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The Voice behind the Veil: An Exploratory Study on the Identity Politics of Muslim Women and the Practice of Veiling (Hijab) in Hyderabad

Abstract

The powerful institutions of family, religion and state institutions have structured the practice of veiling as not only indicative of a woman's self-identity, but also her gender, religious, sectarian, identities. Thus, this paper adopts the phenomenological point of enquiry into the nature of identity politics of Muslim women attempting to place the Hijab as the point of intersection between the religious, gender and class identities. The research study is set in contemporary Hyderabad and enquires into the lives of people who have engaged critically with the practice of ethnic veiling in Islam drawing on the narratives of 53 Muslim women using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A thematic analysis has been used to synthesize the data highlighting the centrality of context specificity to identity politics on the veil. This paper moves beyond the monolithic construction of the black burqa and politically convoluted dichotomies of oppressor- emancipator, informed choice vs. religious mandates and backwardness vs. modernity towards a more nuanced understanding of the veil.

This paper is an exploratory study that seeks to unearth connections between veiling, identity, power, and its intersection with religion and gender. It is set in contemporary Hyderabad and enquires into the lives of people who have engaged critically and creatively with the veil not only as a marker of intersected positions set in hierarchical fields, but also as discursive points that can be used to pose a symbolic challenge to the oppressive systems of patriarchy and religion.

INTRODUCTION

Clothing has been constituted as an artificial envelope used to hide-reveal the natural biological body. What most scholars overlook is that fact that clothing manifests into a bodily extension that cannot be removed without transforming one's bodily sense of self (Al-Saji, 2010). Pioneer scholars Merleau-Ponty's (1945) riveting work *"Phenomenology of Perception"* has revealed that habituation has transformed clothing from merely being an abstraction from the body to an-

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integration into one's body schema. Bodily extensions then constitute dimensions through which individuals perceive and interact with the world where bodily limits are felt not at the skin but at the edges of the clothing, thereby redefining one's sense of 'here and there'- leading to a reconfiguration of external space. Thus, the discussion on ethnic veiling in Islam does not merely pertain to significance of the clothing but goes beyond a superficial covering to uncover the spiritual, religious, political and cultural connotations of identity.

Given the current socio-political landscape- of a democracy in crisis and shift in global politics towards the right -there is a need to re-examine the creation and transformation of this ethnic identity of the veiled Muslim Woman. With a rise in terror attacks- all eyes have turned to the bearded men and veiled women-transforming "Islam" into the dirty word convoluted with notions of fear, exclusion and deviancy. The veiled Muslim woman has been constructed as both victim and perpetrator in contemporary times- where she is passive, helpless and must be emancipated from an inherently paternalistic religion is also the aggressive fundamentalist who forces values onto the defenseless and unwilling individuals. (Evans, 2006, cited by Howard, 2012) Thus, the Muslim veiled woman has emerged as a threat to the *'liberal egalitarian order'*-as theorized by the West.

Attempts to regulate the practice of veiling have been made across Europe- Belgium banned the headscarf in public spaces in 2010 citing security reasons, while Germany sanctioned restrictions

on religious clothing and symbols in 8 states in 2004. France banned veiling in schools in 2004 in solidarity with the philosophy of French secularism. Do these images represent an accurate reality of Islamic women? The problems that underpin this rhetoric of prohibition are patriarchy and culture which are mutually reinforced and amalgamated to form a superstructure imposed on women (Janson, 2011). It is within this context of growing Islamophobia and violence against women that I fix my research study. There is a need to de-construct religious and socio-political identity to draw distinctions between tenets of religion and patriarchal imposition of ideology upon individuals under the garb of "oppressed" and "emancipatory".

Review of literature
Deconstructing Identity: Psycho-Social Underpinnings

"Identity: is a concept that neither imprisons (as does much in sociology) nor detaches (as does much in philosophy and psychology) persons from their social and symbolic universes, [so] it has over the years retained a generic force that few concepts in our field have."- (Davis 1991:105) *Identity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality."* (Bhabha 1994:51, cited by Howard, 2000) The psycho-social underpinnings of identity re-iterate an emphasis on social cognitive and symbolic interactionist paradigms of research. The theory propounds that the social positions we occupy

weigh in heavily on our sense of self and the process of identification. Thus, social identities are embedded within sociopolitical contexts (Howard, 2000). Phinney's (1990, cited by Howard, 2000) extensive work on the formation of ethnic identities reveals that identity development is conflict ridden and associates aspects ethnic self-identification, a sense of belonging, attitudes toward one's own ethnic group, social participation and cultural practices, and empirical findings on self-esteem, self-concept, psychological adjustment, ethnic identity in relation to the majority culture, changes related to generation of immigration, ethnic identity and gender, and contextual factors with them. Thus, scholars cast ethnic identification as situational and volitional – constructing it as a dialect between internal identification and external ascription (Howard, 2000).

Orientalism & Historicity of the Hijab

Historically the origin of the veiled woman's identity can be traced by to the Orientalist discourse as theorized by Edward Said (1978) which polarizes the traditional eastern culture from Western modernity, constructing the East as – *"victims of their own culture"* thereby justifying colonialism as an art of protection- *"white men saving brown women from brown men"* (Spivak, 2008, as cited by Down, 2011). The ways in which the Hijab has been interpreted as a symbol of oppression are two-fold in nature - role of the native informant and peril of false consciousness -implying that women who claim to wear the veil out of choice have internalized the patriarchy of their culture and lack a sense of agency. Under this conception how women who veil articulate their own desires, experiences and motivations becomes irrelevant as they are not agents in their own right: but merely puppets of patriarchy, devoid of agency (Down, 2011 & Bracke & Fadil, 2012).

A Dialogue between Liberalism and Multiculturalism

The core of the anti-veiling discourse lies within notions of choice and agency- constructs of the Liberalist paradigm. The fundamental postulates under liberalism are that man is rational and autonomous- capable of decision making and the pursuit of his/her own interest. (Down, 2011). With reference to the Hijab, the contention is that it is not a matter of choice but an inherent lack of one- if the burqa signifies submission, then logic dictates that those who subscribe to it lack agency (Down, 2011). Bilge (2010) notes: *"the eviction of veiled women from the realm of agency is achieved through a syllogism: Agency involves free will; no woman freely chooses to wear the veil because it is oppressive to women; thus veiled women have no agency."*

The most virulent critique of the liberalist choice argument is offered by the Multiculturalist paradigm. This perspective constructs individuals as born involuntarily into groups of– family, ethnicity, and state, deeming it impossible for an individual to make choices in abstraction from culture. (Down, 2011). As Kymlicka (1995) aptly concludes in his book *'Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of*

Minority Rights'- culture forms the context of choice. Multiculturalism also critiques liberalism stating that institutions are not neutral but embody values and norms of a culture, and can have a discriminatory effect on those that lie outside that culture in the form of a differentiated citizenship (Down, 2011). It can be argued that this singular focus on gender- equated with rights and multiculturalism equated with culture places these two theories as oppositional to one another.

The Multi-Faceted Veil

The veil has no singular meaning but is multifaceted with variances across borders. Research dictates that the Hijab has a dualistic connotation where it has been the source of identity, expression and personhood for women but also turns oppressive, controlling women's sexuality and mobility (Posetti, 2006). What is lacking in the debate is the opinion of women- both those that veil and those who choose not to. The feminist discourse accords women visibility- as substantiated by Sandra Harding's Standpoint theory (2004) - drawing on the importance of lived experiences and constructing the subject of study as the primary source of knowledge.

Reasons for wearing the Hijab are variegated, diverse and context specific. Some of these reasons evident across a plethora of research studies are-: to affirm religious identity as an informed choice, due to religious obligation and family pressure, to create a safe space and negotiate in public spaces, relieve burden of the male gaze and avoid sexism and commodification, to gain respect and oppose stereotypes and discrimination, as a symbol of protest and resistance (Dwyer, 1999; Read and Bartkowski, 2000; Williams & Vashi, 2007, Siraj, 2011, Dywer, 1999, cited by Bhowon & Bundhoo, 2016). For which specific reason women choose to veil may also be shaped by their minority/majority status, whether religious identity is threatened or not, national policies on ethnic diversity (Bhowon & Bundhoo, 2016).

The veil has become a subject of obsessive attention and extensive interpretation (Davary, 2009, cited by Williams, 2014). Scholars note that the contemporary control is one in which hegemonic notions about woman and Islam continues to be shaped by racism and ethnocentrism. Both compulsory veiling and bans rob women of their agency, ignoring the question of how women themselves choose and want to cloth themselves. As Lyon and Spini write (2004: 341, cited by Howard, 2012), 'the answer to one constraint (the religious obligation to wear the foulard [headscarf]) cannot be another constraint (the obligation not to wear it): an effective process of liberation cannot be based on a prohibition [their emphasis]' (Bracke & Fadil, 2012).

Muslim identity has mostly been studied in the context of immigrant minorities and in Western contexts where their identity may be threatened by the majority group but much less in multicultural contexts where Muslims are an unthreatened minority group (Cited by Williams, 2014). It is within this paucity of exploration and study that I root my research within the discourse.

Methodology

The purpose of the study is to explore- the nature of identity politics of Muslim women in relation to the cultural practice of veiling (Hijab). The second question posed is whether the practice of veiling perceived as an assertion of cultural identity and hence as an act of empowerment or is it regarded as a tool of coercion and violence? The research objectives aim to-

- Understand the practice of veiling in the Muslim community. Is it a religious, socio-cultural or gender construct?

- Determine the impact of veiling on familial relationships, mobility of women and stigmatization.

- Study perceptions of Muslim women on the politicization of the Hijab in the contemporary world.

This research study uses the phenomenological qualitative mode of enquiry where my analytical thrust remains focused on the narratives of my participants, as active producers of a discourse on critical veiling by way of lived engagements with their own Islamic veiling practices. The study is rooted within the liberalist-multicultural feminist frameworks constituting a dialogue between the two paradigms. This study documented & collated narratives of 53 participants through in- depth interviews that were semi-structured in nature. The interviews were conducted across a 2 month period during November-December 2017. The sample was drawn purposively and remained criterion based initially, later evolving into snowball sampling. I picked respondents that came from all walks of life to incorporate how socio-cultural factors affect one's decision making and word view. There was diversity in socio-cultural factors of age, education, income and work, marital status, etc coupled with a variance in the status of veiling within the sample. The women of high income households were mostly married and with kids, some migrated from other cities due to their husbands work. A large number of these women were either teachers working at educational institutes or housewives. Some of the higher income women had lived in Saudi during their childhood and were thus able to bring forth new insights. The women from lower income households were domestic workers, migrant workers, aayas in schools and even younger women who had dropped out from elementary education, preparing to re-give their exam. Given below in the table is a concise overview of the participants and their socio-cultural background. The backdrop of this research study is contemporary Hyderabad and interviews were conducted across the following locales- Banjara Hills, Old City, Jubilee Hills, Gachibowli, Borabanda, Shaikpet, Towlichowki and Abids. Focus group discussions and observational learning techniques were also used during data collection.

Table 3.7: Participant Profiles

SNo	Variable and Determinants	Number of Participants
1.	Age -15-22 in age (adolescents) -22-40 in age -40-60+ in age	30 Participants (57%)
2.	Do they prescribe to veiling? Participants that veil Participants that do not veil	45% participants (85%) 8 participants (15%)
3.	Educational status Currently in School Currently at University/ College Completed Graduate degree and above Uneducated	25 participants (include drop outs) (47%) 9 Participants (17%) 16 participants (31%) 3 participants (5%)
4.	Employment status Employed Unemployed (have worked previously) Never been employed (students)	12 participants (23%) 25 participants (47%) 16 participants (30%)
5.	Marital status (no divorces or engaged participants) MarriedWith childrenWithout children Unmarried Widowed	18 Participants (34%) 14 (26%)4 (8%) 33 participants (62%) 2 participants (49%)
6.	Social Location Higher income households Lower income households	26 participants (49%) 27 participants (51%)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discursive construction of the Burqa as monolithically oppressive has remained the overarching perspective on ethnic veiling- overlooking the intricacies of Identity construction. The primary findings explored aspects of what the veil means to the participants - exploring their self concept and schemas, and how this act of veiling manifests in their everyday experiences-for better or worse. A thematic analysis was done to synthesize verbal clues and derive the following themes- Defining the

Veil, Reasons for Veiling, Social Determinants that influence women's decisions to veil, Multiple-meanings accorded to the veil (safety, mobility, equalizer, protection from commodification, assertion of religious identity), Reactions to the veil in Public spaces- discrimination and stigma, and lastly fixing the veil into the Islamic identity of the Muslim Woman.

The Politics Veiling: Constructing an Islamic Identity

The Muslim veil is an item of clothing that has been regarded as both **material and conceptual**. As a material object, the veil is a fabric which comes in different forms, and since the conjunction of Hijab does not specify "what to conceal with" – the veil has emerged as a site of interpretation and altercation moving beyond the monolithic black covering. Conceptually, the veil is the embodiment of modesty in dress, behavior and speech- a philosophy of life.

There also exists a rampant incongruity the meaning accorded to the veil – conceptually. Veiling amidst the participants was most often found to be in response to either transitioning from adolescence to adulthood or as an outcome of a significant life event such as marriage & pregnancy, migrating to a new city, protection from sexual violence and commodification of the female body, health reasons and religious awakening/pilgrimage. The specific veiling reasons adopted by women to veil are also shaped by their minority/majority position in society. Women from higher rungs of society made an informed choice to veil after thorough religious learning while uneducated women relied on their religious upbringing to construct their veiling ideology.

Social determinants that affect women's decision making and Islamic knowledge were also uncovered-identifying parents, mosques and personal tutors as the main sources of Islamic knowledge. The Islamic educators- *imams, muftis, malvis and madarsa's* played a crucial role in imparting this knowledge, but also emerged as the cause of patriarchal cultural distortion of the religious text- converting religious learnings into patriarchal compulsions and restrictions on women. The family on the other hand is tasked with the responsibility of socialization and gender patterning- impacting women's self concept and schematic constructs. The role of the mother was marked as crucial across all narratives. Here, we see an intersection of gender and religion where women emerge as bearers of culture making it her prerogative to pass this learning onto her children- specifically her daughter.

A relative number of participants admitted to veiling post marriage- not out of coercion- but choice. However one must note that these choices are made within the constraints that come with being inherently "female". This essentialist notion of reducing women to docile bodies needing protection and surveillance is the basic thread familial relations are built on. Thus, it important to note that covering/veiling and seeking protection have emerged as crucial markers of cultural norms that all women across class, caste, etc are expected to abide by. All girls are

taught to dress modestly, cover themselves when in public and stay away from the opposite sex. Most of the participants grew up covering their head with a dupatta or wearing a stole/scarf- hence the transition to veiling religiously did not lead to major adjustment issues.

Deconstructing the Veil: The Multifaceted Hijab

A large number of the participants acknowledge that Hijab is religiously sanctioned but has been culturally convoluted. The Quran asks women to cover themselves and men to lower their gaze-but does not prescribe a black cloth. Participants assert that the Hijab is respectability-to the self, to towards society and towards religion-where the veil is the embodiment of modesty in dress, behavior and speech-emerging as a philosophy of life. The data received in the interviews has been collated into the comprehensive taxonomy of- Hijab as Modesty, Hijab as Assertion of One's Identity, Hijab as Safety, Hijab as Mobility, Hijab as an Equalizer, Hijab as Protection from the Male Gaze, Hijab as Control of Sexuality, and Hijab as Convenience.

As an assertion of one's religious Identity the Hijab provides Muslim women visibility while protecting their identity. This visibility obtained has positive and negative implications for the women where they experience pride and experience a sense of in-group belonging, but also report exclusionary and differential treatment in public spaces and institutions. The participants admitted that the veil was an integral part of their religious identity but could not be conflated as the only marker of their personal identity. The Hijab is also the embodiment of modesty accompanied by undertones of moral policing. The participants define modesty as a rejection of societal beauty ideals constructing their own beauty narrative by wearing long, loose clothing, covering their head with headscarf.

The respondents were divided in their belief that the Hijab prevents sexual harassment- but most agreed that it significantly reduces such incidences. With improved safety and security the Hijab also paves way for improved mobility for Muslim women in public spaces–especially those from lower sections of the society and those traveling in public modes of transportation. The Hijab was also constructed as an Equalizer -where all women stand in equal regard despite discrepancies in their social standing, age, race, caste, etc. When veiled- each woman is a silhouetted figure devoid of identity- forcing a form of uniformity. The most interesting revelation made by the participants was that Hijab is a tool of sexual control. The participants asserted that it protected women from the threat of sexual violence, placing the onus of a "safe society" on the women –they must veil to prevent men from being "distracted". It is evident from the narratives that a large number of women have embraced this essentialist notion of women as sexual beings that are inferior and must be protected from the male libido.

Response to the Veil: Integrating Experiences of Muslim Women

In the context of rampant Islamophobia, the study confirms the phenomenon of "differentiated citizenship" (Kymlicka, 1995) – people from different cultures are treated differently than those individuals that lie within the majoritarian culture. The participants reported experiences of discrimination, stigma, Islamophobia and differential treatment but included instances of enhanced respectability. The core sites for mapping reactions were educational institutes, work spaces, public transport, cafes and eateries. Social relationships also emerged as crucial indicators of reactions with family, peer groups and colleagues being the primary sources of critical commentary. The reaction received from their peers and colleagues affirmed that there was an underlying assumption that they had been coerced into the veiling practice. The family members also expressed safety concerns due to the obvious black veil- asking the women to switch to more "neutral colors". All married participants shared the same experiences of being stereotyped into the submissive new bride being coerced into veiling- by her husband and in-laws. Reactions at educational institutes was dependant on the nature of the institution- Women reported to feeling "culturally marginalized" as Muslim minorities in schools, admitting that veiling- led to "others" polarizing them from the rest of the class. The participants acknowledge the need to remove the Hijab in certain situations to maintain a sense of equality- but stated that it cannot be imposed without rationale and abruptly by law.

Working women provided more vivid accounts of discrimination and stigma. The subtle and implicit discrimination Islamic women face at work does not arise from the veil as a threat ideology but from the orient-occident school of thought. The Hijabi woman's capabilities are questioned and she is treated as backward. The experiences agglomerated under this study show that this ideology is often dispelled through repeated social interaction with the veiled woman. While none of the participants were met with physical violence and abuse, discrimination was meted out in the form of bullying at schools, questioning women's abilities, verbal abuse and lewd remarks, sexual harassment on the street, denial of job opportunities. All veiled women had been subjected to Sexist and Islamophobic remarks. Here we observe the intersection of essentialist sex-roles with the oriental discourse- where Muslim women are not only regarded as soft spoken, demure, passive, but backward, submissive and culturally imprisoned. Al-Saji (2010) concludes is that bodies are not only differentiated across cultures but also deemed inferior-superior on the basis of pre-existing power hierarchies. Hence here, the veil not only emerges as marker of the Muslim identity but an explanation of its inferiority.

The narratives of the participants in this study have highlighted that backwardness and modernity are not static and tangible – in the veil, but are schemas individuals create and attribute to the veil. The Hijab doesn't automatically result in a transition from modernity to backwardness and vice versa- but is embedded in ideology.

The participants also discussed the trickledown effect the politicized veil in the media and state politics has had on their everyday experiences as a Hijab wearing Muslim woman. All participants were infuriated by the politics of extremities being imposed on women worldwide-stating that banning-compulsory veiling denies women their constitutional right to freedom, and robs them of a life of dignity. They attribute this to the pre-existing power hierarchy where the west in constructed as the knower and the East as objects of study- to be labeled. The second element highlighted across the interviews was that question of bodily integrity. Some of the educated participants discussed how religion has transformed from a system of faith to a tool of patriarchal control- where women have been forced to cover up under religious pretext.

Discussion and Policy Implications

The veil is more than a mere descriptive identity marker- being embedded in religion that infuses historically and culturally coded meanings into them- ontologically transforming it into power connotative markers. It emerges as a protective measure to negotiate and navigate within an inherently patriarchal society and is a crucial identity marker for women who practice Islam, but cannot be used as a yardstick to measure religiosity nor agency. The veil by itself is neither oppressive nor emancipatory but becomes so within the dynamic social landscape. Thus, the Hijab is a religious, cultural and gender construct- where it protects women from the patriarchal order while simultaneously acting as a tool of patriarchal control.

It is important to note that global policies that delve into extremities of compulsion and banning of the veil- both construct women as docile bodies to be controlled- denying women their rights and agency. This leads to the question of whether there exists a middle ground between liberal ideation and multiculturalist preservation. Perhaps, then, there is no way in this life-world to access that space beyond the veil. Perhaps the burden of identities we carry cannot be left behind, cannot be transcended. But if this brief foray into the multiple, multivalent critical engagements around veiling has engendered any insight, it is that we can, through diverse ways, transform this 'burden' of identity into a site for struggle: a struggle against imposed, reductionist identities; and a struggle towards identities that are fluid, interconnected, not demarcated from the Other but flowing into the Other, shifting, contextual, open to corrections, and which create possibilities of imagination and re-imagination. Can we then re-imagine veiling practices as not just ascribed or received, but rather as discursive exercises we engage with at multiple points in our lives, as opportunities for reflexivity? Can veils become the gears to drive forth our 'becoming', rather than demarcating our 'being'? Can we allow our religiosity, gender expectations, and social acceptance - to be shaken, broken, shattered, and reinvented – along with ourselves, our identities?

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