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Title: Beyond the Hijab: Negotiating the Representations of Muslim Women in America

About the Author:

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Abstract: Living in the United States, Muslim women are challenged by the problem of representation in the encounter with the West. My research investigates the experience of hijabis who are living in the United States and the meanings of the hijab to them. Selecting qualitative research method as my approach, I attempt to delve into my participants’ social experiences, and to understand how these social experiences are constructed and given meanings. Considering the time limit that did not allow me to do participant observations, I conducted focused life history interviews, emphasizing on how these women came to the decision to wear the hijab, what experience they passed through, the challenges they encountered and how they dealt with them, as well as the way they see the hijab itself.

The research suggests that the hijab is interpreted as obligatory to all Muslim women, yet something that should not be strictly imposed on women. Most of my participants were motivated to wear the hijab as a way to improve their practice of Islam. Wearing the hijab in the West has been a reminder of representing Muslim and Islam as a whole to them. It encourages them to behave well in order to perform the good image of Islam and Muslims before the Western society. The hijab has become both a boundary and a bridge in their social relations with non-Muslims. It helps them to communicate their identity and the Islamic lifestyles.

None of my participants feel oppressed by the obligatory to wear the hijab. On the contrary, some of them generate the notion of “liberation,” by which they can present themselves in the public sphere comfortably without being disturbed by people's gaze because of their bodies. The definition of the hijab, however, seems to put head covering at the center of discussion and understanding.

Question: Demographic data:

- Name, age, citizenship, marital status, number of children (if any), education, occupation, city of residence, place of birth, and place of growing up.
- How long have you been in the United States?

The meanings of wearing the hijab:

- How do you see the hijab and the order to wear it in Islam?
- In your understanding, which kind of hijab that meet the Islamic requirements?
How do you learn about the *hijab*?

The experience of wearing the *hijab*:

- Can you tell me the story of your life?
- Where were you born?
- What did your family do?
- How was your childhood?
- When did you decide to wear the *hijab*? How did you come to the decision?
- How did you family and friends respond to your decision to wear the *hijab*?
- What did you feel?
- Tell me your experience when you first came to the United States.
- How do you compare your experience of wearing the *hijab* in the United States to that in other countries that you had experienced?

Reflexive meanings of your experience of wearing the *hijab*:

- How do you see yourself with your *hijab* in the future?
- How will you expect your family and other Muslim women regarding the wearing of the *hijab* in the United States and other Western countries?

Data (Field Notes):

Discussion (Final Paper):

**Beyond the Hijab:**

Negotiating the Representation of Muslim Women in the America

“.... The *hijab* is liberating. You aren’t obsessed when people look at you... and what they’re gonna think when you stand up and talk. .... I’ve never really believed that men really enjoy the women until I actually look on the street and notice clearly, following how men really stare at women, and will check out their legs... and they will do things to see the woman. Some people maybe will say this should make you feel good, because it means you’re attractive. But really... I feel like... you’re being used, because any women will find any guy to look at her no matter how big, how tall, or short... or some people will say that you’re ugly, or you’re beautiful... whatever. There will be anyone to stare at her for different reasons or different parts. I prefer to be admired for other characteristics that won’t go away. I prefer being admired for my other characteristics, other than my physical body....”

(Khadija, March 2009).
Khadija affirms that wearing the hijab, she goes beyond her physical appearance and finds her way to stand equal to men in giving contribution to society. Like other female participants in my research, Khadija believes that women should be respected for more than merely their bodies. In fact, these six hijabis show that being Muslims and wearing the hijab do not impede them from participating in social and academic activities. One of my participants was a researcher at the university engineering laboratory. Two of them are Ph. D. candidates, one of whom is now researching biological science and the other is researching public spaces. The other two participants are Master’s students in social science, and the other is an undergraduate student who just graduated from Islamic studies and is now pursuing her medical studies in another college. In addition to their involvement at the university, four of my participants are wives and mothers of one or three children.

Living in the United States, Muslim women are challenged by the problem of representation in the encounter with the West, who has been an enthusiastic—and even in some cases supicious—spectator at Muslim world, particularly increasing in the aftermath of the 9/11, as identified by Gerges (2007), Abdo (2006), Mamdani (2004), and Milton-Edwards (2004). Furthermore, Ahmed (1992) mentions that Muslim women are challenged by the Western representation of Muslims, particularly the notorious and prevalent perception that Islam oppresses women.

The hijab, or headscarf, has been widely recognized as Islamic religious clothing. Although the issue of the hijab in the United States is not as threatening as that in Europe, Muslim women who wear the hijab in the United States often see themselves and are being seen by the
Western community as the representatives of Islam and Muslims as a whole. The hijab has become a symbol of both Islamic culture and Islamic ideology when encountering the West, but at the same time, also a shield and emblem to show their Muslim identity.

My research investigates the experience of the hijabis who are living in the United States and the meanings of the hijab to them. Selecting qualitative research method as my approach, I attempt to delve into my participants’ both personal and social experiences, and to understand how these experiences are constructed and given meanings. I conducted focused life history interviews, emphasizing on how these women came to the decision to wear the hijab, what experience they passed through, the challenges they encountered and how they negotiated with them, as well as the way they see the hijab itself.

I conclude that the hijab deals with the issue of representation to both the insiders and the outsiders, who generate different perspectives in seeing the hijab. The outsiders may see it as a form of discrimination against Muslim women. yet to the insiders, the hijab is understood as both a way to enhance the quality of the practice of Islam and a way to liberate themselves beyond bodies and physical appearance.

**Introducing the Hijabis**

My participants are all hijabis who have been living in the United States for at least one year when I am doing my research. The word hijabi is common to be used to address a Muslim woman who is wearing the headscarf. The hijabis who are participating in this research are my acquaintances whom I have known very well during my one-and-a-half-year residence at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
Zaynab is a Muslim girl, who just graduated from the university at the end of 2008. She is a citizen of the United States, a second-generation Indian American, who was born and grew up in Chicago area. Having been in the United States her whole life, Zaynab has been used to being minority. Her parents moved to the United States in the early 1980s for job opportunities. Following them, their parents, or Zaynab’s grandmother and grandfather, and their siblings with their families also moved to the United States. They try to preserve and inherit their Indian identity to Zaynab, her siblings, and her cousins through language, clothings, and other family traditional rituals. Yet, Zaynab confesses, she has been more americanized than indianized. In fact, the religion of Islam, rather than their Indian background, has been major in constructing their identity.

Like Zaynab, Khadija is a second-generation Egyptian American, who was born in the United States. Like Zaynab, she is a citizen of the United States, yet identifies herself as an Egyptian. Her parents had been in the United States since they were students at university. Khadija and her family moved to Saudi Arabia for her parent’s job when she was five years old. They had lived there for several years when Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi, was bombed in the Gulf War in the early 1990s. Due to security issue, they decided to go back to the United States. As Khadija grows into a teenager, her parents decided to return back to Saudi Arabia. Having known teens’ lifestyle in the states, her father did not want to raise Khadija in the United States. Khadija lived her teen ages in Saudi until she finished her high school. Since the Saudi’s universities did not accept non-Saudi citizens, Khadija herself moved to Egypt to pursue her undergraduate in an international university there. After graduating
from the university and working for a year in Egypt, Khadija applied for jobs and graduate admissions in the United States. Her journey finally ended up at UIUC, where she studied biological science for her dissertation.

While both Zaynab and Khadija have not been married yet, my other four participants are married and having children. Tina is a greencard holder, who has been living in North America for eighteen years, six years of which were spent in Canada for her undergraduate degree and one-year working. She got married to another Indonesian student before she finished her undergraduate study in 1996. Her husband was pursuing his doctoral degree in a Southwestern city in the United States at that time. After experiencing a long-distance relationship with her husband, Tina moved to her husband’s city in 1997. Fortunately, she obtained a doctoral admission with assistanship at her husband’s university. Before she accomplished her dissertation, again, her husband had to move to another town in the midwest area of the United States. She moved to her husband’s new town a year prior to her dissertation completion.

Tina had a chance to be a full-time mother for four and a half years. With two children at the time, she was very busy at home, yet her husband encouraged her to find a job to let her apply her degree and find wider social networks. Although being a full-time mother was sometimes boring to Tina, she found time to participate in the mosque and to get along with other Muslim women in the town. Her busy days at her office did not allow her to go to the mosque frequently. Now after giving birth to her third daughter, Tina decided to resign from her work. Agus, her husband, has been accepted in his new job in another city at the east
Tina wants to focus her time to take care of her newborn baby and daughters in their new environment.

Being a mother with three children and a Ph. D. candidate at the university, Zahra is also working hard to manage her time. She is a Palestinian, who had been teaching for ten years at a university before she was granted a fellowship to pursue a doctoral degree at the United States. Her husband has been a great support to both her professional and academic careers. He even temporarily resigns from his work in Palestine to accompany Zahra pursuing her degree. They and their two children came to the United States in the end of 2006. The third child was born during their first year in the states. Zahra’s husband is fortunate to find a job in a factory, although it does not relate to his expertise. He and Zahra arrange their schedule to take care of their children while working or studying.

Similar to Zahra, Rini and Nur are also fortunate to have supportive husbands. Their husbands left their jobs in their home country to accompany Rini and Nur taking their Master’s degree in the United States. Rini is an Indonesian woman who has been living in the United States for one and a half year. She left her husband after their months-old marriage. Her husband came to accompany her a month prior to their baby’s birth. Her baby was born when she was busy preparing the final exams in her second semester. Before continuing her education to the United States, Rini was a teacher in an Islamic school in Indonesia.

Nur also gave her baby’s birth in the United States at the end of her semester. She is a Malaysian woman, who had taught in a university in Malaysia for two years before she came here. Both Nur’s and Rini’s husbands are now part-time working while taking care of their babies.
The Hijra to the Hijab

Wearing the hijab is perceived as an improvement toward a better step in being a Muslim woman to all my participants. Nevertheless, it is not as simple as changing fashion. Wearing the hijab means more control over mind and body, as a form of submission to God.

Zaynab was in the fourth grade when she was interested in the hijab for the first time. She was amazed by the headscarf when Fanaa, her oldest sister who was in the eighth grade, started wearing the hijab in 1987. Their parents were anxious to know Fanaa’s plan, the night before she began putting on the hijab for good. Having resided in the United States for almost a decade, Zaynab’s parents really understood how Muslims had been mostly intimidated for their religious belief. “Are you sure you want to wear the hijab, Fanaa? Do you really want it?” her parents tried to convince Fanaa of her decision. Zaynab understood, her parents were concerned about their daughters’ well-being and safety. They were concerned about what people would think about Fanaa’s new appearance.

To Zaynab, the new cloths on her sister’s head was a mystery, which then quickly turned into an excitement once she asked Fanaa about it. Her heart was thrilled, filled with enthusiasm to practice her religion better, like what Fanaa did. She knew, Fanaa just talked to her Islamic teacher and was told about the Quranic verses of hijab. The other day, all Zaynab wanted was wearing her hijab to school. But soon as she arrived at school, her excitement turned into confusion. Everybody asked her, what she was wearing on her head. It was a hot day and her hijab seemed weird to her friends, yet she was only ten years old that time and she had no idea of what the hijab was all about. Zaynab was so
embarassed that she could not answer their questions.

Four years later, Zaynab experienced both a hard and a happy time in her life. Her grandfather passed away. Like other family members, her grandfather was very close to Zaynab and her family. He and Zaynab’s grandmother always spent their time staying with their children and grandchildren from one of their child’s house to another since they moved to the United States in the early 1980s.

Zaynab was still grieving over her grandfather when one of her friends, whom she had known for seven years, was died from cancer. She was fourteen years old at that time, yet she had suffered from such a loss. She suddenly thought of death and how it could come to anyone, including her, her father, and anyone else in her family, anytime and anywhere.

In fact, the year was special to Zaynab. Not only because of her experience of her grandfather’s and friend’s death, but also due to her youngest sister’s birth.

“I experience life and death. It was an interesting combination for me, you know... And I started to realize more and more about Islam, so that the entire idea about where I go in this life that I was born and no... I am gonna die, too. The entire year was very life-changing for me. ... I started really thinking how can I improve myself and my faith” (Zaynab, March 2009).

She started reading books on Islam over summer that year. Additionally, she and her family also attended ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) convention in Chicago. Meeting many Muslims and listening to the Islamic lectures had opened her mind to the entire world of Islam. She did not want to lose her chance to live a better religious life. Zaynab began to put on her hijab when she was in her freshman year in high school, several months after the ISNA convention, and only two weeks before the 9/11.
Practicing better Islam is also Tina’s major intention when she decided to wear the hijab during her senior year in a college in Canada. Tina was graduated from a senior high school in one of the big cities in Indonesia. Having been living away from her parents since her freshman year at the high school, Tina has been trained to be an independent girl. Her father worked from one city to another. Residing with her grandmother was the best choice for Tina to finish her education in one of the best high schools in the country.

Tina has been very interested in applied science since graduating from high school. She proposed to her father to continue her school to a well-known engineering college in other city, but her father disagreed. He did not want her to be away from family. Yet her father changed his mind when Tina proposed her plan to apply for a governmental educational program, which funded a number of talented Indonesian students to pursue their undergraduate degree abroad. Surprisingly, her parents agreed and supported her plan. Although she felt that it was hard to leave her parents for such a very long distance, Tina was grateful that her parents gave her trust.

Tina was one among the very rare female students in her department. She was also one among a few Muslim students in the university. Living a small town in Canada where there were a very small number of Muslims, Tina did not have much reference to fulfill her religious. Nevertheless, one day before she finished her undergraduate degree in Canada, she started thinking of her identity as a Muslim. She had begun to think about the hijab, but had not worn it yet. Of course she had some scarves and Muslim clothings. Her mom sent her from
Indonesia for celebrating Eid al-Fitr, one of the largest Islamic holidays. The clothes, however, were too outdated, she thought. She would look like an old lady with it. Therefore she kept her dream of wearing the hijab in her mind.

She went home to Indonesia in 1996 to get married to Agus, another Indonesian student who was studying for a doctoral degree in a Southwestern city of the United States. Agus returned earlier to the United States several days after their wedding, letting Tina spend more days in her parents’ house. When she would return to Canada by herself, her father became worried about her. Tina had just undergone her surgery at that time. Surprisingly, her father said to her, “Don’t you want to try to put your hijab on? Allah will keep you protected, Insha Allah.” Having learned about the hijab during the last several months, Tina put on her hijab as she left for the airport. She herself was surprised with what she was doing. She never thought of wearing the headscarf in the near time. She had been used to wearing long-sleeve shirt, long skirt for once or twice, and trousers because of her big tall body. But wearing the headscarf? And that day, she wore that in a very neat and covered way. “I didn’t know... but it seemed that Allah had arranged everything for me, and there it went,” she tells me. She even did not have time to tell Agus about her decision, although they had discussed it several times before they got married. Living in a Muslim community in his university, Agus had learned about the hijab more than Tina. Although he did not force her to wear the hijab, Agus hoped that Tina would wear it someday. Tina’s new appearance surprised her friends as she arrived at the airport in Canada. They never expected Tina’s new clothings, however, they
respected her decision.

Being different from peers and friends is always a difficult time to pass through for several hijabis. Nur, who started wearing her hijab, among a religious Islamic community. Although she went to madrasa to learn Islamic studies and reading the Qur’an, she rarely wore the hijab other than to the madrasa. Her father had encouraged her to wear the hijab in her fifteenth birthday, was first also dealing with such issue. Nur lived most of her life in one of the big cities in since she was nine years old, but she only wore it to family events and the madrasa.

When she entered the age of thirteen, her father reminded her of wearing the hijab more intensely.

“He never forced me to wear it, but everytime I was about to stepped out of the house, he always asked me, ‘Where is your hijab?’ So I never had time to argue with him. I just returned back to my room and wore my hijab,” Nur tells me her story. However, she never wore her hijab to go with her friends. “I was not ready to be different from my peer. Why should I wear the hijab, while my friends did not?”

(Nur, March 2009).

Her father and her mother were both born into imams’ families in their town. Imam is a community Islamic religious leader. Although not all imams’ daughters wore the hijab, people mostly expected them to wear the hijab due to their fathers’ religious reputation. Nur’s mother did not wear her hijab until she got married to Nur’s father in the age of nineteen, encouraged by husband’s support and their parents’ religious status. Nur tells me that the hijab was not common and even repressed by Malaysian government before the 1980s, considered a religious
symbol. Islamic identity has been more accepted since the early of the decade, and thus also encouraged Nur’s mother to start wearing her hijab.

When Nur got her first menstruation in the age of fourteen, her mother reminded her of the need for protecting herself. She also gave her confidence for being different from her peer. “Allah will give you the reward,” she said to Nur. While she began to build her self confidence, something happened when she hanged out with her peers at a shopping mall. They usually went there to play games at the game station after school before going home. That day, Nur and her female friends were walking from the game station when a group of male youngsters hugged them from behind. They did not know each other, but the boys assumed that the girls would be similar to other girls they usually met in the mall. The fact that their modest, yet without-hijab, appearance did not make them different from other girls who would not have any problem to be treated in a such way, was shocking to Nur and made her really upset. She began to think about wearing the hijab, yet did not want to change her lifestyle very much. “I thought that I had to be different from those girls, eventhough I would still go to game station.” She decided that her fifteenth birthday would be her turning point to start doing it. Her friends were all surprised with her hijab, yet she did not want to persuade that wearing the hijab is the rightest thing and not wearing it is less good than wearing it. She convinced her friends that wearing the hijab was her fifteenth-birthday resolution and she would stay with them. She would go to the game station, but would try to behave better.

Different from Nur, whose parents played a role in encouraging
the wearing of the hijab, Rini senses that her parents did not encourage her at all. Residing in a small village in Indonesia, the young Rini did not see the hijab as a symbol of Muslim women’s piety. On the contrary, there was a public assumption that related the hijab to Islamic extremism. Therefore, although her neighborhood was relatively religious in traditional sense, Rini did not see many women wearing the full hijab.

After graduating from her college and working for a year in a small town in Indonesia, Rini applied for a job in another big city in the country. She taught English course part timely and thus applied for another job as a teacher in an Islamic elementary school. She had not worn the hijab back then, yet the Islamic school required all of its teachers to wear the hijab at school for the reason of children’s teaching consistency. During her first year, Rini put her hijab on and off. She was wearing it only when she taught at the Islamic school. Several other teachers did it, too. Her school principal did not mind at all with the way she wore her hijab. However, Rini became very embarrassed to meet her teacher friends outside the school without her hijab. Therefore, she finally decided to put it on everytime she left house or meet men other than her family members. “It was in 2002. People no longer saw women who wore the hijab as extremists. So was the Indonesian government. My parents were even happy to know that I finally wore the hijab,” says Rini. When she met Dito, who is now her husband, Rini had worn her hijab.

Zahra and Khadija experienced the wearing of hijab differently.
Zahra grew in a big family of fourteen in one of Palestine’s big cities. Most people in her town were religious people who were concerned about sexual segregation in everyday life. Men and women tended to dress modestly, although not all women wore the hijab. Zahra had not worn her hijab until she was sixteen years. Several years prior to it, her older brother had reminded her of the need for wearing the hijab. It is very important,” her brother told her. Zahra realized that she was a rebellious person. “You are speaking about that, so I will not wear it,” she replied. She wanted to be herself and did not want to be pressed, even if it was about something that she believed obligatory. Her brother left their home to work in another town when Zahra was still at middle school. frequently. Her brother was at the college at that time. “Zahra, you have to wear the

Zahra always went to girl schools from elementary to middle school. Yet a single-sex education on science was not possible when Zahra continued to high school. There were only forty five science students in town, consisting of thirty male students and only fifteen female students. Israeli occupation of Palestine would only allow it to open a class if there were at least thirty students. Therefore, the local government decided to open a co-education to accommodate female students. Zahra was grateful about the decision, so that she could continue her education in her favourite subject. However, with the new different system, another problem emerged. She felt very exposed everytime she was in the class, particularly when she had to go to the front of the class to present something or to write something on the board. Therefore she decided to wear the hijab to school the following day. Nevertheless, he had a dilemma in the afternoon on the first day of
her hijab, when her mother asked her to go to Zahra’s grandmother’s house.

“I told my mom that I wouldn’t go, but you know… I really wanted to come to my grandmas’s house. I was struggling in myself, whether or not I would go with my hijab. If I went without my hijab, then what should I do if I met my classmates on the street? My heart talked to me, ‘Why don’t you wear it? What do you worry about?’ And that’s it! I went to my room. I decided to wear the hijab and went to grandma’s house. Well… I think I should have made that decision earlier, but I did not want to take it because of my brother. When he told me that I should wear the hijab, I told him that I wouldn’t do it. I wanted to be my self and to take the decision all by myself. My brother was in another town for her job training at that time…”

(Zahra, March 2009).

Khadija also implies that the motivation to wear the hijab self. During her residence in Saudi Arabia she did not provide her with choices of wearing the hijab. One day in her childhood, she was walking with her father without the hijab. She was only seven years old that time, yet people would think that she was older due to her big body. A group of men with white robes and beard, called amar ma’ruf nahi munkar jilbab, or a long robe and the veil, would put her in danger. Although her father had explained that she was not as old as she looked, but both Zahra and her father realized that Zahra had to start wearing the jilbab, otherwise everybody on the street would stare at her. Zahra was very excited to wear the clothes during the first year, but it turned into a confinement to her, particularly when she wanted to play with her friends. She envied them for not having to wear the jilbab although they were at the same age. should come from one’s when she was a child and a teenager, she was extremely imposed to wear the group, warned her father that letting such a big girl without
Khadija admits that she was not happy to wear the *jilbab* in Saudi Arabia. The government strictly controlled the way women dressed, walked, talked, and even the (only) kind of dresses that they could choose. In fact, they did not have choices. “They made you wear it! I was happy for a while, because it’s part of my religion, but then… they forced it. I wasn’t happy about that!” says Zahra. In addition to the black, loose robe with extended back part to cover the head, Zahra had to cover her face with *niqab* everytime she went to public spaces. “I felt like wearing a box, you know…,” she describes her clothings. Many immigrants also adopted the dresses because they were imposed to do so. Some Sudanists and Indians she knew wore their black *jilbab* on the way to and from work. Since women’s workplace was separated from men’s place, they put off their *jilbab* were available at stores, the government did not recommend them due to their decorative styles, and thus considered not appropriate. and changed it with their traditional clothings when they were working. “Nobody wanted to stand out. They didn’t want to disrespect the culture either,” Zahra explains why no woman appeared differently in the public space. Although a number of designer

When her father decided to send her to Egypt to pursue her undergraduate degree, Khadija was very excited for several reasons. First, she got a chance to know her family’s origin. Second, she was excited to live in such a diverse environment, getting to know different people who did things differently. The most important thing, she was happy because she did not have to wear the very confining *hijab*, like the one she had to wear in Saudi. Soon as she arrived in Egypt, she put her *hijab* off. She felt like she was re-born. Instead of getting away from Islam, the diverse environment with multiple Islamic thoughts motivated
her to re-learn Islam, her religion.

However, for two years after putting off her hijab, Khadija had gradually thought about her identity. She was born in the United States, her parents are Egyptians but she did not know much about the culture. Her personal trajectory finally brought her to the decision that she was a Muslim. She was impressed when one of her friends who was very beautiful, decided to wear the hijab. Furthermore, some of her friends with whom she felt comfortable to get along, suddenly disappeared to think about divine issues and the hereafter.

One day when she was on the bus on her way back to her apartment, Khadija suddenly felt “very exposed.” She was in her ordinary T-shirt and jeans. Nobody in the bus were staring at her, but she felt exposed. It did not take much time for her to think about her decision. “I probably would not come to the decision if I sat and thought. It was a long process...,” Khadija tells her story. Therefore, she took a headscarf from her mother’s room and wore it. Her mother was still in Saudi with her sister, who was finishing her high school, at the time. She was with his father, who was just retired. Her father looked at Khadija who was ready to leave with her hijab without saying anything. “I’m going to the university like this today,” said Khadija to her father. As she walked to the bus stop, she hesitated she would keep going or not. “‘Oh, no... it’s syaithon [satan],’ I told myself.” Her friends thought, she wore the hijab to prepare for Ramadhan. Egyptian girls usually wore their hijab during Ramadhan and put it off afterward. But Khadija told her friends that her hijab would stay forever.
Learning and Understanding the Hijab

Zaynab, Tina, Zahra, Khadija, Rini, and Nur grew up in Islamic families and environments. Their parents were concerned about their children’s Islamic education. Those who went to schools in Muslim countries like Palestine, Malaysia, and Indonesia, obtained a certain subject of Islamic religion at their schools, albeit public schools. However, growing up in the United States does not mean lacking of religious studies. Both Zaynab and Khadija went to Sunday schools weekly to learn reading the Qur’an and to understand other Islamic lessons. They also spent their summer, learning Islam more in the mosque or in the Islamic conventions.

Even though all of my participants studied Islam during their childhood, not all of them prioritized the wearing of the hijab in their teen days. Rini even mentions that a hijabi was considered an extremist Muslim in her village in the 1980s. So does Tina. Their stories suggest that wearing the hijab was not solely a symbol of piety and religiosity. In fact, many Muslim women in Rini’s village lived religious life, yet did not wear the fully-covering hijab.

Community and family are critical in supporting one’s intention of wearing the hijab. The negative stigma of the hijab discouraged Rini. Additionally, she grew among religious community and went to schools with relatively conservative surroundings. Similar to Rini, Tina sees that hijabis were considered different from ordinary Muslims when she was in high school in the 1980s to the early of the 1990s. Indonesia was ruled under the authoritarian Suharto regime, which repressed hijabis through a number of regulations. The prohibition of hijab on profile
pictures, school certificates, personal identities, and driving license cards are several among the many examples of the repressive regulations.

Although Tina did not grow with challenges that demanded her to wear the *hijab* like the ones that were experienced by Zahra, Khadija, and Nur, she was motivated to learn Islam better during the process of constructing her identity among Western society. Slightly different, Rini internalized the *hijab* through her everyday life. The *hijab* had gradually become her identity to represent the banner of Islam as she worked in an Islamic school. For Nur, wearing the *hijab*, Nur wanted to differ herself from other ordinary girls, who would not mind to mingle with any boys. Although different in their contexts, Rini, Tina, and Nur dealt with identity construction when putting on their *hijab*. In fact, the Qur’anic verse, in which the *jilbab* is ordained, also highlights the notion of identity. was firstly understood as part of her responsibility for preserving her family religious identity. Yet she finally found it critical to declare her identity as a good Muslim girl. By her

“O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”

(Sura 33:59).

The verse also shows that the word used to address Muslim women’s clothing is *jalaba* or *jilbab*, or an outer garment. Differently, the word *hijab* specifically means a headscarf. Covering the *awra*, or the parts of the body that must not be exposed to the public, from people other than one’s *mahram*, or persons whom a Muslim cannot marry, has been understood well by my participants as the essence of wearing the
hijab. However, the shifting terminology implies the changing focus of covering the awra to the covering of head or hair. Most of my participants had dressed modestly with a long-sleeve shirt and trousers before they put on their headscarf. However, it was the headscarf that made them being seen and noticed by other people.

Wearing the hijab is understood as a religious obligation to my participants. Tina reaffirms the Qur’anic verses ordaining the wearing of the hijab to all Muslim women. To her, it is clear and unnegotiable. She believes that God intendedly ordains it to women for the sake of them. Therefore, she accepts the notion of gaze control in Islam. Despite the order to control the gaze to both men and women, Tina views that who may see and who may be seen are arranged in Islam differently according to sexual differences. She shares her experience doing her prayers and social interaction in an Islamic center in one of the Southwestern city in the United States. The Islamic center separates men’s and women’s prayer rooms with a one-way glass divider, which is usually opened for wedding feast. “We, the women, could see the men through the glass, but they couldn’t see us. We could also communicate with them through the door. I usually asked a brother [a Muslim man] for passing a message to my husband. Cell phones were still uncommon at the time, so I asked for their help. Although we could see the men, women usually talked as short as possible without seeing the men to whom they talked. We controlled ourselves although we were given access to them,” Tina tells her story.

Self-control is also learned well by Zahra from her community and family. Growing in a conservative religious community and family, Zahra
is internalizing the norm of sexual segregation. She felt that the way they arranged their seats in the high school, in which male and female students sat in separate rows, did not provide her with enough privacy. Different from her male friends who had played with her since her childhood, her male classmates were strangers to Zahra.

**Living with the Hijab in America: Building a Boundary, Bridging the Gap**

When Tina returned back to her university town in Canada with her hijab after her marriage, it was in 1996. Although many of her friends asked her about her hijab and her reason to put it on, Tina tried to make the answer as simple as possible. “I often could not manage my time for dressing-up during class exams. I usually changed my clothes, put my baseball cap on, and leave for the exams. I didn’t have enough time to brush my hair. So when some friends interrogated me about my reason to wear the hijab, I just answered, ‘No more bad hair day,’ while laughing,” says Tina.

Her friends at her college in Canada and colleagues at the graduate school and at her recent workplace in the United States hijab. In fact, she tries to get along with them well. She can talk and discuss anything, including sports, science, and religions, with them. By doing this, Tina hopes that her friends did not see her by her hijab, open-handedly accept Tina with her

It was less than a month after she came back to Canada with her hijab when she met a woman who commented her hijab. They both waited for the bus at a bus stop. The woman suddenly said, “I’m
fortunate for not having to wear that again,” with a glance at Tina’s headscarf. Tina was shocked to hear her comments. “They forced me to put it on my head,” the woman continued. The woman lived in a Middle Eastern country in which the jilbab was imposed before she moved to Canada. “It was a trial on me who just learned to practice my religion better. So I did not think about her words too much,” Tina smiles.

Wearing the hijab in both Canada and the United States, Tina sees that both countries provides her with more comfort in wearing the hijab, rather than Indonesia, her home country.

“I don’t have to worry of what people think of my clothes here. They see this more as fashion. In Indonesia, oh no… Once I dressed with my jilbab [black long dress] to go to a shopping mall with my mom. My mom asked me, ‘Are you serious with wearing that dress? People will think you are your children’s babysitter. They’ll think you’re an immigrant worker…’ I don’t understand… why they bother noticing others’ clothings. They care about others’ makeup, what they put on their bodies… I feel more comfortable here.”

(Tina, March 2009).

The hijab has increasingly become a catching-eye attire since the 9/11 event. Although experiencing the condition of being minority for years in the United States, Zaynab feels the difference in the way the Western people look at the hijab before and after the terror, which occurred two weeks after she began wearing the hijab in October 2001. She was one among the very few Muslim students in her high school. Many of her friends had known her being a Muslim when she was practicing fasting during the month of Ramadhan. They also saw her doing her prayers at school everyday. However, the way they looked at her was changing as she put the hijab on her head, although she was the second hijabi her school after another senior student. Her hijab seemed
to be a clear, loud declaration of her being Muslim. On the early days of her hijab, several friends asked them, “What’s that on your head? Why are you wearing that? Did your parents force you to do that?” The readings and the lectures at the ISNA convention over summer assured Zaynab to answer their questions. She convinced them that she did it under nobody’s pressure. She did it in order to practice her religion better. Most of them understood it a personal decision. Some of her friends pulled themselves away from her. Zaynab tried not to think about it. Fortunately, she just entered the high school and met new friends. As times went by, Zaynab learned not to take her friends’ curiosity on her hijab seriously. Once she heard one of her male friend passed her while singing a song with the word “turbanator” in its lyrics. Zaynab could not resist laughing, listening to his song, which should have made her insulted with its modified lyrics. The boy was surprised that she was not offended at all and finally respected her more.

When the 9/11 happened, the situation was completely changed. On the day when the terror took place, Zaynab was in her German hijab, and other Muslims had very quickly become the center of the world’s attention. Their class was suddenly wrapped up in a fearful silence. Zaynab felt that her fear was more than the others’ fear, particularly when the news on television mentioned that Muslims were the actors of the terror. She could not imagine what would happen to her, but her teacher told her again and again that everything was alright and would be fine. That day she had to walk home on foot without her sister. She was fearful of what might happen, but she convinced herself that it would be fine to walk home alone. Her house was not far from school, taking only five minutes. She was walking on the side of the street when a car
stopped for a while, honking at her. The driver looked at her angrily without saying anything. Zaynab did not know what she should do, but she realized that she, her

Islam has become more and more popular afterward. Zaynab sees that the terror had grown more curiosity of Islam and Muslim among Western society. The hijab was not questioned too much when Fanaa, her oldest sister, wore it four years prior to the terror. It was seen more as a fashion statement, rather than a political symbol. The news on television helped people to identify Muslim and Islam, including through the hijab. Suddenly those religious and cultural signs turned into political symbols, blending all Muslims in the world into a monolithic group of Muslim and a single Islam.

Responding to the increasing questions on Islam, the Department of History at Zaynab’s school initiated an Islamic panel several weeks after the 9/11. Some Muslim students, one of whom was Fanaaa, were invited to sit in the panel and were asked to answer other students’ questions on Islam and Muslim, particularly on terrorism and the hijab. The audience was very enthusiastic with the discussions, although several of them sounded more interrogating than questioning. The panel was held again the following year. Since Fanaa had graduated from the school, she did not sit in the panel anymore. The year was Zaynab’s turn. The audience was still enthusiastic, yet showing more understanding on Islam. The panelists were even supported by most of the audience when some people tried to blame the chaotic conditions in the United States on Muslims. To Zaynab, the Islamic panel was both a challenge and a form of her responsibility for protecting Islam. Through this panel, she
introduced Islam she learned to wider audience and tried to build better interfaith understanding.

People’s different way of seeing Islam was also experienced by Khadija when she returned back to the United States in 2005, after graduating from her college in Egypt and worked for one year there. People seemed to know who Muslims were and what they were doing. Khadija was selected in an internet interview for a job in the United States. The interviewer, who was an Indian man, asked her, “Do you think the way you dress will cause a lot of problem for you working here?” Khadija was not surprised with that question. “It’s obvious to me that you yourself are not white, blond, with blue eyes. So we both look different each other,” she replied. Among the only three applicants who were left for two positions, Khadija was the one who did not get the job. She tells me that she did not feel either sad or disappointed at that time. She knew what she was doing and she was convinced with the way she dressed. Not long after the job refusal, she obtained an admission for a doctoral program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Although the university is a diverse environment, a number of people in her department ask about her hijab. Khadija is always enthusiastic to explain her hijab to other people. However, not all people respect her personal choice. One day she worked with a sour material in the laboratory. Accidentally, the liquid splashed out and left one drop on her clothes. She went to the restroom to clean her clothes with water. A person who coincidently came to the bathroom said, “Yeah, that’s what happen when you wear a lot of clothings.”

“I was sad when I heard her comments. It seemed that the way I dressed did not fit what I was doing. But let’s think this way... This
clothes protect my skin from accidents that may last for years. And I should be thankful for that.”

(Khadija, March 2009).

It was only several months ago when she experienced other unpleasing incidents. She was shopping at a grocery with her sister who came to visit her. They were talking in Arabic when an American woman said, “Shut up, you bitch. Get out of here, go back to your country!” Khadija and her sister were very upset but did not say anything. She assumed that the woman was probably unhappy with her life and spilled her resentment to them. She was very sad seeing that the woman said such a rude stereotyping words in front of her little child. The words she said probably would disappeared soon from her lips, yet the child would keep them firmly in his mind.

The other day, Khadija was walking on the side of a street with other hijabi when a car honked at her. When she turned her head, she saw the female driver in the car pointed her middle finger to her. Again, Khadija was upset, yet also sad at the same time. She tried to understand that people who picked on her and other innocent Muslims were exposed too much to distorted stories and news on Muslims and Islam.

Although some participants experiencing their bad moments due to people’s stigmatization on their hijab, Zahra tells me that most people she meets at the university respect them very well. They look at her hijab but then showing their hospitality. She feels different, yet welcome. Rini also feels being different on the bus. She notices that people would tend to take other seats first before sitting next to her, although the bus
is full with passengers.

In fact, the *hijab* helps the *hijab*is not only to declare their identity as Muslims, but also to communicate their lifestyles, which in some cases are not compatible with Western lifestyle.

“I don’t have to tell my friends that I don’t go to bar. They know, ‘She’s a Muslim. She won’t go with us for drinking.’ There is also a Muslim man complained, ‘I have told them that I’m a Muslim, I don’t drink and I don’t go to the bar. But they keep asking me everytime they have a party....’

(Khadija, March 2009).

“Once a friend ask me if I can go with the group for a party at a bar. I asked her, ‘Will you bring your child to a bar?’ and she say no. ‘Okay, so I won’t go to the bar,’ I told her. Everytime we went out for lunch together, they always asked me to choose a place. They know that I am a picky eater. I told them that I can eat veggies or seafood, but not meat. I told them that I always bought meat at certain butchers.”

(Tina, March 2009).

Wearing the *hijab* in Western community, most of my participants feel that they are being representatives of Muslims in front of the West. Tina tells me that she wants people outside Islam to know that Islam and Muslims are *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*, bringing blessings to the world.

Thinking that she is standing for Muslims, Nur always tries her best to show that Muslim women are not oppressed. They are also educated and standing side by side to men. Nur tries to show that her *hijab* does not hamper her from participating in any kinds of activities. She was an athlete of athletics and net ball, who often participated in regional competition representing her high school. Similarly, Zaynab was also an athlete of badminton in her high school.

Khadija refuses to think that by wearing the *hijab*, she is a
representative of Muslims. She prefers to do her best and let people know that the hijab is the way she dresses. She believes that by doing her best, she spreads the messages of Islam to other people, even if she does not say or tries to show anything to them.

**Conclusions**

The hijab has been a political rather than a religious symbol in the encounter with the West, particularly at the aftermath of the 9/11.

My participants believe that wearing the hijab is obligatory to all Muslim women, yet something that should not be imposed strictly on them. Most of them see the hijab as a way to improve themselves to be better Muslim women, thus it should begin from themselves. Nevertheless, in most cases, male relatives, particularly brother, husband or future husband, and father, are persons who take the responsibility for reminding them of wearing the hijab without pushing them.

To most participants, wearing the hijab has been a reminder of representing Muslims and Islam as a whole. It encourages them to behave well in order to both perform the good image of Islam and Muslims and convey the messages of the peaceful and egalitarian Islam to the Western society. the hijab also helps them to communicate their Muslim identity and their lifestyles, which are sometimes incompatible with the Western lifestyle.

My participants both implicitly and explicitly refuse the idea that the hijab is a form of oppression or discrimination against them. On the contrary, most of them generate the idea of the hijab as “liberation,” by
which they can present themselves in the public sphere comfortably without being disturbed by people’s gaze because of their bodies.

The best level of wearing the hijab is understood as putting on loose clothes with the hijab covering over head to bosssom. It should be “not showing the shape of our bodies.” Although what they understand about veiling (in Qur’an: jalaba) is covering the whole body except hand palms and the face, covering the hair seems to be central and the most significant thing, by which someone is considered wearing the hijab. The hair veiling is also central to the outsiders'/Western gaze. The hijab (headscarf), not the long blouse and skirt, has been a symbol of difference, or in a clearer sense, a symbol of ideological threat.

I agree with Naber and Karim that the hijab has served as a Muslim women’s identity in addition to their cultural identity. Although having stayed for years or even holding the citizenship of the United States, my participants identify themselves with their parents’ ethnicity. Although Mernissi mentions that the hijab has represented “the absence of internal control” (185), my participants show that they authority of putting on the ordained clothings is all in them.

Reference


