

Communication

This Battlefield Called My Body: Warring over the Muslim Female

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Abstract: This communication centers on the argument that there is an ideological tug-of-war over the Muslim female body. The author discusses how religious and secular patriarchies, as well as feminism all make claims to the bodies of Muslim women and purport to know what is best for her. With particular focus on the headscarf and using comparisons with how non-Muslim women's bodies are fought over, the author argues that there is a common thread connecting the warring sides as they each employ patriarchal and imperialist views of the Muslim woman that attempt to consume her agency. As the author examines the personal agency and veiling motives of Muslim woman, she counters the idea of Muslim women as passive recipients of mainstream religious and secular narratives imposed upon them by sharing different ways in which they self-author their own narratives in a post-9/11 USA.

Keywords: Islam; women; patriarchy; feminism; body; body politics; agency; *hijab*; self-authorship

1. Introduction

The Muslim woman's body is like a battleground upon which patriarchy (both religious and secular) and feminism are at ideological war, with the most brutal battles taking place upon her head. All warring sides are obsessed with the Muslim female body focusing on covering her up, fashioning her wardrobe, or disrobing her. Patriarchy and feminism attempt to control Muslim women through their ability to define their identities, roles [1], and the manner in which they should dress to either showcase their religious piety by covering, their worth and sex appeal through fashion, or their

liberation by uncovering. This results in many Muslim women often carefully navigating between religiosity and secularity while maintaining their ideas of ideal Muslim womanhood [2].

2. Islamic Patriarchy

The belief that Islam requires the *hijab* (headscarf or covering) lends itself to enforcement of *hijab* or even shaming or scaring women and girls into it. When a woman or girl feels forced, shamed, or scared into wearing the *hijab*, it may become virtually meaningless. It also implies that upholding mainstream Islamic expectations and the outward presentation of Islam (e.g., sartorial practices) are more important than holding the religion dear to one's heart and organically and authentically feeling moved to wear the *hijab* from deep within not just: (1) to please God; (2) because it is an obligation; nor (3) to avoid punishment or hell. In other words, forcing this onto women makes the performance of religion more important than the belief and the inward spiritual journey. It encourages hypocrisy as it is oppression by expectation and enforcement masquerading as piety, righteousness, modesty, and chastity.

One popular mainstream Muslim narrative is that a woman is protected from the male gaze, desire, and sexual harassment by wearing the *hijab*. This can easily become a slippery slope [3] because while a woman may cover most of her body, her lips may be seen as sensual, her smile seen as too inviting, or even her voice and completely covered physically presence may be just enough to sexually arouse a man. The argument that the *hijab* is a protection is problematic because it may be interpreted similarly to "Western" societies viewing rape as something that is provoked by the manner in which a woman dresses [3]. Additionally, the idea that wearing the *hijab* is a protection from sexual harassment negates another reality that a number of Muslim women covering their faces experience—some Muslim men make sexual advances toward them, whether it is a lingering gaze, the licking of his lips, or some other action that causes her discomfort [4].

While the Qur'an (33:59) tells Prophet Muhammad to instruct his wives, daughter, and believing wives of his companions to cover themselves so that they may remain unbothered and respected as women of Islam, the mainstream practice of Islam has extended this to mean that all believing Muslim women must or at least should wear the *hijab*. This has made the *hijab* a sort of litmus test for a woman's level of faith and modesty, Islamic credibility, and indicative of her level of religiosity and piety. It can be confusing and potentially psychologically harmful for a Muslim girl to be told that: (1) she can only be modest if she wears the *hijab*; (2) wearing it will allow her to enter paradise; or (3) wearing it is a way to protect Muslim men by helping them focus on their religion instead of on her.

Muslim patriarchy makes a Muslim woman believe that she must cover her body in order to protect her male coreligionists from temptation and sin. It makes her think that she has only two choices for her body: (1) be a righteous, virtuous Maryam (Mary), Mother of Jesus; or (2) be a painted, whorish Jezebel, Queen of Israel. It makes her think that her body is familial and community property, that she must safeguard her body at all costs because her worth and her family and community's honor are based on whether or not her vagina remains untouched and her hymen remains intact. It makes her think that she is impure, even filthy and untouchable, or unfit to worship Allah when her body, in synch with nature, sheds the lining of her uterus as it mirrors the full moon's monthly shedding of its fullness. This all places a very heavy burden on Muslim girls and women. Nevertheless, the social

disciplining of the Muslim female's body is not only a religious phenomenon; it also takes place in secular society.

3. Secular Patriarchy

Mainstream society's patriarchal standards of beauty are ingrained into young girls telling them that they cannot be beautiful without being thin, having clear skin, wearing the right clothes or makeup, among other things. They are also seen when young girls are put into skirts and dresses and told to close their legs when they sit, stop jumping around, "little girls don't behave like that", and when little boys are allowed to do as they please with the excuse of "boys will be boys". Teen magazines, commercial advertising, and parenting techniques have similar affects on young girls' psyches, as well. Part of being female in patriarchal societies is that they are told how to gender their identity early in life, and most of the markers of their femininity and even modesty are external and presented on the body, thereby causing a focus on the outward appearance and performance of identity without regard for the inward reality [3,5].

As stated, male power over the female body extends beyond Muslim communities. Mainstream marketing in non-Muslim societies objectifies and manipulates the female body through hypersexualized advertising, with the hyposexualization of the Muslim female body having a similar effect [3]. In both cases, men perceive her body as existing for them [3]. Additionally, the number of television programs (e.g., Fashion Television, Project Runway, The Fashion Show, What Not to Wear, Rachel Zoe Project, Queer Eye for the Straight Girl, America's Next Top Model, and others) that celebrate fashion and are dedicated to the clothing of the female body further objectify women using them like props, mannequins, and landscape.

Some men believe that women's bodies exist for their own pleasure and entertainment. This belief can cause them to entice her into under-dressing her body or over-dressing her body for their own satisfaction not that of women. This overdressing of the female body may be more easily accomplished when religion is inserted. Nevertheless, women (religious or not) make daily decisions about what they will and will not wear; it belittles women to argue that each of their decisions is authored or orchestrated by men.

In general, women are often obliged to comply with very specific or very general patriarchal demands [5,6] whether those demands be objectified in: (1) headscarves to hide the hair and neck; (2) restrictive brassieres to uplift and hold the breasts at attention; (3) high-heeled shoes to define a woman's calves; (4) surgical treatments and procedures to remove or reduce any signs of aging; (5) makeup products to enhance or feign beauty; (6) vaginal rejuvenation procedures; and even (7) forced removal of headscarves and criminalization of face veils such as in France's *laïcité*. On the opposite end of both forms of patriarchy is mainstream feminism, which also places its particular demands on women.

4. Mainstream Feminism

Mainstream feminism that looks with an imperialist gaze [7] through a prism of essentialized feminism [8] sees Muslim women as less intelligent, oppressed, culturally depraved, passive, less

likely to engage and succeed, and even dangerous (to feminism) due to *tribal stigma* [3,9,10] with her *hijab* being seen as an “abomination of the body” ([3], p. 4; [9]).

Questioning the *hijab* and certain covering practices is mostly a healthy endeavor in which many Muslim girls and women engage before and after deciding (if they do) to wear it. However, questioning it can also be an oppressive and even dismissive strategy that is disrespectful to Muslim women and to all women in general. This was the case in April 2013 with the FEMEN “topless *jihad*” controversy that was sparked by the Tunisian woman who protested the female body as a source a familial honor. The backlash from Muslim women around the world, especially Muslim feminists, was swift as many perceived their religion to be under attack orchestrated by Islamophobic European feminists. In effect, the FEMEN campaign and mainstream feminism, cover Muslim women with a tight veil of their own that is hemmed with threads of ignorance and adorned with sequins of damsels—who are so indoctrinated as not to even know that they are—in distress.

5. U.S. Feminism and Orientalism

When speaking of a Muslim woman’s freedom in the body being censored and thwarted by Muslim males, US feminism, centered in orientalism, often neglects to take into account the plethora of women who define freedom differently [8,9,11]. In doing this, U.S. feminists have often been guilty of dismissing Muslim women’s ability to be self-determining and rejecting the manifestations of women’s agency that do not mirror their own. Although many feminists’ intentions are emancipatory, many unknowingly take on the voice of a female male chauvinist implying that Muslim women have false consciousnesses as if they are proletariats, unwitting victims of the religion or practice of Islam under the unseen, standardized ideological control of a mythical Islamic bourgeoisie.

U.S. feminism and the apparatus of Western Orientalism are often rejected by Muslim women around the world and within the U.S. because it is seen as making itself *the* voice of normative, universal feminist reason. Anti-*hijab* feminists presume to know these women better than they know themselves, thereby consuming Muslim women’s agency and exerting their ideological power and dominance over them much like what they accuse pro-*hijab* Muslim men of doing. In their attempts at solidarity and to present counter-hegemonic practices and tools of resistance, they often isolate the very women they claim to speak on behalf of by introducing their own form of cultural hegemony based in orientalism [9,11] and clothed in patriarchal social structures, a male gaze [7] and with hatred for the *hijab* [8] and even Islam at the core. Similarly to some misogynist Muslim males who use the *hijab* to argue a virgin/whore dichotomy, essentialized feminists err in dichotomizing the female body and mind as either free and equal or oppressed and unequal. Truthfully, these dyads are not separated by a piece of cloth wrapped around or draped upon the head of a woman.

6. Muslim Women

In a 2012–2013 phenomenological study (N = 20), I explored the relationship between Muslim women’s religious, cultural, familial and individual habitus and the historical and current—post 9/11—national habitus of the U.S. and how this post 9/11 national habitus of anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia affects U.S. American Muslim women, specifically those wearing the *hijab*. Although this study was more centered on social and cultural capital, and social stigma, some of the participants’

comments reflected that they were absolutely aware of the struggle over their bodies and that they chose to wear the headscarf for a variety of reasons.

The study utilized random, purposive and snowball sampling methods and included 25–27 open and closed-ended interview questions. Interview questions were tailored to Muslim-born and convert women not wearing *hijab*, Muslim-born women wearing *hijab* and convert women also wearing *hijab*. For converts, they must have converted to Islam more than three years prior to the study. Participants came from a variety of ethno-racial and socio-economic backgrounds; however, all attended a higher education institution in the U.S. after 9/11.

The study participants weighed in very heavily on their *hijab*-ing motivations.

Example 1. Sultana, a Nigerian with a B.A., attended a public, four-year university in an average-size, urban city in the west. She, a Muslim from birth, stated:

I started wearing *hijab* in 2000, my 2nd year in college. I wear it in obedience to my Creator and because my body is my own business; so I feel my body and adornment is not for public view and spectacle [12].

Example 2. Hannah, a half-Japanese and half-white American with an M.S., attended a public, graduate institution in a large, urban city in Texas. She, a convert to Islam, explained:

I began wearing *hijab* in the spring of 1998. I wear it first and foremost because it is required in Islam, but also because I love it. It's my protection, my shield, my way of saying, "I am a Muslim woman, and I demand your respect." I've worked too hard all of my life to resort to being eye candy for strangers who mean nothing to me. *Hijab* is, in fact, the ultimate form of rebellion against a society's standards of beauty and acceptance. It requires people to value me for who I am and not for how I look [12].

Both participants are clear in their interpretation and belief that wearing *hijab* is a religious mandate and an act of obedience to God. They also clearly mark the body as a matter of private space, which includes the hair, ears, and neck in that privacy. The responses imply that covering up the body deflects attention from it, places awareness more on the mind, and commands respect; it is what the woman is about rather than how she looks. Sexuality and sexual attraction are also introduced with the mention of not wanting to be "eye candy" for strangers. However, as much as a woman may try, she may be found attractive and seen as eye candy whether it is out of sexual desire or intense curiosity. Hannah also goes a step further and introduces *hijab* as a feminist act against imposed standards of beauty and a conscious act of resistance, rebellion against societal norms and notions of acceptability.

Example 3. Maria, a Latina *muhajibah*, was a student at a community college in Southern California. She, as a convert to Islam, stated:

Ever since I embraced Islam I wear the *hijab*...because I respect myself and love *Allah* [God] by wearing the *hijab* and defining myself as a Muslim woman. I also like for other students to change the wrong perception they have of Muslim women. I want them to know we like to go to school, we have the same rights as men to get educated and follow the career of our choice. When I walked on campus or participate in class wearing a *hijab*, I feel I represent women in Islam...The [*hijab*] from the outside is also in one's actions and must come from a heart full of love for *Allah*. When we wear full *hijab* there is no doubt

that we are Muslim; we don't get mistaken by anything else but as free, respectable women. It hides us from prying eyes and providing us with a sense of security. Wearing a *hijab* also makes it easier to behave modestly when we are also covered modestly [12].

In this testimony, we see *hijab* provides a sense of security and acts as behavior modifier. It also allows Maria to provide a real example of a Muslim to her classmates, thereby making Islam more accessible to them, as well as breaking stereotypes along the way. Nevertheless, there is an unstated stereotype that is confirmed with her words: (1) She does not actually represent women in Islam as a whole; there are many Muslim women who do not wear the *hijab*; and (2) Not all Muslim women who wear the *hijab* are free or behave respectable.

Example 4. Najla, an African American *muhajibah*, earned her M.S. degree from a private university in Southern California. She was also a Ph.D. student at a public university in Southern California. She, as a Muslim from birth, stated:

I grew up knowing what the *hijab* was and seeing many women wear it, but I never truly understood the depth of and the divine wisdom behind the *hijab* until 2003. Before then, I had put it on for weeks and months at a time, but would always remove it because I did not know in my heart and soul why I was wearing it. I prayed for God to enlighten me with the truth regarding the *hijab*. I asked Him to show me why I am or am not supposed to wear it and to make me know my answer in my heart and soul. In 2003, He answered my prayers. After much study and thinking, I suddenly realized I wanted to wear my faith as a reminder, and I wanted to take control of my sexuality and take my power back as a woman who has a choice in who she lets see what and how much of it she lets them see. Wearing the *hijab* is, indeed, VERY empowering (not to mention a great character-builder, *mashaAllah* [as *Allah* has willed it]!) [12]. Najla provides a great example of the progression many Muslim women go through, specifically as it relates to the sartorial practice of wearing the *hijab*. Some may wear it without knowing exactly why or without being completely convinced. Others may be completely convinced at the time of wearing it for the first time, but their beliefs may change over time. Her story shows how she came to her own understanding through study and reflection. Her act of removing the *hijab* for a period of reflection and study shows that she practiced her power to choose; she was not in a situation where she was forced to wear it.

Example 5. Marisela, a Cuban American (also of black, white and Spanish heritage) *muhajibah*, earned her B.A. from a public university in Northern California. As a convert to Islam, she shared:

It took me a good year or so after I reverted to wear the headscarf. I was afraid of it actually. I was afraid of what people would say, but mostly I was afraid of how my family would react. My husband is still Catholic and so is all of his (and my) family. No one knew I was Muslim, but the headscarf would advertise that. One day I woke up and told myself that I could not leave the house until I put it on. I felt like a hypocrite because I officially changed my faith but I was still too weak to do things I knew I should. I became a new person when I put it on. I felt really Muslim. I was proud and although there were many fights and hurtful words said, my husband stood by me and I hope our families will too, if *Allah* wills it [12].

Marisela's story highlights the power and allure of passing. By being Muslim and not wearing the *hijab*, she was acutely aware of her privilege to blend in with the religious majority in the US and to go undetected as a Muslim even within her own family.

Example 6. Sarah, a white American *muhajibah*, received her B.A. from a public university on the east coast. She, as a convert to Islam, explained:

I began wearing *hijab* in Turkey when visiting my in-laws for the first time...I wear it because I believe I should. I'm also very lucky in that it fits my personality very well. In Central Asia [as a Peace Corps volunteer], before I was even Muslim, I found myself buying and occasionally wearing, although people would freak out, headscarves (although I wore them tied in back) just because I liked it. I was drawn to *hijab* even in college when I had no thought of ever becoming Muslim, and I always preferred loose and concealing clothing (my mom used to fight with me to get me to show my body!) [12].

Contrary to the ubiquitous stereotype of Muslim women being forced or intimidated into wearing the *hijab* by fathers, husbands, and brothers, none of the participants who don it expressed or even insinuated that wearing the *hijab* was a decision imposed upon them; if they wear the *hijab*, they have chosen to wear it (whatever the reason). The reasons for wearing the *hijab* varied, and it was interesting to see that a few of the women started wearing it as little girls (e.g., Yasmin and Raaniya). Some of them began wearing the *hijab* as the result of positive peer pressure and belongingness (e.g., Ibtisaam and Yasmin); however, many women who choose to be *muhajabat* do so believing that it is their right to prevent people from seeing what they believe that God has ordained to remain private (e.g., Sultana, Hanna, Marisela, Sarah) and also to demonstrate a collective identity [2,12].

As others shared, it gives them a sense of safety (e.g., Hannah and Raaniya), protection (e.g., Marisela and Najla), privacy (e.g., Sultana and Maria) and freedom (e.g., Raaniya and Hannah). They feel that it allows them to be seen as women of faith (e.g., Hannah and Marisela). Some of them see wearing the *hijab* also has the benefit of breaking stereotypes whenever a *muhajibah* is doing or saying something that causes non-Muslims' paradigms to shift (e.g., Maria and Hannah). They also wear the *hijab* as an outer manifestation of their inner belief, as a way not to display their beauty so they may be listened to rather than looked at by the opposite sex, and also as a reminder to themselves to implement their religious beliefs into everything they do. A couple of the participants even describe it as a behavior modifier, which is to say that wearing it reminds them to maintain their modesty or be cordial in words, deeds and thoughts [12].

One of the most interesting and revelatory findings in this study came from the single participant who did not wear the *hijab*. According to Patricia, a Mexican American convert to Islam, she felt more protected from harm by not wearing the *hijab* because of her ability to pass as non-Muslim and blend into the religious mainstream [12]. I would also argue that not wearing the *hijab* protects her body from becoming a battlefield even though she is Muslim.

7. Conclusions

Muslim women do not need to be pitied or saved by others [11]. This is especially true for Muslim women in the U.S. who are pitied and othered by orientalist notions. They are not simply subjected to

the discourse about their bodies nor do they simply absorb the meaning their bodies have to others; instead, they survey the discourse as they go through life and come to their own conclusions about their bodies [13]. Regardless of narratives imposed upon them by others, many Muslim women are active agents and participants in their religion [13,14].

As illustrated in the qualitative examples above, Muslim women may choose to wear the *hijab* not out of personal desire but out of religious convictions that have to do with the sense of right and wrong and fear of punishment by Allah. There are Muslim women who wear the *hijab* to avoid Allah's wrath, just as some may only pray, fast, and give charity in order to remain in Allah's favor. In such cases it may be, arguably, a form of impression management [14–17] and required hypocrisy as the performance of a “pious Muslim woman” identity [5] is preferred over an authentically pious Muslim woman who presents herself without the *hijab*. This is hardly unique to Muslims; mainstream society also enforces required hypocrisy and the glorification of covering up the female body. Recent examples of this are new dress codes at awards shows like the Grammys and the Oscars. The dress codes mainly target women and try to enforce modesty and decency by requiring the female celebrities to conceal more than they may want [18].

Furthermore, many Muslim women take a partially reactionary and counter-hegemonic approach to wearing the *hijab* [12–14] as Hannah's example shows. It can be worn to signal religious pride, pride or the assertion of a woman's right to be different [10,12,13] from the mainstream population around her (the U.S. in this example), rejection of the expectation of how she should appear, an act of subversion by taking on “a challenged identity” and making it her own [3,13,15], and a form of self-affirming, hostile bravado [10,15]. Moreover, the *hijab* can be worn as a teaching tool and invitation for dialogue from non-Muslims (as Maria suggested), not just as a silent symbol [9] but also as a means to break down stereotypes and cause cognitive dissonance [10,12,13].

The Muslim female body as a battleground for differing ideologies is not something to be taken lightly [11,14]. Unfortunately, there is no ceasefire or peace treaty on the horizon, and the war over her head underscores the troubling truth that women's bodies remain community property, whether that community is Islam, mainstream society, or U.S. feminism. Nevertheless, as many Muslim women continue to de-center and agitate the status quo of religious and secular norms, they encourage self-authoring [19–25] in younger generations of Muslim girls in the US, and, perhaps, around the world.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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