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Spring 5-1-2021

The Hijab in the Quran and its Effects on Muslim Women in the Western Society

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THE HIJAB IN THE QURAN AND ITS EFFECTS ON MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE
WESTERN SOCIETY

By

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

May 2021

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who guided and encouraged me throughout the year. Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

HEBA OMAR MARZOUK: The Hijab in the Quran and its Effects on Muslim Women in the Western Society (Under the direction of Dr. Theresa Starkey)

The purpose of this thesis is to present the contextualization of the hijab in the Quran, present the experiences of some Muslim women who wear the hijab, and analyze them through the frameworks of choice feminism and standpoint theory. This thesis consists of two main parts: the documentary and the thesis reflective writing. The writing portion is broken down into two parts: contextualization of the hijab and documentary analysis. The documentary is mostly made up of the responses from the three interviews that were conducted virtually through Zoom. The documentary analysis portion then analyzes the experiences of the three women, Alia Alshammari, Nadeen AlOstaz, and Yasmeen Sedeek, in relation to statistics and literature. The results I found were that, Muslim women who wear the hijab are following the commands of their religion and should have the freedom of choice to dress the way they want based on their choice of faith. Moreover, due to their choice, there is a high potential for them to experience forms of discrimination and various stereotypes. Finally, stereotypes and inaccuracies arise partly due to the low level of knowledge on the subject of the hijab in the Western society which, in turn, can lead to negative effects on the Muhajabat's lives.

PREFACE

The basis for this research originally stemmed from my identity as a Muslim woman who is a part of the American society and also a Muhajaba. With all the incidences that are going on around the world, currently and in the past, and with the gap in research that I found on the topic of hijab, I decided to choose this topic for my thesis project. I wanted to shed light on this Islamic symbol that is clearly defined in main Islamic scriptures such as the Quran. Furthermore, I wanted to provide different standpoints and experiences of Muslim Muhajabat who are living in the western society, such as America, and showcase their responses in a documentary format. It is my passion to not only explore the contextualization of the hijab in Islam but also look through this topic using feminist approaches such as choice feminism and the standpoint theory.

In truth, I could not have achieved my current level of success without a strong support group. First of all, my thesis advisor, Dr. Theresa Starkey and Dr. Carrie Smith, who supported me with patience and guidance throughout the writing process. And secondly, the participants who volunteered to be a part of my documentary, each of whom has provided some of their experiences as Muhajabat in their community. Thank you all for your unwavering support.

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<u>Introduction</u>

Since the September 11th terrorist attacks, the Muslim community in the United States has experienced an increasing level of social and religious scrutiny. This unfortunate incident has dramatically changed the way the American society views Muslims, especially Muslim women, who wear the hijab (Muhajaba) in public.

The term hijab—" حجاب " means a cover, curtain or screen. It is not a technical term used in Islamic jurisprudence for the dress code of women. The term used in Islamic jurisprudence that denotes the conduct of unrelated men and women towards one another, and their dress code, is "satr or satir— الساتر , ستر ". In the last two decades however, the Muslims in the west, as well as the media, use the term "hijab" to define the headdress and the overall clothing of Muslim women. It is in this latter meaning —headdress as well as the overall clothing— that I will be using the term "hijab" in this thesis. Islam has strongly emphasized the concept of decency and modesty in the interaction between members of the opposite sex. Dress code is part of that overall teaching. There are two verses in the Quran in which Almighty Allah talks about the issue of decency and hijab as defined earlier.

Unfortunately, Muslim women who wear the hijab have experienced various instances of discrimination including people ignoring them, disrespecting them, and treating them uncomfortably. A unique aspect of Muslim women in the US is that they not only confront the stigma of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, but that which is attached to Islamic dress as well. Despite some of these problems, however, the experiences of Muslim women in the United States remains one of the least researched topics in sociology.[1]

The primary purpose of this thesis is to contextualize the hijab in the main Islamic scripture, the Quran. Moreover, to analyze the experience of Muslim Muhajabat, women who wear the hijab, and the effect of the hijab on their educational and career goals. The hijab is a Fard, a religious obligation, that has been directly referenced in the Quran, and also, further explained in the Sunnah, sayings and examples of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.). Furthermore, I argue that the stigmatization of the hijab in the United States, especially after 9/11 events, has had a wide range of negative effects on the Muslim community, especially for the Muhajabat. I also argue that some Muhajabat do encounter some level of negative activities while they are seeking their educational and career goals.

In my research, I have found that many scholars such Yvonne Haddad in his journal article The Post-9/11 "Hijab" as an Icon published by Oxford University Press,[2] Rachel Droogsma in her research article Redefining Hijab: American Muslim Women's Standpoints on Veiling, [3] and Sayyid Rizvi in his article Hijab, The Muslim Women's Dress, Islamic or Cultural,[4] opened up a very important conversation about the hijab, however, it seems like crucial and necessary information is missing or hasn't been elucidated enough such as the importance of understanding the historical context of Islam and textual analysis of the Quran. This deeper understanding of the impact of the hijab can broaden the knowledge and the acceptance of the Muhajabat.

As a young Muslim woman who wears the hijab, I have personal experience of being a Muhajaba myself. In this thesis, I will be using 2 main frameworks as lens to look through this topic. The first framework I will be using is the feminist Standpoint Theory which is argued by Dorothy Smith, a contemporary feminist theorist, and coined by Sandra Harding.[5] As a methodology, I use it as a method of research because I have an insider's perspective or standpoint as a Muhajaba. Through this fact, I was able to connect with the participants, who are a part of the

second part of this thesis project, and understand their point of views as Muhajabat. The theory as an epistemology consists of three main principles: (1) Knowledge is socially situated, (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized, and (3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized. According to feminist standpoint theories, the process of achieving knowledge begins when standpoints begin to emerge. They emerge when those who are marginalized and relatively invisible from the vantage point of the epistemically privileged become conscious of their social situation with respect to socio-political power and oppression, and begin to find a voice. It is no historical accident that feminist standpoint theory emerged in academic discourses more or less contemporaneously with the feminist consciousness movement within feminist activism.[5]

The second framework I chose to implement in my thesis is Choice Feminism. It was coined by Linda Hirshman.[6] It resulted from the third wave feminism to dismantle misconceptions of the practice and to argue that freedom is not simply the capacity to make individual choices, but rather the ability to determine one's own life path.[7] Choosing to wear the hijab is a personal decision that many Muslim women make at different points in their lives. Through this theory, they gain agency and power due to choosing how they want to appear and identify as part of society. Moreover, it gives them control over their bodies as to what to display and what to keep private. But, unfortunately, sometimes this ideology is not openly accepted in some areas of the world especially in the Western regions.

In the West, the veil so dominates public perceptions of Muslim women who are wearing the hijab who have tended to go unnoticed. Focusing on Great Britain, showcasing London along with trips to the Continent and Internet excursions, Emma Tarlo examines dress biographies,

fashion geographies, and shopping venues. Her goal is to demonstrate how Muslim women have approached covering in the post-9/11 urban situation, which has been marked by accentuated public and media hostility to women's dressed bodies.[8] Tarlo discusses how women choose many different routes from a wide cultural repertoire of possible ways of being Muslim in London. The post-9/11 sartorial map of London has no fixed category either for Muslim women or for religious dress, although the press and the media continue to reproduce stereotypes to that effect. Confronting such stereotypes, Tarlo notes the diversity of Muslim perspectives and experiences, arguing that women's increasing visibility through dress practice is a result of their deliberate search for identity, faith, and politics.[9] She does a remarkable job at demonstrating that young cosmopolitan Muslims do not see a tension between "fashionable" and "Islamic," and that rather such dress practices feed on one another with significant local variations.[8] This is a valuable example of how choice feminism could be implemented to support and guide women to make their own choices based on their own beliefs and demands to take control over their lives and their bodies.

Chapter 1:

History of Islam and the Quran

Islam emerged during the seventh century in Mecca, modern-day Saudi Arabia, and today, it is the second largest monotheistic religion in the world with a following of over 1.9 billion people found around the globe.[10] The term Islam is derived from the Arabic root s-l-m, which means "submission" or "peace." Muslims are those who surrender to God's will or law, rendering them at peace with themselves and with God. The center and foundation of Islam is God, who is called Allah, or "the God." Allah is the all-powerful and all-knowing creator, sustainer, and judge of the universe. The absolute monotheism of Islam is preserved in the doctrine of unity (tawhid) and

sovereignty ("ruler" or "lord") of God that dominates Islamic belief and practice. As God is one, His rule and will or laws are comprehensive, extending to all creatures and in all aspects of life.[11]

One way is through the Islamic scripture, the Quran, which was revealed by Allah to the Prophet Mohamed in the seventh century. Muslims believe it was revealed verbatim: not a single letter or word has changed since it was first revealed to Prophet Mohamed. The Quran explains all aspects of human existence, including matters of doctrine, social organization, and legislation. Muslims believe that their prospectus is the Quran. To further establish the essence of the catalog analogy, we can take a look at a parallel from the 19th century popular culture such as etiquette manuals. These manuals and advice books were written and published to prescribe proper behavior for men and women at every stage of their lives. An example of this includes the *How to behave: a pocket manual of etiquette, and guide to correct personal habits* published by the Walter Scott Publishing Co. LTD in 1980. [12] This manual focuses on giving instructions on how to dress, speak, be a good wife, be a good mother, and many other rules and guidelines to draw a path that these middle-class women should follow.

In much the same way women in the 19th century used etiquette manuals to reflect on what to do in their lives from all sorts of perspectives, Muslims not only use the Quran as a book of guidance but also the Sunnah (Hadith). The practitioner can reflect on how to wear the hijab, what forms of it are acceptable, and how to interact while wearing it, for example. All these and many more questions are answered through the experiences of the Prophet Mohamed and the Sahaba (his friends and followers) during his lifetime. All this information is documented in the Sunnah to provide us with practical real-life examples of practitioners and their different experiences doing various things, including wearing the hijab. A verse from the Surah Al-Nahl distinctly identifies the Sunnah and its purpose:

"وَأَنزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ"

And We have revealed to you (O Muhammad) the Reminder (i.e., the Quran) so that you may clarify to the people what has been revealed to them, and so that they may reflect." (16:44)

Chapter 2:

Contextualization of the Hijab

The *hijab* is an integral part of everyday appearance and life of most Muslim women all over the world. As Karen Sternheimer, a sociologist and an author at the University of Southern Carolina, stated, "Clothing is profoundly social -- it reflects culture, it might make a statement about a subculture we identify with, about our economic status, about gender, and about our sense of self. Even if we are not consciously making choices to impress others or to fit in with a group, the clothing options available to us at any given time are produced in a social, cultural, and economic context. For instance, wearing a headscarf can reflect our religious beliefs, relations of gender and power, the temperature, and fashion trends.

Oftentimes western feminism can be criticized for slipping into third world women tropes, whereas to the practitioner the hijab represents personal choice and religious belief. It has multiple interpretations as it is not just a scarf, it is much more than a piece of cloth. The general stereotype associated with *hijab,* held by first and second wave feminists, is seclusion of Muslim women and restricting them from leading an independent life separate from their male relatives.[13] Feminist

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Hadith from Sahih Bukhari volume 1: book 4: hadith 148 about the hijab: "Narrated 'Aisha: The wives of the Prophet used to go to Al-Manasi, a vast open place (near Baqia at Medina) to answer the call of nature at night. 'Umar used to say to the Prophet "Let your wives be veiled," but Allah's Apostle did not do so. One night Sauda bint Zam'a the wife of the Prophet went out at 'Isha' time and she was a tall lady. 'Umar addressed her and said, "I have recognized you, O Sauda." He said so, as he desired eagerly that the verses of Al-Hijab (the observing of veils by the Muslim women) may be revealed. So Allah revealed the verses of "Al-Hijab"."

movements, such as the "market feminism" that resulted from the second wave movements, embrace the equation that "modern' equals women's rights, the Judeo-Christian heritage, and democracy, while 'traditional' equals patriarchal suppression of women's rights, the Islamic heritage, and terrorism."[14] This scholarship fails to provide women with basic rights, such as the right to choose their appearance and identity. The third wave feminism, which began in the early 1990s, criticized these early thoughts from the first and second waves, and one of the principles that was argued was for the exclusion of the marginalization of the minority groups, such as Muslim Muhajabat. As a young lady who wears the hijab and many examples like me, we define the Hijab as liberating since it allows us to resist the constraints placed upon us as women in America. Discourse structures all social positions, and Muslim women's unique perspectives encourage them to reflect critically on the manner in which Muslims, and Muhajabat in particular, are defined in American society. [15]

The First Verse

The first verse in the Quran where the hijab is mentioned is verse 30 of chapter 24, which is also known as Surah an-Nur (the Light). In this ayah (verse), Allah commands Prophet Muhammad as follows:

"قل لِلْمُؤْمِنِيْنَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوْجَهُمْ ذَلِكَ أَزْكَى لَهُمْ"

"Say to the believing men that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them."

This is a command to Muslim men that they should not lustfully look at women (other than their own wives); and in order to prevent any possibility of temptation, they are required to cast their glances downwards. This is known as "hijab of the eyes".

Then in the next verse (ayah 31), Allah commands the Prophet to address the women:

"وَقل لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَ يَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوْجَهُنَّ"

"Say to the believing women that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste) …"

This is a similar command as given to the men in the previous verse regarding "hijab of the eyes." This hijab of eyes is similar to the teaching of Jesus where he says, "You have heard that it was said by them of old time, you shall not commit adultery. But I say unto you, that whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart."[16] So if you see a Muslim casting his/her eyes downwards when he/she is talking to a member of opposite sex, this should not be considered as rude or an indication of lack of confidence — he/she is just abiding by the Quran as well as Biblical teaching.

After the "hijab of the eyes," came the order describing the dress code for women:

"ولا يُبْدِيْنَ زِيْنَتَهُنَّ إِلاَّ مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَىَ جُيُوْبِهِنَّ"

"and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms…"

Khumur خُمُرٌ is plural of khimar خِمَارٌ, the veil covering the head. This translation can be seen in Arabic dictionaries like Lisanu l-Arab, Majmau l-Bahrayn or al-Munjid.

Al-Munjid, which is the most popular dictionary in the Arab world, defines al-khimar as "something with which a woman conceals her head — ما تغطى به المرأة رأسها." Moreover, Fakhru 'd-Din al-Turayhi in Majmau l-Bahrayn (which is a dictionary of Quranic and Hadith terms that is commonly used by scholars) defines al-khimar as a "scarf and it is known as such because the head

is covered with it."[17] So the word khimar, by definition, means a piece of cloth that covers the head.

According to the commentators of the Quran, the women of Medina in the pre-Islamic era used to put their khumur over the head with the two ends tucked behind and tied at the back of the neck, in the process exposing their ears and neck. By saying, "place the khumur over the bosoms," the Almighty Allah ordered the women to let the two ends of their headgear extend onto their bosoms so that they conceal their ears, the neck, and the upper part of the bosom, also as mentioned in Ar-Razi, at-Tafsiru 'l-Kabir.

This is confirmed by the way the Muslim women of the Prophet's era understood this commandment of the Almighty Allah. The Sunni sources quote Ummu 'l-mu'minin 'A'isha, the Prophet's wife, as follows: "I have not seen women better than those of al-Ansar (the inhabitants of Medina): when this verse was revealed, all of them got hold of their aprons, tore them apart, and used them to cover their heads..."[18]

The meaning of khimar and the context in which the verse was revealed clearly talks about concealing the head and then using the loose ends of the scarf to conceal the neck and the bosom. Finally, the verse goes on to give the list of the mahram – male family members in whose presence the hijab is not required, such as the husband, the father, the father-in-law, the son(s), and others as listed in the verse.

The Second Verse

In Chapter 33, which is also known as Surah al-Ahzab, ayah (verse) 59, Allah gives the following command to Prophet Muhammad:

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لأَزْوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءِ الْمُؤْمِنِيْنَ يُدْنِيْنَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلاَبِيْبِهِنَّ"

"O Prophet! Say to your wives, your daughters, and the women of the believers that: they should let down upon themselves their jalabib."

Jalabib جَلَابِيْبٌ is the plural of jilbab جِلْبَابٌ, which means a loose outer garment as defined in Arabic dictionaries such as Lisanu l-Arab, Majma Al-Bahrayn or al-Munjid.

Al-Munjid, for instance, defines jilbab as "the shirt or a wide dress—الواسع الثوب أو القميص." While al-Turayhi, in Majmau l-Bahrayn, defines it as "a wide dress, wider than the scarf and shorter than a robe that a woman puts upon her head and lets it down on her bosom."[18] This means that the Islamic dress code for women does not only consist of a scarf that covers the head, the neck and the bosom; it also includes the overall dress that should be long and loose.

As presented before, after the Quran, the *hadith* is the most revered Islamic text. These are the sayings of the Prophet later recorded by historians after a rigorous verification process. The 6 most referenced collections of *hadith* are by Bukhari, Muslim, Sunan ibn Sahih, Sunan Ibn-e-Majah, Sunan Abu Dawood, Mishkat Shareef and Tirmidhi. When it comes to the hijab, the *hadith* mostly tells the women to avoid flashy clothing or clothing that is too thin or revealing, and from which a woman's body can be seen through. Since many *ahadith* talk about ambiguities in cases of covering, this suggests that women were already covering at the time and, hence, it wasn't necessary to state the obvious and talk about the existing norms of the society.[19] This theory also seems to be supported by the above-mentioned verse where women are told to pull their *khimars* to cover their chests (Quran 24:31).[1]

In conclusion, the purpose and the origin of the hijab emerged from the Quran, the main Islamic scripture, and the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. This command represents one of the integral parts of the identity of Muslim women because it acts as an identifier

and as a symbol of Islam anywhere in the world. Along with the standpoint theory, choice feminism was a lens that was used, in this thesis project, to view the choices of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab. Their decision acts as an identifier of their Islamic identity. Moreover, it embodies their agency as they are choosing to be distinct from other members in the society through their dress.

Chapter 3:

Documentary Analysis

To put all the important topics discussed in the first half of this writing such as choice feminism, standpoint theory, and the hijab in real life context, interviews were done with three different women and then further made into a documentary. These women are not only Muhajabat, but they are also current members of the University of Mississippi as undergraduate or graduate students. I connected with these women through the Oxford Muslim Community and through the different forms of communication that tied us virtually through social media. The snowball sampling method was used where existing study subjects recruited future subjects among their acquaintances. The first lady interviewed was Nadeen AlOstaz, an 18-year-old undergraduate freshman who decided to wear the hijab as a senior in high school. The second was Alia Alshammari, a PhD candidate in the School of Pharmacy. She has been wearing the hijab since she was 13 years old. The third woman was Yasmeen Sedeek, a graduate student and an Arabic instructor at the University of Mississippi. She has been wearing the hijab since she was 20 years old. All three participants were interviewed, after the approval of the University IRB, through the virtual application, Zoom, on different days of the month of June of this year. Each interview lasted around 15-20 minutes and all participants were asked the same 5 questions:

1. At what age and time did you decide to wear the hijab and what was the reasoning behind wearing it?

2. How was your experience like on campus and in the larger community as a Muhajaba?

3. Do you think that people in the west have enough knowledge about the hijab (what it is and why do Muslim women wear it)? Why?

4. What do you think could possibly facilitate the acceptance of the Muhajabat in the western society and change some of the misconceptions that they might have?

5. Have you ever encountered obstacles or hardships while seeking your educational/career goals in America? If so, when and how did it take place?

The responses collected from all the interviews were combined into a documentary that accompanies this reflective writing section of this thesis. Additionally, this segment is also dedicated to analyze, through different feminist frameworks, the similarities and differences between the experiences of different Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab in a Western society. Furthermore, what effect the hijab has on their lives generally and as being members of an academic institute: The University of Mississippi. My expectations are that Muslim Muhajabat would feel a level of differentiation in terms of treatment in comparison to other members of the society. Moreover, I hypothesize a positive correlation between the involvement of the Muhajabat in their societies and the chance of negative experiences that they could potentially face.

The Hijab defines Islamic Identity

Alia, Nadeen, and Yasmeen all agreed that the central motive behind choosing to wear the hijab is faith. All three participants chose to become Muhajabat at different ages and in three different countries. Nadeen AlOstaz, at the time as a student at Oxford High School, spent much

time researching and building her knowledge basis on the topic of hijab to be certain about her choice of wearing it. As she described in the documentary, she stated that:

"Sophomore year something happened and I started getting closer to Allah (swt) (god) and had tests after tests after tests, up until senior year. I kept getting pulled closer and closer and I started thinking about it more seriously. I went to my mom and told her that I wanted to wear it, she told me to keep on researching about it just to make sure that I am certain of it. In my senior year, a week before December 16th, I was like I want to wear it now."

Yasmeen Sedeek had a similar experience as Nadeen. She decided to wear the hijab at age 23 while she was living in Egypt. She described the action as being "for the sake of god with no outside pressures such as family." Although Alia Alshammari described the hijab as an "Islamic identity" for her and that it comes from her faith, she had a different experience due to her background coming from Saudi Arabia. She described how they were trained as girls to cover up and "be prepared to become adults (after puberty)". Cultural and family influence was present at the beginning of her journey when she was younger, as she started wearing the hijab at the age of 13. She further described how during the time period she grew up in, it was a cultural norm for all the girls to cover up and wear the hijab. But as she further elaborated "now it is a choice for them" and that everyone now has the complete freedom to choose for themselves. She herself represents one of those women who chooses to wear the hijab as a part of her identity as she lives now in the United States.

The decisions of these women to wear the hijab based on their personal choices present relevant applications of *Choice Feminism*. Through the lens of this individualistic feminist approach, it can be observed that each woman made her own decision based on her free will and

choice. This form of feminism also encourages women to embrace the opportunities she has in life and to see the choices that she makes as justified and always politically accepted. This scheme supports the decision of these Muslim women to make their decision to wear the hijab because it abstains from judgements and includes all women regardless of their choices.

Furthermore, through the standpoint theory, it is important to identify the marginalized group that is being discussed in this project. The population of Muslims around the world vary greatly depending on the region. The Middle East-North Africa region has the highest concentration of Muslims of any region of the world: 93% of its approximately 341 million inhabitants are Muslim, compared with 30% in sub-Saharan Africa and 24% in the Asia-Pacific region.[20] In the west, Muslims are considered a minority group because in major western countries like the United States, for example, they only represent 1.1% of the total population according to Pew Research.[21] Thus, it is important to analyze the perspectives of the members of these marginalized groups to further understand and build knowledge basis on the topic of the hijab. As stated in the Standpoint theory, the experiences of individuals should be the starting point of knowledge production.

Experiences as Muhajabat

Most of the interviewees, such as Nadeen and Yasmeen, had similar experiences in terms of academics and how people interacted with them on campus. As Yasmeen voiced:

"Fortunately, I don't have difficulties, especially around the students on campus. They are kind of aware of the differences and accept it. But in the larger community, I sometimes find some, I don't like to say discrimination, but it's some of the older generations, they

look down sometimes on us as women who wear the hijab, especially as they are not talking

to us or anything."

Additionally, Nadeen set forth her experience as follows:

"For the large part, I have noticed people act normally with me, how they normally would,

it is just like a matter of who you meet. Some people are friendly when you see them and

they are like good morning, and some people are more closed off, they don't want to talk."

As it has been already brushed upon with these two women's experiences, one of the biggest

challenges that all three women, Alia, Yasmeen, and Nadeen, agreed upon was the feeling of

isolation. These women described it as being "ignored," "closed off," and "isolated." Alia

described what she experienced as a graduate student on campus:

"I think that being isolated as a consequence of your identity, your appearance, or because

you are carrying your own beliefs around campus, it's not really the best academic

experience. People think that just because we are covered, we are not allowed to have any

sort of interaction with others, and this is not true. Some professors, and it is a gesture of

respect, they try to avoid talking to us, spending time with us, they try to limit our interaction

with them because they think that we are not allowed as females to have interaction, or talk,

or to speak. People think that because they are not aware of our background and our beliefs.

We want people to interact with us just like any other figure [in the society]."

While Alia is a graduate student, she is also employed at a local hospital. She described her

experience of her first day working there as follows:

"It wasn't really funny when someone brought like a racist, a really racist joke about me as

a Muslim coming and working in a hospital and that was really horrible experience and he

said, Jim, why are you bringing someone who is a terrorist to work in this place. Yeah, I didn't like that and, of course I know it was a really bad joke, but I didn't like the high tolerance of racist jokes on Muslims."

Statistics show that after 9/11, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) saw a 250% increase in cases of religion-based discrimination against Muslims.[22] Many might think that these data were collected after 9/11 events and that was 19 years ago, so everything should be composed now. But, statistics show that the number of assaults against Muslims in the United States rose significantly between 2015 and 2016, easily surpassing the modern peak reached in 2001, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of new hate crimes statistics from the FBI. In 2016, there were 127 reported victims of aggravated or simple assault, compared with 91 the year before and 93 in 2001.[22] However, assaults are not the only form of hate crimes carried out against Muslims. The most common is intimidation, which is defined as reasonable fear of bodily harm. Anti-Muslim intimidation also increased in 2016, with 144 reported victims, compared with 120 the previous year. These numbers, however, are still dwarfed by the 296 victims of anti-Muslim intimidation in 2001.[23] These statistics, since they don't encompass data all the way through 2020, is considered an incomplete snapshot that is nonetheless revealing of what some Muslims have been and are going through in their daily lives while living in the US.

Although all the participants didn't mention that they have experienced hate crimes, as described by the statistics, it is important to take into consideration that limitation that is present in this thesis project due to the global changes that resulted from the Coronavirus. So, if the number of participants was higher, there could have been a better chance for some to have had a personal experience of a hate crime, for example. Nonetheless, the participants in this thesis provide their

personal experiences that do contain some levels of differentiation of treatment such as verbal discrimination, for instance.

The hijab is an example of a choice that, not only fulfills the free will of individuals, but also displays their ability to determine their life path. Sometimes, however, there are negative consequences that accompany that choice. Muhajabat like Alia, for example, sometimes wish that they can be who they are without getting judged for it: "Sometimes I wish that I could be Muslim and cover without showing that all the time." According to Pew Research center, in a survey conducted in 2017, half of Muslim Americans say it has become harder to be Muslim in the U.S. in recent years. And 48% say they have experienced at least one incident of discrimination in the past 12 months.[24] Even though not all the women in this study faced direct hate crimes or physical acts of discrimination, it can be inferred that each woman, depending on her level of interaction with others in the society, can end up with different experiences due to her choice of showcasing her Islamic identity.

Accurate Knowledge on the Hijab and Islam

Western identity, more specifically the American identity, calls for inclusiveness and the freedom of religion and expression through the first amendment of the United States constitution. However, many marginalized groups such as Muslim women, who choose to wear the hijab in this society, face a lot of negativity and backlash for showcasing their distinct identity. Moreover, profuse amounts of misconceptions penetrated the American society over the past decades, especially following the events of September 11, largely through the media. These stereotypes also come from the lack of cultural and religious exposure; therefore, lack of information.[25]

To understand where the lack of knowledge might be resulting from, the Standpoint theory, as an epistemology, could be used to work through the challenges, stigmatizations, or misconceptions articulated by the media in the aftermath of 9/11, for example. It further depicts how experiences of individuals should be the starting point of knowledge production. Furthermore, it illustrates how the social group that gets the chance to define the important problematics, assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses of a certain controversy will end up leaving its social fingerprints on the picture of the world. That's due to the fact that no one has a complete view of the social hierarchy. Thus, this feminist theory suggests that the process of achieving knowledge initiates when standpoints begin to emerge.

For instance, the standpoint of the media on the topic of hijab has become a major influence on the American perception of this phenomenon. Generally, what the media has to say influences what the general public perceives and enacts. Some news outlets, such Fox News, spread sentiments of negativity towards Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab. One of its hosts, Jeanie Pirro, made Islamophobic comments about congresswoman Ilhan Omar's hijab live on tv.[26] This was just one example out of thousands of reporters, journalists, and social media influencers who have identified the veil with "Islamic militancy, extremism, jihadism, and oppression of women."[2] Unfortunately for many Americans, their main source of knowledge about Muslim women comes from some of these media outlets. Due to this fact, many Muslim Muhajabat, who represent a visible part of society, end up facing these misinformed individuals in their everyday lives. This standpoint represents one of the outsider's perspective on this topic and also showcases how power is centralized in the upper hierarchy of the society, politically for example, far away from the marginalized groups. Thus, they end up partly oppressed and displayed through the perception of that upper hand power such as the media.

On another note, Nadeen, when asked about possible misconceptions that she found when interacting with other members of the society, recognized a very original and important piece of information about the presence of the hijab in many different religions and not just Islam:

"One thing I thought of was that a lot of people don't realize is that a lot of religions, it's not just Islam, a lot of them have the idea of the head covering. Islam specifically tells us how to cover, how to cover more modestly, and in Surah El-Nour, it says Khimar, and a lot of people think, some Muslims even says this, that the hijab is not mandatory and that it is something that is just pushed on culturally. But the Khimar is a head covering that and, in the verse, it says to bring the head covering forward, so you cover your chest as well. So, it's not just a matter of the "head" covering, meaning that there was a "head" covering beforehand. So, it is not something that Islam just introduced."

Christianity and Judaism, as examples, include the idea of the head covering and modesty. According to Rabbi Dr. Menachem M. Brayer, Professor of Biblical Literature at Yeshiva University, in his book, *The Jewish woman in Rabbinic literature*, describes how it was the custom of Jewish women to go out in public with a head covering which, sometimes, even covered the whole face leaving just one eye free.[27] And in Christianity, St. Paul in the New Testament made these statements about the veil: "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head - it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his

head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head" (I Corinthians 11:3-10)."[27]

It is clear that Islam didn't come up with the concepts of modesty and covering up. Other religions, that came about way before Islam, also encompass these ideas and command it's followers with similar commands to those in Islam. So, the misunderstanding that some people possess about how Islam is the only religion that commands followers to cover up is not accurate. Just because Muslim Muhajabat showcase their modesty doesn't mean that they are extremists or don't have the "freedom" that others have. It just means that they chose to follow the commands of the religion that they accepted.

Likewise, a continuation to the preceding misinterpretation, some people think that just because a woman chooses to wear the hijab and become more modest, that means that she wants to "isolate" herself and not interact with other members of the society. From the standpoint of a Muhajaba, Yasmeen, she explains how she is able to do whatever she wants while she is wearing her hijab just like any other member of the society:

"I can do everything and anything while I am putting my hijab on. I have fun, I teach at the University, I am a graduate student, I practice everything in my daily life while I am putting my hijab on. I don't find it an obstacle to me."

Yasmeen's personal life, as she narrated, can give us a hint of what a Muhajaba feels she can do while embodying her Islamic identity. She is a graduate student and an Arabic instructor at the University of Mississippi. She doesn't find the hijab "oppressive" or "dictatorial" over her

daily life. Yasmeen and many other Muhajabat can project their personal experiences to those who have different standpoints or perceptions about the hijab. And also, for those who try to convince the public that their choices are acts of upper hand authority and enslavement. Some western feminists, such as Mona Eltahawy, believe that the hijab should be banned because women should have the right to have complete "freedom" like men in dressing up equally with no authority or control. This fact provides a paradox to the choice feminism framework because it goes against the women who want to make the choice to wear the hijab. It actually enacts oppression and control over their personal choices of dress.

Many theories of feminism become ironic especially as they have developed through the many waves over the decades. This has caused a great deal of controversy and disputation over the topic of feminism and has caused a lot of animosity and enmity towards the feminists themselves. Thus, I chose to view the experiences of the participants' standpoints through choice feminism, which I believe is a valuable part of feminism that emerged in the 1990s. That is due to the fact that it grants each woman the power to make her own choices based on what she wants and not anyone else. This, in turn, grants her the agency and recognition she deserves as an equal part of society.

Finally, another huge misconception that a great number of people have about the hijab is that it is a "cultural" phenomenon. Thus, if someone chooses to wear the hijab, then they are more than likely from the Middle East and that they are obliged to wear it because it is pushed on them culturally as Yasmeen and Nadeen indicated in their responses. As of 2010, there were an estimated 1.6 billion Muslims around the world, making Islam the world's second-largest religious tradition after Christianity. And although many people, especially in the United States, may associate Islam with countries in the Middle East or North Africa, nearly two-thirds (62%) of

Muslims live in the Asia-Pacific region, according to the Pew Research Center analysis. In fact, more Muslims live in India and Pakistan (344 million combined) than in the entire Middle East-North Africa region (317 million).[20] Therefore, the misconception that, if a Muslim woman wears the hijab, then she is from the Middle East is totally imprecise because these statistics prove that there is little to no correlation between geography and being a Muslim Muhajaba. It actually proves the accuracy of the opposition of what is mostly misinterpreted. The largest Muslim population is in the Asian-Pacific countries not the Middle East. This data also supports the fact stated earlier in that each individual, especially Muslim women, should have the right to make their own choices without deceptive assumptions about her ethnicity, background, and nationality.

It is critical to consider all the possible standpoints when discussing a certain topic. Each standpoint represents a different point of view and each should be taken into consideration to get a clearer picture of the central topic such as the hijab. The standpoints of the subordinated groups displayed in this project provide insight on personal experiences of several women in the Western society as Muhajabat. So, through this documentary analysis, we were able to take a closer look at some of their experiences and dive into the topic of hijab through two feminist frameworks: standpoint theory and choice feminism.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to discuss the presence of the hijab in the Quran, and to determine and analyze the experiences of several Muhajabat living in the United States, through the lens of choice feminism and standpoint theory. The two parts that compose this thesis project include the documentary and the reflective writing portion. Interviews with several Muhajabat were done virtually and then combined into a documentary. The three participants, Alia, Yasmeen,

and Nadeen, had similar and different experiences that provided opposing standpoints to some of the common viewpoints present in the general society about the topic of the hijab. Their experiences proved that my hypothesis was correct. The more involved and interactive a Muhajaba is in her community, the higher the chance of her encountering negative experiences.

On another note, the contextualization of the hijab in the Quran and the Sunnah gives a profound insight into the religious command, which all the interviewees agreed to be the main reason behind their choice of becoming Muhajabat. The standpoint theory, as a methodology, aided me as a researcher to further understand and incorporate the point of views of the participants, as I am also a Muhajaba living in the Western world. Furthermore, the theory highlighted the individual experiences of the members of this marginalized group and gave them value and recognition. Working hand in hand, choice feminism, as a framework, was used to back up the choices of these women to dress differently and to showcase their identity. This in fact provides them agency and confidence in their own decision making without the interference of outside powers. Moreover, as Nadeen narrated, "the hijab is not a symbol of oppression, it is actually liberating and makes me feel confident in a way."

To further analyze this topic, it was important to shine light on the experiences of the interviewees and the misconceptions that are present in the western society, specifically in America. Pew Research data referenced and some of the experiences of participants, such as Alia, provide evidence that proves the presence of discrimination and differentiation in treatment in the general American society and on college campuses. Furthermore, all the participants agreed that there is not enough accurate and precise knowledge on the hijab nor on Islam and, therefore, less acceptance. Some of the participants such as Yasmeen suggested that, to facilitate the acceptance of the Muhajabat, "officials and responsible people in the government and in the media should

make small speeches about the hijab and deliver the message to the people that you have the choice not to like us but you have respect us." She then finished her interview by saying: "We have to make them accept it. They have to change, not us."

While this thesis focused primarily on Muslim women who wear the hijab, it would be interesting to study the experiences of Muslim women who don't wear it in the western society. Further research on Muslim women, both veiled and unveiled would further help in the understanding of the dynamic of the society's interactions with them as Muslims rather than just Muhajabat. Additional research would also need to accommodate women who are converts to Islam and how they negotiate their way into the existing Muslim society in the United States, as well as the perception of the general public on them.

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