

“It’s a part of me, I feel naked without it”: Choice, agency and identity for Muslim women who wear the niqab

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ABSTRACT

In the context of heightened suspicion and anti-Muslim stereotypes in a post-9/11 and 7/7 era, Muslim women who wear the niqab (face veil) are stigmatised, criminalised and marked as ‘dangerous’ to British/Western values. Several countries have imposed bans on the wearing of face veils in public places based on the premise that the niqab is a ‘threat’ to notions of gender equality, integration and national security. While the wearing of the niqab has elicited a good deal of media, political and public debates, little attention has been paid to the opinions of Muslim women who wear it. Drawing on individual and focus group interviews with Muslim women who wear the niqab in the United Kingdom (UK), this article places at the centre of the debate the voices of those women who do wear it, and explores their reasons for adopting it. The findings show that the wearing of the niqab emerges as a personal choice, an expression of religious piety, public modesty and belonging to the ‘ummah’. It is also perceived as a form of agency, resistance and non-conformity to Western consumerist culture and lifestyle. It will be concluded that wearing the niqab empowers women in their public presence and offers them a sense of ‘liberation’, which is associated with the notion of anonymity that it provides them.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 16 August 2015; Accepted 4 January 2016

KEYWORDS Muslim women, Islam, niqab, agency, identity, ummah

Introduction

The wearing of the niqab is a highly visible manifestation of being a Muslim woman in the West. Specifically, it is perceived as the most visible symbol of Islam in the West, especially in a post-9/11 and 7/7 climate. In this context, the wearing of the niqab is stereotypically seen as a ‘threat’ to notions of integration and national cohesion, and a visual embodiment of gender oppression and gender inequality. Moreover, the wearing of the niqab is often understood as a practice synonymous with religious fundamentalism and, as such, one which fosters political extremism. Media discourses and political rhetoric about Islamist extremism are often illustrated by the image of a

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Muslim woman in niqab. Through her clothing, this female figure is used to illustrate the 'abnormal', a 'stranger among us', an extreme belief system, embodying the potential threat of terrorist attack (Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010). Seen in this context, the niqab is linked to the global 'war on terror' and more recently, to the rise of the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) through its capacity to be used as camouflage for a terrorist. Similarly, the wearing of the hijab for women and having a beard or moustache for non-white men are also linked to the global 'war on terror'. According to this line of argument Islam is associated with terrorism, and to this extent, it is perceived to be the number one enemy on the 'war on terror'. As a visible manifestation of Islam in the West, the wearing of the niqab/hijab for Muslim women and beard for Muslim men is part of a larger issue that is the Islam itself.

Within this framework, the construction of the niqab exclusively through the lens of Islamist terrorism, gender oppression and self-segregation has triggered a spate of national and international reforms focused on the criminal law, which are used to justify state restrictions on the wearing of the niqab in public (Fredette 2015). In April 2011, France became the first country in Europe to introduce a law banning the wearing of the niqab in public including public buildings, educational institutions, hospitals and public transport. In July 2011, Belgium was the second European Union country after France to enforce such a ban. In Spain, the city of Barcelona and other regions have brought in similar bans, as have some towns in Italy. Germany has no national law restricting the wearing of Muslim veils, but half of Germany's 16 state governments have outlawed the wearing of both hijabs and niqabs by teachers.

In the UK a number of British politicians have expressed strong feelings of antipathy towards it; however, neither the government nor mainstream political parties have revealed any plans for imposing legislation to ban the wearing of the niqab in public. That said, in 2010 a backbench Conservative MP, Phillip Hollobone, became the first politician to attempt to ban the niqab when he presented a private members bill, the face coverings (regulation) bill to the House of Commons, which was rejected. Mr Hollobone's bill received its second reading in the House of Commons in February 2014 but it was rejected again. However, restrictions on wearing the niqab in particular

contexts, such as a witness giving evidence in criminal and/or civil trials, and for classroom assistants teaching young children, have been upheld.

Both nationally and internationally, the perspectives of veiled Muslim women and their reasons for wearing the hijab or niqab are usually absent from media, political and public debates (Bilge 2010). Recognising this lacuna, a number of research studies have turned to in-depth interviews or focus group discussions with hijab-wearing women in order to identify their reasons for wearing it. For example, studies conducted in Canada (Ruby 2006), France (Afshar 2008; Wing, Smith, and Nigh 2006) and the USA (Droogsma 2007; Shirazi 2001) reveal very similar and equally diverse motivations, ranging from religious piety, to avoiding the male gaze, taking control of their own bodies, to asserting a Muslim identity as well as resisting sexual objectification and oppression. At the same time though, there has been far less research on Muslim women who wear the niqab. The under-representation of niqab-wearing women tends to reinforce the view that they are indeed passive or disengaged (Bilge 2010). As Petzen (2012) points out, the automatic equation of the niqab with coercion and oppression is patronising to women who wear it by choice and consider it 'empowering' and 'liberating'. Failing to recognise that there are a number of reasons why women adopt the niqab, stigmatises veiled Muslim women as either religious fanatics or oppressed victims with no agency. From this perspective, the image of the Muslim woman in niqab erases the multiple identities of niqab-wearing women as subjects, and reduces them to passive victims of gender subjugation in Islam.

This article explores agency within women's talk about the wearing the niqab; in particular, how they construct themselves as agents of wearing the niqab in the UK. At a time when wearing the niqab in British society is the subject of regular media, political and public debates, this article is timely. The article's significance lies not only in its topicality but also in focusing on an under-researched group. Drawing on individual and focus group interviews conducted with Muslim women who wear the niqab, the article focuses on their reasons for adopting it and examines what the niqab means to them. Given the scarce amount of primary data available surrounding the niqab, this article seeks to develop a better understanding of women's reasons for

wearing it. In exploring why women from a diverse range of Muslim backgrounds wear the niqab, the article raises questions about how women manage their Muslim identity in British society today. Respectively, the article offers new insights into the definitions and significance of the niqab, and the agency of niqab-wearing women. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how the niqab can be transformed from a symbol of gender oppression, Islamist fundamentalism and a badge of 'backwardness' to a symbol of Muslim identity. As such, the article documents the metamorphosis of the niqab from a passive piece of cloth to an interactive tool that Muslim women adopt in order to practise their faith and gender in the West.

The research study

The aim of this study was to examine the lived experiences of Muslim women who wear the niqab in the UK. Specifically, this was a qualitative study that included 60 in-depth interviews and 20 focus groups with niqab-wearing women in Leicester between 2011 and 2012. All the participants wore full-length jilbabs (long robe) accompanied with hijabs (headscarves) and niqabs (face veils), mostly in black, and thus in their public encounters they were visibly identifiable as Muslim women.

Individual in-depth interviews allow for 'rich' data to be collected with detailed descriptions (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2011). This approach is especially valuable for researching sensitive issues that require confidentiality and a more intimate setting for data collection, and this is especially appropriate for 'hard to access' groups such as niqab-wearing women. Focus group interviews incorporate the strengths of qualitative research in terms of gathering 'rich' data whilst generating additional insights through group interactions (Curtis and Curtis 2011). In the context of this study, the focus group method afforded the possibility of open discussion amongst niqab-wearing women with similar or different experiences of wearing the niqab in the UK whilst, at the same time, highlighting collectively held beliefs and attitudes.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Prospective participants were identified through local Muslim organisations including mosques, Muslim schools and Islamic centres, as well as local Muslim university student

societies, and Muslim women's groups. Participants unaffiliated to any local Muslim organisations or groups were also recruited through snowball sampling. At the time of the fieldwork, the women who took part in the study were residents living in Leicester. According to the most recent Census data, Leicester is a city located at the heart of the East Midlands of England and has a population of approximately 330,000 (Office for National Statistics 2011). Leicester residents hail from over 50 countries from across the globe, making the city one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse places in the UK outside London (Open Society Institute, 2010). Leicester has a large and rapidly expanding population of Muslims and niqab-wearing women, making it an ideal site in which to conduct this particular study. Participants' real names have been replaced by pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity.

Religion and veiling

Throughout individuals and focus group interviews, participants highlighted the religious significance of wearing the niqab. There was a general consensus that the wearing of the niqab was as an act of worship that brought them closer to God. They stated that Allah had asked them to wear the niqab and therefore they wanted to please Him by covering in public and in the presence of non-mahram¹ men. Relatedly, participants explained that the principle of avoiding contact with 'non-mahram' men is pivotal for women in Islam (see also Hannan 2011). According to the Quran (the word of Allah given to Prophet Muhammad by Angel Gabriel) and the Hadith (second-hand reports of Prophet Muhammad's lifestyle), free-mixing and socialisation between unrelated (non-mahram) men and women is strictly forbidden in Islam, at least as a general rule, unless a woman has a mahram in her presence. Apparently, these two sources are indispensable; one cannot practise 'true' Islam without consulting all of them. Therefore their decision to adopt the niqab came out of a belief that it was a religious commandment and to this extent, they wanted to express their commitment to their faith. This line of argument affirms the role of the niqab as an expression of religious observance and piety. The following comments illustrate the participants' desire to please Allah.

For me it is very much about expressing my love of my God. It is a way of coming closer to Allah. It's like me saying 'Look, I am doing this to show you how much I love you and what my faith means to me'. (Layla)

For me it is obedience to my Lord. I wear it because Allah told me that 'This is what you have to do'. (Rahimah)

The niqab is one more step towards pleasing Allah. I express the love I have for my Lord with my niqab. (Zubaidah)

As these quotes demonstrate, participants' decision to wear the niqab was based upon what they believed Allah had asked them to do. According to this viewpoint, the wearing of the niqab demonstrates participants' conformity and devotion to Allah's commandments, and makes a public statement of religious submission to Islam (Bullock 2011). Also, the wearing of the niqab is a public expression of women's identity as pious individuals. This line of argument indicates agency on the part of the woman who acts upon her understanding of the Islamic scripts. Such understandings of the dress requirement for a woman in Islam derived from reading the Quran, although it was not necessarily through Quranic directives that such meaning had been constructed. For example, some participants cited religious authorities such as imams as the main source of their belief that the wearing of the niqab would bring them closer to God.

Other participants argued that their understanding of the dress requirements in Islam was inspired by the Prophet's wives, who were fully covered. Similar to the ideal of the Virgin Mary in Christianity, the wives of Prophet Muhammad are perceived as the ultimate role models for women in Islam (Hasan 2011). Under this idea, if the Prophet's wives covered their faces so too should all women in Islam. However, it is important to note here that there is a difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims on the status of the Prophet's wives, with Shia Muslims often being critical of the Prophet's wives. Moreover, some participants revealed that it was through an increased religiosity and spiritual awareness before or after a trip for Hajj (pilgrimage to

Mecca) or Umra (the lesser pilgrimage) that they decided to practise Islam by taking up the niqab. It is important to note that participants did not wear the niqab whilst on Hajj since one of the requirements for women going for Hajj is not to cover their face and their hands with gloves. It was either before or after their trip for Hajj or Umra that they wore the niqab as a form of religious piety. A couple of participants noted that they decided to practise Islam – through wearing the niqab, performing their daily prayers² (salat or namaz) five times a day, fasting and attending the mosque – in particularly difficult times in their life such as bereavement or serious ill health.

The highest authority (mufti) in Al Azhar theology school in Cairo has publicly spoken about the niqab (or wearing gloves) as a non-requirement. The ruling of this mufti for Sunni Islamic tradition is important as it demonstrates that the wearing of the niqab is not mandatory. Indeed, the majority of participants argued that the covering of the face was not obligatory but a ‘recommended’ part of the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad. Whilst acknowledging that the wearing of the niqab was not compulsory, these participants decided to take this one step further by adopting the niqab – in addition to wearing the hijab and jilbab – as an expression of extreme religious piety. In contrast, some participants (mostly in the context of focus group discussions at mosques and Islamic centres) considered the covering of the face with the niqab as religiously mandated according to their understanding of the Quran and as such, it would be a ‘sin’ if they did not wear it. The latter argument indicates that some participants might have felt religiously obligated to wear the niqab premised on the notion that it was a Quranic prescription. Regardless of whether the niqab was perceived as an obligatory or optional religious practice, the consensus view was that the wearing of the niqab marked their Muslim identity in the public sphere, as the following comments illustrate:

I decided to wear the niqab because I wanted to be identified as a Muslim. (Aisha)

When people see me they know straight away I'm a Muslim. The message I send is that I'm a Muslim because I'm fully covered.
(Jahidah)

Before I didn't look Muslim 100% because I wasn't wearing it. If I were to remove the niqab when I go outside, nobody knows who I am or what I am. (Shantaz)

In contrast to the current findings, Shirazi and Mishra's (2010) study, which involved in-depth interviews of young American Muslim women, found that none of their participants felt they had to wear a niqab to express or assert their religious identity. Participants in Shirazi and Mishra's (2010) study pointed out that they were not interested in wearing the niqab, although some of them were already wearing headscarves or the hijab. They felt that the wearing of the niqab isolates women from society and is unnecessary in Western countries such as the United States. They considered the decision to wear or not wear a niqab a matter of personal choice.

On the issue of choice, participants in the present study noted that in certain countries like Saudi Arabia, Muslim women risk arrest and incarceration by refusing to wear the niqab, while in certain European countries (such as France and Belgium) Muslim women demand the right to wear it, despite legislation that forces them to take it off. Depending on the political context, the Muslim dress can become either a form of 'resistance' by women or 'control' over women (Fredette 2015). In the British context, participants appreciated the freedom to wear the niqab and even use it as a fashion accessory, depending upon the context, as the following quotes demonstrate:

Sisters are forced to wear it in some places in the world. I will not deny this. This is not right. But I choose when to wear it and when to take it off. I choose what colours to wear, not just black and white. (Jasmine)

It's awesome! It's a beautiful, religious fashion statement. I have drawers full of a variety of vibrant colours, materials and prints. I match them with my outfits and wear a different style every day. (Khadija)

I wrap it in a different way, for example, taking the headscarf and wrapping it over my face or maybe showing my nose, something like that, you know, trying different ways of doing it. Sometimes I get a coloured niqab rather than a black one. Black is usually seen as more hostile whereas if it is a pink or a blue one it looks more friendly. (Focus group participant)

Clearly, some participants felt that it is an obligatory religious duty to wear the niqab whilst others noted that it is optional and even used it as a fashion accessory. Accordingly, some participants identified themselves as 'practising Muslims' and set the parameters of religious piety: 'good' Muslim versus 'bad' Muslim. They emphasised that wearing the niqab represents a higher level of faith than wearing the hijab or jilbab. Hannan (2011, 81) argues that the wearing of the niqab is often seen as a prerequisite to being a 'good practising Muslim'. The Five Pillars of Islam include the religious duties expected of every Muslim. In particular, the Five Pillars of Islam consist of the following: declaration of faith (Shahadah), prayer (Salat), charity (Zakat), fasting (Sawm) and pilgrimage (Hajj). For Wadud (2007, 219), practising Islam through veiling is the 'sixth pillar of Islam'. The wearing of the niqab as an example of being a 'good' Muslim is illustrated in the following focus group discussion at a mosque.

There is a difference between the practising Muslim and somebody who just calls themselves Muslim. I can call myself a practising Muslim but before wearing the niqab I was just a Muslim by name. I didn't go along with my responsibilities and duties as a Muslim but now I do.

Before, when I was at University, you couldn't really tell I was a Muslim because I didn't practise my religion. I never really wore anything Islamic. Now I feel I am a good Muslim because I am more practising.

The niqab is part of being a Muslim and I consider myself to be a good Muslim.

The consensus view was that 'good practising Muslims' would be 'rewarded' in the afterlife because of demonstrating their commitment to Allah by wearing the niqab despite adversities in the present life. Specifically, all the participants reported suffering anti-Muslim hate crime such as verbal and physical abuse in public as a result of wearing niqab (for an in-depth discussion of veiled Muslim women's experiences of anti-Muslim hate crime in public in the UK please see Author 2014). Nevertheless, participants drew strength from the fact that they would be given 'real' justice in jannah (Islamic conception of paradise), as indicated in the quotations below.

We are not here to enjoy ourselves. We are here to be tested. Every difficulty that we go through is a test. We believe in the hereafter and in the afterlife there will be real justice for us. (Focus group participant)

Allah is the only one who can help us. Allah knows the pain we feel and the things that have happened to us. Allah knows about it. It's not for everybody and everyone to know about these issues. As long as Allah knows about them, we will get justice in jannah (Focus group participant)

While motives of a spiritual nature – in particular the quest for religious piety, establishing a permanent connection with Allah and being 'rewarded' in jannah (paradise) – were central to all participants' narratives, a plethora of other factors played a significant role in their decision to adopt the niqab. For example, participants drew on gender-related arguments to explain their

decision to cover, particularly the notion of the niqab as a sign of public modesty. By wearing the niqab, participants sought to present themselves as modest women, as discussed below.

Public modesty

During the course of interviews and focus group discussions participants stated that modesty is one of the main reasons why Allah requires women to wear the niqab. Contractor (2011) observes that the covering of the face is an integral and obligatory aspect of the modesty guidelines for women in Islam. Gabriel (2011) suggests that the purpose of being fully veiled is to discourage adultery and promiscuity, and confine sexual relations within the boundaries of matrimony. From this perspective, the face is perceived as the source of beauty and looking at it can lead to zina (fornication); however, zina can be prevented. According to this line of argument, zina is caused by women and men must be pacified by the women's mode of clothes. In this thinking, women and not men are held responsible. Participants described women as 'pearls' or 'jewels' that must be covered in order to be protected. This is illustrated by the following comments in a focus group discussion at a mosque.

If you had a priceless jewel would you walk down the street with it in your hand or would you cover it up and put it in a safe? Islam sees women as priceless jewels to be covered and kept safe.

There is a difference between wearing the niqab and not wearing it. Women in Islam are like a precious jewel, like a diamond, and when you are covered you have that value but if you are not covered then what value do you have?

Moreover, participants described feeling 'liberated' from the dominance of physical appearances. The wearing of the niqab typically lies outside the sphere of commercialised, mass-consumption fashion and promiscuous clothing (Hannan 2011, 81). Participants highlighted that the imposition of Western dress codes – including social pressure placed on women to conform

to the unrealistic body images promoted in the media – contributed to their decision to wear the niqab as a form of ‘resistance’ to this oppression. From this perspective, the wearing of the niqab demonstrates assertiveness and agency, and women feel ‘in control’ of their bodies.

Referring to hijabs, Muslim women often characterise the practice as ‘empowering’, contrasting ‘the pressure on [Western] women to reveal their bodies with their own choice to cover; the first reflects patriarchal oppression while the second reflects conscious resistance to oppression’ (Droogsma 2007, 309). Some participants felt that they escaped the pressures of competitive consumerism and obsessive bodily preoccupation by adopting the niqab. Indeed, the following statements are in line with the idea of anti-fashion sentiment.

Wearing the niqab is a big relief. Before when I used to wear the hijab I didn’t want to go out unless I looked absolutely beautiful so putting the niqab on saves me a lot of time. It saves me from wasting a lot of my important time because once I put it on I know I’m protected. When you go out you have to look a certain way, you have to act in a certain way but when you’ve got the niqab on it strips you from all these qualities that you had before. (Fariza)

I just love it! I hate having to choose what to wear. When I go out I just throw an abaya on whatever I’m wearing in the house and I look presentable and I put on my hijab and my niqab and underneath I could be wearing my pyjamas [laughing]. (Rasheeda)

On the one hand, participants argued that the Western values which had been instilled in them – such as religious freedom, autonomy, freedom of choice and gender equality – had facilitated their adoption of the niqab. On the other hand, they questioned some of the norms and values of Western society, and argued that the wearing of the niqab kept them safe from the contamination of ‘Western ways’. Hasan (2011, 118) suggests that adultery, pornography, provocative fashions and the increasing sexualisation of young girls in Western society are just a few examples of deteriorating standards of public

decency in the West. As a means of public modesty, the niqab protected participants from such 'harms'. From this standpoint, the niqab serves as a symbol of 'opposition' to the Western lifestyle on the basis that it infers anti-moral decadence and functions as a 'visible' rejection of the sexual promiscuity of the West.

In the following quotes – which reinforce a sense of Muslim 'we' and non-Muslim 'them' – Rafia defended veiling as a form of extreme modesty in the same way that Western women choose to be immodest whilst Zainab felt that public modesty is rejected in British society. Echoing similar views, participants in focus group interviews stated that Islam liberated them from the 'evils' of the West. Unquestionably, such views are problematic on the basis that they demonise the West and contribute to the rise of Westphobia as a form of prejudice and bigotry, in the same way that the West is often referred to as Islamophobic or xenophobic.

Although I'm not the most modest niqabi because I don't wear gloves, I stand to defend the outer limits of modesty. There are Western women who are on the outer limits of immodesty, who walk around with loads of bare flesh. They wear the least they possibly can and that's one extreme which is quite permitted and veiling is an extreme form of modesty and I'm standing for it.
(Rafia)

British people have been modest in the old days but they have now given it up. They look down upon us but if they prefer seeing on billboards naked women exposing themselves, selling themselves for a few quid, what does this say for their morals? Even homosexuality is accepted nowadays but modesty is not accepted in British society. (Zainab)

Islam is a religion which is visible, men are told to keep a beard and women are told to cover up. It is a religion which is in your face, you can't hide it away. The industry of evil [West] is built on two things: immodesty which is the opposite of Islam and the

second is extravagance and Islam teaches simplicity. Islam is in direct conflict with today's values. Islam doesn't have any time for things like pornography, nudity and shamelessness. (Focus group participant)

For some participants there were clear tensions between being practising Islam and the Western lifestyle. Participants cited alcohol consumption and teenage pregnancy as examples of a lack of moral values in British society. By using the word 'they' to imply British people, participants clearly disassociated themselves (individually and collectively as Muslims) from these social issues. In this regard, they also assumed identity not by citizenship but by their religious followings. Fredette (2014) examined how the public identity of French Muslims is constructed in France and the implications this has for this relatively new and diverse population. Fredette (2014) argued that an omnipresent elite discourse condemns Muslims as unfit citizens; yet many French Muslims themselves do not doubt their French identity. This demonstrates the range of misunderstandings between cultures and highlights that communication between 'us' and 'them' is essential to tackle prejudice and bigotry.

Protection from male attention

During the course of interviews and focus group discussions, participants emphasised that the wearing of the niqab also serves as a means of protection from the male gaze. Participants reported that the wearing of the niqab became necessary in the British/Western context because of the sexual exploitation of women through staring in the public sphere. Participants felt 'invisible' and thus safe on the basis that the niqab served as a safeguard from being treated as sexual objects. From this perspective, the wearing of the niqab empowers women to enter the public domain instead of feeling 'powerless' in the face of sexual harassment in public. This is exemplified in the experiences of Ruqia, a Somali college student, who described how the wearing of the niqab protected her against male students' persistent staring.

Before putting it on boys always had the habit of staring at my face. I didn't like being stared at. I hated being stared at. So this [niqab] protects me now. (Ruqia)

Similarly Nisha and Nabeeha felt protected against men's aggressive flirting on the basis that they were fully covered, as the following quotes demonstrate.

The veil means protection from dirty looks. Some people are under the assumption that we wear it because we are ugly but that is not true. We're just trying to protect our [moral] beauty. I'm married now so I don't want other men looking at me. Women who continue to beautify themselves and trying to look gorgeous, they do it for other people, not their husbands but if you are married you shouldn't do that. That's why adultery happens and families split up. I am the only person in my family that wears the niqab. My sisters don't wear it. I've got three sisters. They always attract men's attention but I think that's dangerous because if you have a family and you fall in love with another man, then your marriage is void. (Nisha)

The niqab is privacy, when you walk out of the door and people see your face they can read lots of personal things about you. They can tell how beautiful you are, they can tell how old you are, they can tell personal things from your face and if you want to be private from other people and you don't want them to be thinking these things, especially men, you know, they all think 'Would I do her?' If they can see your face they will think that but if they can't see you face they won't. (Nabeeha)

These participants also argued that according to the Quran and the Sunnah, Muslim women should not leave the house unless it is considered absolutely necessary. In this regard, being fully veiled was perceived as a means of maintaining the female body as a space of 'sacred privacy' in line with

religious prescriptions (El Guindi 1999, 153). As such, the wearing of the niqab allowed them to enter the public sphere without worrying that they compromised their privacy and dignity as Muslim women. Clearly, the niqab means different things in different contexts. Shirazi (2001) investigated the semantic versatility of the veil in western popular culture, Saudi advertising, Iranian and Indian poetry and films, and for Iranian, Iraqi, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) women soldiers, and concluded that the veil has no fixed meaning; rather, its meaning depends upon the social context.

To illustrate this, the local environment was also a contributing factor to participants' decision to wear the niqab. Indeed, the individual reasons of women who wear the niqab cannot be fully explained without also giving weight to details of personal biographic experience and the particularities of living in a Muslim-dominated community in the UK. For example, many participants reported that the niqab guarded them from the gaze of Muslim men in the local community. As the following extracts illustrate, for both Shelina and Zafirah, the niqab functioned as a shield against the male gaze within Highfields and the areas around East Park Road and Spinney Hill, which are areas in Leicester with a large population of Muslims (Open Society Institute, 2010).

Shelina and Zafirah explained that prior to wearing the niqab, they used to wear the hijab and the jilbab but felt uncomfortable walking in these areas because Muslim men would persistently stare at them. As such, wearing the niqab enabled them to walk freely in a Muslim-dominated community in the UK without worrying about Muslim men staring at them in a lustful manner. In this case, participants also felt that they gained respect from Muslim men in the local community because they were fully covered (including wearing the jilbab, hijab and niqab). The following comments remind us that niqab-wearing women are not only consciously presenting themselves to non-Muslim men but also to Muslim men.

I felt I needed to wear it because I didn't get the respect from [Muslim] men, particularly in Highfields, they used to stare at me. I felt dirty and the niqab gave me that protection. (Shelina)

When I wear the niqab and I walk in a predominantly Muslim community I feel shielded because it takes away the glances that I don't want. It makes a statement but I'm talking about making a statement not to non-Muslims but to Muslims and predominantly to Muslim men; that I don't wish to be seen in that manner. I did notice that when I didn't wear it I did attract a lot of male attention within the local Muslim community. Especially if you're walking past a masjid [mosque] and it's all men standing outside the masjid you don't want everybody looking at you. So I thought it's probably a good thing to wear it. (Zafirah)

Throughout interviews and focus group discussions the consensus view was that the wearing of the niqab was an act of individual choice. This aligns with the Open Society Foundations' (2011) in-depth qualitative interviews with 32 Muslim women in various regions of France who wore niqab. According to that study: 'The testimony of the women clearly indicates that none of the interviewees was forced to wear the full veil' (2011, 15). Unquestionably, there are some Muslim women and girls who may be subjected to mandatory wearing of the niqab (or hijab) by their family or community; however, while some may feel pressured, other women decide to wear it independently (and often against their family's or community's wishes).

In the context of this particular study, comments such as 'I am not forced to wear it' and 'It is my choice' were made by all participants. As an act of choice, the niqab liberated participants through facilitating their presence and physical mobility in the public space. Within this context, it is important to recognise that this sense of 'liberation' is associated with the notion of anonymity that the niqab provides its wearers. Rather than isolating participants, the wearing of the niqab strengthened them both spiritually and pragmatically by empowering them to leave the domestic sphere and enter the public space on the basis that they were anonymous. The issue of anonymity as a form as liberation is illustrated in the following comments.

When I am fully covered I feel liberated. I feel I can be whoever I want to be. Nobody knows who I am. I can walk freely without

anybody judging me by what I look like or the shape of my body.
(Aliyah)

With the niqab I can remain anonymous and that's how Islam deals with the woman. This is why we cover, to stay anonymous so that people don't know who we are. (Nazia)

When I did not wear the niqab I was very much like 'Oh dear, how am I going to leave the house?' but now nobody knows who I am so I feel confident, I feel powerful. For me this is the key about the niqab. (Nimah)

Closely linked to the agency of the niqab as an act of choice is the significance of its visibility in public. On the one hand, the wearing of the niqab is associated with notions of 'invisibility' on the basis that it marks the presence of women in public as anonymous. On the other hand, the wearing of the niqab increases the woman's visibility because it marks her Muslim identity, particularly in a non-Muslim majority country such as the UK. The following section demonstrates that as a visible manifestation of being Muslim, the wearing of the niqab indicates a badge of allegiance of Islam through notions of a worldwide, transnational Muslim community, the 'ummah'.

Identity and ummah

Constructions of the niqab include a sense of religious piety and observance to the Quranic prescriptions, public modesty, rejection of consumerist values, protection from the male gaze and a sense of liberation based on the anonymity that the niqab provides its wearers. Within this framework, participants explicitly stated that they chose to affirm their Muslim identity by wearing the niqab in public in the UK because they were proud to be Muslim. Throughout interviews and focus group discussions participants emphasised that showing their Muslim identity was a key purpose of wearing the niqab with the view to be recognised as Muslims. This ties in with the suggestions of Contractor (2011) who found that veiled Muslim women are intentionally

recognisable as Muslims whereby veiling is an affirmation of their faith, particularly in the West. From this perspective, the niqab serves as a means of identification of Muslim women which is in line with the Quranic injunction 'So that they may be recognised as believing women (33, 59)'.

Participants painted an image of the niqab as an essential part of their identity, both individually and collectively. The sociology of clothing (Crane and Bovone 2006; McRobbie 2004) provides a useful framework through which to consider the issue of identity and the wearing of the niqab. Clothing can be an important vehicle for conveying and expressing meaning, identity and values. 'Clothes both affect and express our perceptions of ourselves' (Crane and Bovone 2006, 321). Ruggerone (2006) suggests that clothing has a special character as a material object because of its location on our bodies, thereby 'acting as a filter between the person and the surrounding social world'. Values have also been interpreted as being 'intimately tied to the self' and as forming "the core of one's personal identity" (Hitlin and Piliavin 2004, 382). Correspondingly, on an individual level Faridah and Shafia saw the niqab as part of their private body whilst on a collective level, Wadiyah highlighted the notion of belonging to the ummah, the geographically unbounded community of Muslim believers.

The niqab is now part of my private body. (Faridah)

For me the niqab is mine. I don't know how to explain it in English but it's like here you are in my house and my house is my house. I do what I want in my house so the niqab is mine. It belongs to me. It is part of my body. It is part of who I am. (Shafia)³

I like it to be recognised as a Muslim woman and feel part of the ummah. (Wadiyah)

From this perspective, the wearing of the niqab gives meaning and significance to the person's individual and collective identity in Islam. As an act of solidarity with the ummah, the wearing of the niqab renders Muslim women symbolic of their faith. Seen in this light, the wearing of the niqab is a

badge which categorises women as Muslims and allows them to feel members of a dynamic, unbounded world community, which is conceptualised as crossing ethnic, racial, geographical and political boundaries (Afshar, Aitken, and Franks 2005). As Saunders (2008) points out, membership in the ummah does not necessarily reject competing national identities (for example Arab or British) nor does this membership prevent internal divisions (for example Sunni versus Shia, moderate versus fundamentalist). Rather the ethnic, regional and linguistic differences that would have created divisions in a Muslim country are overshadowed by the shared difficulties of living as ethnic and religious minorities in the West.

Conclusion

In the current climate, Islam is under siege and 'visible' Muslim women (and men) across Western societies risk stereotyping, labelling, stigmatisation and violence (Abbas 2007). The wearing of the niqab is seen as the most visible symbol of Islam in the West. Popular perceptions stereotypically read the niqab as a homogeneous practice thus failing to recognise the multiple and overlapping understandings that it holds for women who wear it. Nevertheless, there is little research about the lived experiences of Muslim women who wear the niqab in the UK.

Drawing on interviews with Muslim women from diverse Muslim backgrounds, this article has challenged the symbolism of the niqab as a 'threat' to notions of gender oppression, integration, national cohesion and public safety, and illustrated the more nuanced meanings that it holds for women who do wear it. By and large, the article indicated that the niqab contains a two-fold dimension: a religious dimension and a gender-related one. From a religious perspective, participants described the niqab as a symbol of religious commitment, worship and piety. In essence, the wearing of the niqab was understood as something that Allah had asked women to do. Seen in this context, the niqab indicates Muslim women's conformity and devotion to Allah's commandments. However, it is important to point out that the wearing of the niqab is not a requirement in Islam but participants decided to adopt the as an expression of extreme religious piety.

From a gender perspective, the wearing of the niqab provided participants with a sense of protection from sexual harassment whilst the anonymity conferred less of a chance of undesirable male attention when in public. In addition, participants described the wearing of the niqab as 'liberating' and 'empowering' in the sense that it allowed them to leave the house without worrying about being judged based on their physical appearance. Moreover, throughout individual and focus group interviews the consensus view was that the wearing of the niqab was an act of individual choice, and this was something that all the participants were keen to highlight. As an expression of personal choice, religious identity and freedom of expression, the wearing of the niqab plays a crucial role to being recognised as Muslim and be part of the ummah, particularly in the West. Seen in this context, the niqab evolves from a passive piece of cloth to a religious standpoint and an identity position. Ultimately, the niqab is not a passive piece of garment. Rather, it is as an important and integral part of women's identity.

Notes

¹ A 'mahram' is a man whom a woman cannot marry in her life such as her father, brother, father-in-law or son. As such, a Muslim woman must wear the niqab in the presence of men who do not have with her a degree of consanguinity (blood relationship) that precludes marriage.

² Prayer is called 'Salat' in Arabic. However, Muslim women from the India subcontinent used the term 'Namaz' instead of Salat.

³ Shafia was a French national of Algerian heritage. At the time of conducting the interviews, Shafia and her family had recently moved to Leicester from Paris because of the veil ban in France which prevented her from wearing the niqab in public.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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