitive dissonance" which has arisen from these young second and third generations' multiple identities. We can see this from some of the statements my informants made when I asked them about their ethnic origin, which brought up the problem of identity definition. However, the majority (as seen above) defined their multiple identities in terms of religious

1. The jilbab comes from *jalbab* and means in Arabic "the outer sheet which covers the entire body" (Memon Madani, 2000). It is normally a long dress or tunic that is worn on top of other clothes and that normally goes down to the feet.

2. The abaya is an over garment worn by some Muslim women. It is the traditional form of hijab, or Islamic modest dress, for many countries of the Arabian Peninsula. It is sometimes adopted in other parts of the Islamic world. The traditional abaya is black, and may be a large square of fabric draped either from the shoulders or head.

identity (Muslim), then ethnic background (Somalian, Pakistani, Moroccan...), and finally in terms of British nationality, which was mostly reduced to citizenship or a British passport. But how do these girls achieve this re-discovered religious identity that would lead them to adopt its commandments and symbols, such as the hijab?

Ethnicity and Britishness

Ethnicity and Britishness seem to be the two poles of the continuum along which most of my BM (British Muslims) participants seem to struggle. Although my informants seemed, firstly, to explore the western seductive lifestyle to which they partly belong (as they were born in the UK), the reality is that some (coming from different social classes) encountered its cruel and also negative outcomes, falling into what Ramadam (2000) called "attraction-repulsion", which is what many Muslims feel towards the West. Among all my representative examples, I should point out the case of "Ja", who experienced violence towards her as a consequence of living in bad areas, or "I", who stressed that in order to try to fit in and be popular in secondary school, she encountered troubles to the point that the day she was expelled from school she reconsidered her values and goals in life.

Ethnicity and Britishness seem to be the two poles of the continuum along which most of my participants seem to struggle

Although only three girls admitted going through these negative processes, the rest agreed they were not attracted or fulfilled by the so-called British way of life or culture. Moreover, some also stressed the sense of insecurity experienced from the introduction of the new anti-terror policy, and their disagreement with Britain's current political agenda undertaken in the Middle East. Thus all these factors seemed to point out that their British identity remained only positive at levels of citizenship and the positive rights implied. Regarding their ethnic identity (Pakistani, Somali, Moroccan, Arab…), many difficulties also arose. Most of the BM girls did not speak their parent's language, some disliked their Pakistani patriarchal culture, and most importantly, some had never been to their country of origin, where some found it hard to create a bond with their original extended families who considered them "outsiders".

Like "Za" most of the girls expressed the same: "Za": "They have this idea that people born and raised in England don't really know about our culture…!" Added to this, I believe this assumption of new Muslim identities and therefore the adoption of the hijab were really linked to each other (Dwyer, 1999) and what is more, the latter could be motivated by a desire to remember roots: As Abrahamson (cited in Sarbin and Scheibe, 1983: 191) says: "What the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember." Thus, as Ramadam mentioned (2003), Islam appeared for many of my informants as the panacea, with the consequent danger of falling into idealisation and simplification.

Islam: The Best Option

So, why is Islam considered to be the best identity option by these BM girls? As we noted earlier, these girls (despite being British) do not perceive a sense of protection from their own government, and some feel the British way of life is not only unacceptable but also dangerous. Thus, once they re-evaluate and re-discover their religion, Islam provides spirituality and protection from God and from the strong and extended ummah (community), as Islam is a religion that is shared by many ethnic groups in the world, which also gives a sense of belonging and togetherness. As "Z" said, quoting Yvonne

Ridley:[3] "Islam allowed me to belong to the largest family of the world!" For many like "O" and "Ja": "Islam is a supporting system!"("O"); "Where people help each other." ("Ja"). Added to this, and contrary to the NBM (Non-British Muslim) informants, BM women seemed to distinguish constantly between "religion" (Islam) and "culture" (Moroccan, Pakistani, Somalian, etc.) in a probable attempt to reach a purified version of Islam, free from any cultural influence, or as an attempt to avoid gender oppression or inequalities that are occurring culturally in the name of Islam, including the enforcement of veiling in the Middle East. But this is only a hypothesis.

Furthermore, this binary "culture" vs. "religion", only mentioned by BM, was also expressed in the society's affiliation chosen by Brunel informants. BM belonged to the ISOC whereas NBM belonged to the Arab, Turkish or Iranian one. Thus, it seems that NBM actually preferred "culture" or "ethnicity" over "religion". From what I witnessed, this allowed them to be linked to their home culture and fellows in a new and foreign environment. Although most of the BM girls were born and raised in the UK, they seemed to be stricter in their religious practice and clothing, contrary to the NBM ones as mentioned previously for whom wearing the hijab seems to be a traditional cultural practice more than a religious one. Moreover, the most extreme version would rely on the new converts considered by the British Muslims as the best Muslims "because they don't have any cultural influence, so when they go to Islam they do it 100%, but in Islamic countries they learn about Islam because it is in their culture... Reverts are the ones!" ("I").

Finally, after embracing their religion, a new identity is born and, with it, its religious rituals (i.e. praying, reading the Qur'an, observing Ramadan...) through which they will discover the real importance and meaning of the hijab. We can see this in the following statements made by my informant: "I": "When you start understanding your religion you understand the real meaning of the scarf. It's just like another step, it's like the religion is asking you to pray five times a day, so the religion is asking you to cover up. It was not easy and fast but I understood it was the next step of my *deen* (way of life in Islam). One day I decided to wear one and not to delay it anymore!" Furthermore, although many Muslim women fiercely criticised the symbolism attributed to the hijab, the thing is that the majority of my BM informants stressed the importance and the need for public recognition. This is understandable as in any identity process of self-recognition, belonging and identification constitute a set of symbols that are important to be displayed; and the hijab seemed a good one (Dwyer, 1999). "M": "Maybe people wouldn't see you as a Muslim if you didn't have any symbol... Then you would be like anyone else!"

Because the cultural background of my participants is culturally linked to Islam, this religion appears to be the best option to negotiate their ethnic and national identities

Thus, once the hijab is adopted, the main advantage the girls experienced after public recognition was respect. According to my informants, such respect came first from the British white community, but especially from the British Muslims. It is the latter who appreciate their real commitment and who distinguish them from those who do not

3. Yvonne Ridley: British Journalist and Respect Party politician best known for her capture by the Taliban and subsequent conversion to Islam.

practice properly, called "Muslims by name". Such respect enhances their acceptance to this exclusive but also secluded ummah. As "Z2" stressed: "I could lose my whole identity as a Muslim or do it properly and cover myself." Public recognition and respect also comes from their parents, who confer upon the girls some kind of high morality and expertise (Dwyer, 2000). "M": "Islam gave me the opportunity to educate my parents about the true meaning of it." Respect, finally, comes from the extended family in the girls' country of origin, who, once they see the girls wearing the hijab, consider them less outsiders. "M": "My family in Pakistan was surprised because they thought I would come back from England with make-up and jeans, but they were very pleased to see the opposite."

Although I am conscious about the complicated identity processes that take place within every adolescent, the truth is that there is a particular socio-economic reality and identity struggle among these second and third generations of "hybrid" British Muslim youngsters. Because their cultural background is culturally linked to Islam, this religion appears to be the best option to negotiate their ethnic and national identities. It seems not only to reconcile some basic values (family, respect for elders, not drinking, no dating...) inherent to their cultural background, but also to allow them to live under the principles of democracy, freedom of choice (including religious) and prosperity of the West.

The hijab responds to a particular use of the body that justifies and responds to a particular social value or social arrangement that comes from the Muslim community

Moreover, once they embrace Islam (through their first peer contact) the hijab appears as a piece of clothing or symbol to be displayed in this process of belonging, self-recognition and differentiation without which the new Muslim woman identity would not be complete. It confers respect and it is also a boundary maker. Thus, the hijabization process seems to begin once the re-discovered religious identity is embodied and visibly displayed through the hijab. I should, however, point out that its adoption (especially among the BM girls) has been the result of a personal evolution and decision and not from any parental coercion. Indeed, some of them do not encourage or support their daughter's decision as they feared it could result in an obstacle for them to reach professional respect, success and peaceful lives in the West, something their parents work hard to gain.

The Social Body (Society and Hijabization)

The hijab appears as part of an important commandment to pursue their *deen*. Therefore, this hijabization process takes place, is guaranteed and enhanced by what I witnessed as social regulation coming from the Muslim community, in the form of *dawah* or a social process which could fall into the social body introduced by Scheper-Hughes and Lock. According to them, symbols or "cultural construction about the body" (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987: 15) help us to sustain and behave in society. Thus I will demonstrate that the hijab responds to a particular use of the body that justifies and responds to a particular social value or social arrangement that comes from the Muslim community.

However, although they all stressed that they adopted it out of personal conviction, we could also argue that, from a psychological perspective, no one is completely free from the social environment to which one belongs. Thus, some subtle and subliminal influences could have taken place while being exposed to orienting devices in the form of subtle influencing messages or suggestions coming from the

peer group in the form of the *dawah* (Arabic meaning for "invite"). *Dawah* is considered to be the Muslim responsibility to invite others to Islam and is referred to as the act of preaching Islam recommended by the Qur'an. Thus the *dawah* (normally done by women) appears as the always present social element which I believe plays an important role by:

- Guaranteeing the first contact with Islam by offering information.
- Providing a model of the code of proper Muslim behaviour.
- Enhancing a Muslim girl's Islamic commandments and taught responsibilities also guaranteed through a subliminal and subtle "social regulation", coming mostly from other Muslim women. Moreover, this *dawah* enhances the hijab functions and meanings and guarantees the girls continue wearing it by this subtle social regulation and teachings about the real importance of wearing the hijab for life.

Whether it is through readings, teachings or observation, the thing is that my informants (especially the BM girls) understood the importance of wearing the hijab after embodying their Islamic commitment or *deen*. However, I should mention that I also started experiencing and witnessing the other, intrusive and inappropriately disrespectful side of the *dawah*. Thus, although all the girls admitted they were never instigated, enforced or pushed to wear the hijab, in the context of my own experience I found there were many subtle psychological ways of implementing it and enforcing it. As "O" said: "I don't feel pressure, but the dads, cousins and so on are more protective... They are not going to tell me 'you have to cover your hair', but they might be like 'out of respect you might want to wear something more comfortable'."

Another important fact to be mentioned is that wearing the hijab is claimed to be an act of personal choice, as it is believed that any act of enforcement would lead women to remove it and be inconsistent. "When you start understanding, you do it properly, but when you are younger and you are forced to do it, you don't appreciate it or take it off!" ("Z2"). Because as "No" said, "if someone told me what to do, I wouldn't do it!" Maybe this might explain the subtle and important role that the *dawah* plays as a subliminal social process.

Moreover, although this *dawah* was only done by women, apparently in the innocent forms I mentioned before (invitations, talks, offer of Islamic literature, etc), some girls also experienced some intrusive forms of this social regulation: "Z": "One day a girl from the ISOC told me I had to dress modestly, because I was wearing tight clothes. I told her I was not ready but she told me it was not about being ready but about something I had to do for my religion since I was a Muslim."

Although the hijab has been claimed by many to be a visible barrier and a Muslim symbol that allows people to spread the real meaning of Islam, as we have seen, it can also allow intrusive and strict forms of social regulations

I also had a similar experience at Regent's Mosque (Central London) when I was wearing the hijab myself. An unknown woman approached me and, as a bit of my hair was suddenly visible, she said to me: "Beautiful face and beautiful hair." This could be seen as an expression of the *dawah* in the form of social regulation, because the girls told me this was done for my own good as this woman probably felt I should be told how to cover properly. Moreover, some of my informants were also reprehended by a young Muslim woman regarding the way they were praying. Thus, although the hijab has been claimed by many to be a visible barrier and a Muslim symbol that

allows people to spread the real meaning of Islam, as we have seen, it can also allow intrusive and strict forms of social regulations. This could be explained as, according to all my informants, wearing the hijab implies an important responsibility for women to represent Islam properly. What "Z2" expresses is completely representative: "When you wear a headscarf you have more responsibility because you are representing every Muslim. You can not be seen with men or smoking."

Furthermore, the body will slowly start being the object of internal regulation and control through training and mind discipline enhanced by the consciousness of wearing the hijab and what it implies, which is also guaranteed by this external social regulation (Turner, 1984) or in this case by the *dawah*. This will result in embodied spirituality.

The hijab is constantly used in the media as a visual symbol of dangerous extremism and symbolic association with women's oppression

However, the hijabization process does not reach its final destination at this point. As "I" said: "Islam is an evolution that never ends!" According to my informants, once the *deen* and spirituality are embodied and more consistent, some are ready to take a further step. This will also "re-shape" the body again under (for instance) this ultimate cloth called the abaya. Therefore, especially among my BM informants, the hijabization process has its ultimate expression through this progressive body shaping or covering that goes from the hijab to the abaya. However, although the niqab[4] and the burka[5] were not considered by any of my informants except for "Ja", who was willing to wear it back in Palestine when married. During my fieldwork, she evolved from wearing pants, long tops and really bright and colourful scarves to only wearing dark ones and black abayas (also suggested by the head of the Islamic society, brother Abdullah, who thought that as she was the president of the Islamic society she had to represent Islam and set a modest model for other Muslim women). Moreover, she was willing to show repentance for her past behaviour (clubbing, smoking, drinking…) and gain reward and forgiveness through some form of body shaping. As she said: "For one good thing you do, God will reward you and that will count 10 times more than bad things." This was mentioned by many of my informants.

Thus, as most of my BM informants considered the black abayas as the last expression of the Islamic religious *deen,* this trend to adopt stricter forms of covering could respond to a need for more self and social regulation due to the closer temptation living in the West could represent for them, which could lead them to fall back into bad past western habits as "Ja" mentioned: "We could be tempted by the devil again." Thus, this self-discipline through covering and social regulation will also guarantee that BM woman not only protect themselves ("Ja", "I" and "Z") from that but also embody their new Islamic way of life.

The Political Body (Gender Politics and Hijabization)

As my final chapter, I would like to present the hijabization process through what Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) identify as the "po-

4. A niqab is a veil which covers the face (except the eyes), worn by some Muslim women as a part of sartorial hijab. It is popular in the Middle East but it can also be found in North Africa, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent

5. A burka (also burqa or burqua) is a type of opaque veil sometimes worn in addition to a headscarf by Muslim women observing purdah. Similar to a niqab, the burka covers the wearer's entire face except for a small region about the eyes. A full burka or Afghan burka is a garment that conceals the entire body. The full burka includes a "net curtain", which also hides the wearer's eyes. During the Taliban's reign in Afghanistan, women were required to wear a full burka.

litical body" or artefacts of social and political control of populations (social body) and discipline of individuals. The ongoing controversy in European countries like the UK and more especially in France, where its banning has never been exempted from political implication, is also reaching Spain, where school directors (Girona, Ceuta…) have recently had to face by themselves how to approach such a new phenomenon in their schools when girls insist on wearing the hijab in class.

The hijab is constantly used in the media as a visual symbol of dangerous extremism and symbolic association with women's oppression (Mernissi, 1985; Wikan, 1982). Moreover, the French banning has led many Muslim women in the West to publicly condemn it, to combat secularism and claim the freedom to wear it as a reaction. Thus, the hijab remains a politically-charged piece of clothing. As I mentioned before, although my informants defended the "liberation" discourse based on Naomi Wolf's (1991) ideas of the western "tyranny of beauty", there is an insidious academic discourse through which we could also identify a form of "oppression" (Mernissi, 1985) or a contradictory discourse. I have based this on the fact that in the name of Islam, which promotes body concealment and modest behaviour, women's bodies are somehow regulated. This, in turn, is said to guarantee a political social order through dichotomised gender roles where women have to negotiate between traditional female roles that encourage them to rear their children and remain in a domestic space, or modernity which encourages them to access professional sectors and higher education.

According to my participants, the hijab has a major significance of liberation or freedom (Bullock, 2003) as inner beauty and intelligence are considered by them to be challenged and to emerge from this body concealment. Thus, my participants feel they are no longer exposed as sexual objects like western girls are; therefore they will be respected and loved for their inner qualities: "Sor": "I want men to look at my internal beauty and then my physical beauty will come up. Then that person will respect me more." Moreover, the hijab is perceived by many independent thinking women as a choice to gain "true liberation" from the sexual pressures in western society (Patel, 1997). Most of my educated Muslim female informants (including converts) were seduced by this current Islamic positive discourse.

In the name of Islam, which promotes body concealment and modest behaviour, women's bodies are somehow regulated

Finally, we should also comment on the liberating feature derived from the anonymity the hijab gives to the girls due to the fact that public scrutiny and visual invasion and enjoyment are blocked to men by this symbolic clothing shield. This will help women to prevent male sexual approaches by stopping them from "entering women's private property": their body. This statement is highly representative. Hijab protects women and signals to men: "A": "My body is private property, do not enter, this is my space!" It is about self-protection so that acts that are forbidden in Islam do not arise. Thus, we could conclude that there is a social and cultural concept of the body seen as exposed to men, which leads to a need for protection with the hijab in the West, considered to be liberating by my informants. Thus their concept of liberation could also be socially constructed by their culture of origin where men need these boundaries in order to respect women and control themselves.

The Hijab: The Insidious Oppressive Discourse

However, although my informants found the hijab liberating, allowing them to escape from the pressures of conventional western

"models of beauty", there is a competing discourse based on its "oppressive" features always represented by the western discourse, which is the basis of the current controversy. This discourse is represented in the following reflexive account, based on my attempts to approach the hijab phenomenon personally and academically. However, although there is a current attempt to fight cultural backward-looking Islamic discourses to bring back women's equality and rights to education and economic independence, academically speaking, the girls' discourses seemed to reproduce a social construction of gender roles based on the outdated and criticised dichotomy introduced by Ortner (1974) between "male" (culture, public, creativity…) and "female" (nature, private, domestic and procreativity…): "I": "A man is like a brick! All he can do is the physical work! A woman's attribute is to bring up their children as well because a man cannot do it like a woman and it is because of how Allah has created us. But that does not mean you should be restricted at home […], we have more options nowadays […]". "Ja": "A man has to bring the finance and what is required from a woman is to raise their children and follow their religion."

Despite its liberating aspects, the fact is that the hijab can bring many inconveniences from its public Muslim identification

Thus, it appears that my informants acknowledged their important social role to maintain the family unit, thus the function of society. This will be based on their biological differences which are also considered a threat to men and to social order due to their female sexuality and body appearance. Thus, a body control is understood (Mernissi, 1985) not only to guarantee women's own protection from men's harassment but also to help men to control their instincts and remain faithful, which will result in a social benefit: "I": "By wearing the hijab I benefit the opposite sex as well because it makes it easier for them to lower their gaze and to not look at women because it is hard and difficult for them."

However, this need for internal regulation suggests women's active sexuality needs to be contained (Mernissi, 1985), and according to what I experienced from my informants, women seem to have to deny their external signs of femaleness and human sexuality not only as a proof of the sacredness of their body, but also as a proof of piety and moral superiority to gain respect from the male sex by differentiation from the unbelievers, the sinners or the whores (Wolf, 2001). Thus, women seem to always carry more responsibilities than men, who are considered to be sexual individuals with poor self-control, as we can see in the previous statements and in the following ones: "I": "It is a scientific fact that men think about sex like every 10 seconds. The purpose of the hijab is to preserve our modesty and beauty [...] We are not supposed to show we are attractive!" "A": "The hijab was given because of men's weakness, because men follow women's appearances a lot more […]"

Moreover, although they insisted on their right to receive education (which Islam encourages), in case of conflict of responsibilities, women's primary role is expected to be educating their children and being a good wife, which could again be socially constructed and respond to different historical and cultural needs and concepts of social order. As Ortner and Whitehead (1984) later stressed, different types of social order could lead to certain perceptions of gender. Nonetheless, none of the informants seemed to acknowledge they were falling into some contradictions. This Islamic discourse tries to divert the girl's attention to this appealing liberating benefit and protection of body concealment against sexual harassment, pregnancy or sexual diseases. These arguments

would support the "oppressive" characteristics of the hijab in opposition to the liberating one stressed by my informants, as social (Turner, 1980) or political control could be taking place through their bodies or clothing.

However, despite its liberating aspects, the fact is that the hijab can bring many inconveniences from its public Muslim identification, as I experienced myself when I contrasted my two experiences while wearing the Somalian style hijab or turban and the so-called proper hijab at the Islam Expo held in August 2006, London. When I did wear the first one, although I was also modestly dressed,[6] I did not come across as a western or as a Muslim woman, which conferred on me some kind of freedom of action. Nevertheless, the two other times I wore the hijab, it became clear from the first moment that I was not only publicly identified as a Muslim but also expected to behave and accept certain situations taught under the *dawah* (i.e.: I was told by "Z" how important it was to greet people behind the stands before looking at leaflets; I was told how I should reach for a book at the bookshop if a Muslim brother is in my way, or the importance of lowering my gaze in front of men to avoid any physical contact).

A new separateness has been born between "us/them" from a feeling of vulnerability perceived from both sides. Thus the hijab serves this purpose as it increases the feeling of belonging to a community but builds up a clear boundary for the western viewer

I should also stress that wearing the hijab also implied the possibility of approaching and being approached and greeted by other Muslims at any time (as happened to me on many occasions, including men looking for future Muslim wives). Although the social exposure I felt by being recognised, chastised and approached was subtle, it gave me a sense of awareness of not only what was considered as behaving in an Islamically correct way, but also about the social regulation that women experience due to their identity being publicly displayed by the hijab.

Finally, when I removed it on both occasions (after 14 hours of wearing it), the last time after the Islam Expo, I experienced a sense of complete freedom in many ways, which again my socially constructed western origin could explain. Therefore, it represented a clear confirmation of the typical reaction of many western people. Nevertheless, I would like to make clear that I am aware this reaction is no longer based on my informant's experiences as it represented my own. Hence, although this could lead to unconvincing ethnographic conclusions based more on my personal socially-constructed experience and socially-constructed concepts of "freedom" and "oppression", this however happened to echo and parallel the western current discourse that regards the hijab as an oppressive practice, which I also found interesting.

Conclusions

Nowadays, images of covered Muslim women constantly displayed in the mainstream press as the "oppressed" other marked by religion and political fanaticism ignores the possibility of falling into ethnocentric western bias or an Orientalist[7] vision (Said, 1994). Moreover, what many people do not acknowledge is that this

6. Being modestly dressed according to the Islamic dress code, the girls told me, means covering the chest, the arms, the legs and the lower parts of women's bodies (bottom, hips…) and not revealing women's shapes by avoiding tight clothes.

7. Orientalism became a field of knowledge or paradigm for understanding the Middle East and Islam, which sought to be objective but which was actually based on the assumption of inherent Oriental inferiority.

"re-veiling phenomenon" adopted by many young Muslim women in the West seems to come out of personal decisions, not out of conscious enforcement and coercion. Thus, as seen, the hijab remains a complex phenomenon linked to difficult and contemporary concepts such as identity, ethnicity, religion, politics and gender. As globalisation has brought religious and cultural diversity, new global identities are struggling to be resolved, especially among second and third generations.

Furthermore, multiculturalism allows the hijab to be used by Muslims as a tool to discuss "political culture" (Vertovec, 1997) and publicly display religious forms of identity as part of a collective identity of silent minority groups that not only are becoming part of the new European multicultural picture but want to be heard. Moreover, due to the latest "terrorism" events within the West, Muslims are constantly equated with terrorists, thus having to justify their national loyalty in the West. As a result, a new separateness has been born between "us/them" from a feeling of vulnerability perceived from both sides. Thus the hijab serves this purpose as it increases the feeling of belonging to a community but builds up a clear boundary for the western viewer.

I also believe that a critical intra-dialogue should firstly be achieved within the Muslim community to promote some basic understanding about the hijab and to avoid misleading distorted information that some books and radical sectors could be giving about Islam, especially to young women.

Added to this, the resurgence of the so-called return of the veil among BM women could also be a re-interpretation of what it means to be a woman in contemporary Muslim societies (Duntley, 1999) in an attempt to gain self-representation and self-realisation in their communities. Thus, what appeared to me as "oppressive" could respond to different options and ways of achieving women's liberation and equality subjected to cultural and historical re-interpretations.

Finally, in contrast to the past, nowadays the hijab appears as a "tool" through which my informants experience and reclaim their freedom. However, what is now considered a liberating practice among British Muslim women in the West could take a different shift and lead to different and oppressive semantics depending on future discourses they react to through this piece of cloth, or semantically overcharged symbol (Tarlo, 2007), which today embodies many discourses and socio-political realities.

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