

Chapter 4

Muslim Women: Embodying Identity

4.1. Introduction

Dressing the body of Muslim women and the idea of beauty has invited many socio-political controversies worldwide. As discussed in the introductory chapter, feminists have argued that the religious strictures on covering the body of Muslim women highlight the oppressive patriarchal system infused within Islam. The veiling prevalent among Muslim women worldwide made them more susceptible to being observed as 'from a backward religion', the 'oppressed section of women', etc. Similarly, the idea of beauty has restricted meanings and practices for Muslim women. The erotic capital and beauty possessed by women were a constant source of conflict both at the macro or micro levels in history. Islamist feminists have vehemently critiqued Muslim women's universal caricature and understanding. They argued for a different paradigm to understand veiling within the socio-political discourses within the Islamic nations. There are deep-rooted socio-cultural underpinnings in dressing the body rather than simply protecting the body from climatic variations. It has to be looked at within the larger practices of the purdah system prevalent in most South-East Asian countries. It is a practice through which females are secluded from the larger frame of public life by covering their faces and hiding their physical form to protect their modesty.

The idea of beauty has multiple interpretations, and it has been argued that these are two sides of the same coin. '...beauty's meaning in women's lives continues to be a problem. On the one hand, feminists have argued that beauty ideals and practices reflect patriarchal domination. These stress slightly different arguments but seem to coalesce that beauty practices act as a means of social control over the female body. On the other hand, beauty

is also seen as a potentially pleasurable instrument of female agency' (Listyani et al., 2018). Hakim (2010, 2011) has also argued how attractiveness can be used as a capital and how erotic capital plays a vital role in modern society, marriage markets, labour markets, the media, politics, advertising, sports, and the arts. She also argues that this capital is vital to understanding social and economic processes.

In India, covering one kind or the other has been a marker of a woman's identity and status. The form of *purdah*, practised primarily on Northern Indian Hindu women after marriage, is known as *Ghoonghat*, i.e., the lower part of a *sari* used to cover the head and the entire face. The *purdah* observed by Muslim women is again of different types like *Hijab*, *Naqab*, *Burqa*, *Awrah*, *Chador* etc. The most common form of *purdah* worn as apparel in India among the Muslims is the burqa done by the North Indian women referred to above. This burqa covers the body and face with a net screen in front of the eyes that allows the woman to see in front of her, whereas Niqab is a veil where the eyes are not covered. A hijab, in other words, is a garment that covers the hairs, neck, ears and chest except for the face. For Muslims, seclusion begins after puberty, and for Hindus, seclusion starts after marriage (Hanna, 1973). The Hindu and Muslim women in India follow the custom of veiling, but their context is different. The burqa was introduced to Muslim women to protect them from other men, and Goonghat is practised to enforce the subordination of women within family and kinship. This system made them excluded from institutions and curbed their freedom (Saxena, 2020). This mechanism of *purdah* not only segregates a woman physically but also restricts her 'self' to mingle in the public sphere. This is a form of social control internalised by the women considering *purdah*, a moral obligation to be very private and personal.

However, abandoning the veil as a mark of liberation and fulfilling women's rights seems to be just an issue raised to infuse western thinking. Many Muslim thinkers worldwide argued that veiling was not a sign of backwardness. Still, it is instead a sign of their civilisation, and they (Muslim women) won't abandon it. In retaliation to the colonial attack against their culture, the Muslim women started observing the veil more vigorously (Ahmad, 2006). This argument on veiling and re-veiling goes on without the Muslim woman getting a chance to decide her apparel. Many feminist thinkers like Fatima Mernissi (1985), Unni Wikan (1982) and Yasmin Alibhai- Brown (2014) considered veiling as a threat to women's liberalisation, while some feminists like Naomi Wolf

regarded the veil as a mark of liberating women from the western concept of beauty and consumption ideology of western capitalist patriarchy. Gad Saad, a western Behavioural scientist, in his article *Beauty Myth versus Veil: A Feminist Perspective*, talks about how western feminist like Naomi Wolf, Helen Razer and Germaine Greer hails veil as liberating. It is also being argued that veiling is not a symbol of oppression, but instead, male gazing at women is a sign of assault and oppression. A central mantra of feminism is that the so-called male gaze constitutes a form of assault. Accordingly, any dress code that negates such "patriarchal oppression" can be liberating. Western media images (and more generally the capitalist patriarchal system) are apparently key peddlers in the sexist subjugation of women. On the other hand, veils can at times be constructed as liberating since women freely choose to wear these (Sad, 2011).

On the contrary to the above many feminists even argue that the veil is political rather than cultural. 'Take off the veil' campaign in 2008, on the International Women's Day by some Arabic websites and blogs considered *hijab* as intellectual terrorism by strict Islamic groups. Dr Elhem Manea, a Yemeni campaigner, wrote on the website, "My hair is not a sex symbol that I should be ashamed of, and my body is not a stage for men's fantasies. I am a noble human being with my hair and body". She is a professor who works in Switzerland and believes that the veil is not a freedom of choice but rather religious coercion. Staying silent about the issue will invite extremist ideas to infiltrate society. She considers it the symbol of oppression, and women should avoid "putting this rag on their heads". The campaign against the compulsory headscarf in Iran during 2014 has millions of supporters. Marnia Lazreg, in her book *Questioning the veil*, analyses the culture of veiling and why women take up to veil themselves. She examines how veiling is passed from one generation to another, and she concludes that women should not take up to veil. She supports her argument with historical analysis and the inconvenience of veiling. Whereas Oihana Marco, another anthropologist, in her article *The Hijabization process: Some "mindful bodies" uncovered*, talks about the re-veiling process among British Muslim women to mark their identity as Muslim women. We need to explore these intellectual comprehensions and debates on dressing the Muslim women's bodies through their everyday lives.

4.2. Dressing the body and Make-up

The dress often embodies one's culture and identity of the community. As such, "the body and dress operate dialectically: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning while the body is a dynamic field which gives life and fullness to dress" (Entwistle, 2001). Beyond the spectacular context of the performance of dress in public have implications on the mundane everyday lives in reproducing social order (Polhemus, 1994). Along with dress, the beautifying body is also a vital aspect of the women's everyday life. In a general sense, beauty is the physical attractiveness of a woman's body that is subject to changeable social standards. This standard of physical attractiveness varies in different societies. While the debate on agency versus structure seem immaterial for the women in the ground, at one level, they reproduce the practices existing in the community and belong to the collective whole and identity. At another level they exercise their agency in embodying it in their individuated self. The performance of an individual's identity relies on the social and moral positioning in society. The physical body on which the social situations impose specific ways to perform the identity. They transform the body to imbibe a 'managed identity'. This is a mundane everyday life for these women, who are unreflective of these managed identities.

4.3. Lived Experiences among Bengali speaking Muslim women

Rohima Begum, in her late fifties, who is also a domestic helper, a Bengali speaking Muslim from the village Bhujkhuwa Chapori village, said that she was the second wife of her husband. She was wearing a faded, old *saree* and said that she can hardly afford to buy her choice of dress. She has to be satisfied with whatever she gets from her places of work. She has been working for many years without wearing *burqa* or *hijab* and there was no complaint of her regarding her dress, so she didn't think much about her dress, but she always covers her head in her workplace, also in streets and at home. Her skin dries out in winter, so she puts coconut oil in her hairs and on her body, which is her skin care.

Jubeda Khatun in her forties is a Bengali speaking Muslim woman working as a Madrasa teacher also mentioned in Chapter 3, page no. 63, wears *burqa* to her Madrasa. Her profession allows her to cover herself with a *burqa* while teaching. Her body is a part of her profession as Madrasa is an educational institution which also teaches religion. Her

body is also a part of what she teaches to her students. Her performance in her everyday through her material body of *burqa* is guided by her religious radical ideology.

Rabia, again other women from Bhujkhuwa Chapori and in her late twenties, married to a vegetable vendor. She is a housewife and stays at home with her kids. She whenever has to go out has to take permission from her husband or her mother-in-law and whenever she goes out she wears her *burqa* or clad herself around a broad cloth covering her head, ears and neck. She was financially sound compared to Rohima and Robiz and do not need to work outside to earn her livelihood. But unlike Rohima and Robiz, she always had to cover herself without revealing her eyes, ears, neck, her hands, and her legs.

Bengali Muslim woman, Robiz Ahmed, is a domestic help from Bujkhuwa Chapori. This is a Bengali village which also has a *Masjid Parichalana Committee*. This committee looks into the religious and internal matters of the village. This village follows the *Wahabbi* ideology and appoints *Muajjins* from *Deobandi* School of thought. This village also allow *stablighi jamaat*¹ to enter the village to preach the ideology and to spread global Islamic identity to enter. Robiz is a 40-year-old woman, dressed in a colourful cotton sari and wearing a lot of bangles and earrings. During her childhood she didn't have a particular dress. She used to wear her mother's blouse as top with the petticoat as skirt and sometimes she wore frock when visiting places. They were poor so could not afford too many dresses or have choices. She got married to a wage labourer, but her husband married again when she was pregnant. She said that whatever you do to look beautiful does not hold anything if your husband does not love you back. She added that every woman wants to look beautiful irrespective of rich and poor. But the poor, the daily wage labourers face a challenging situation even to buy the necessary oil for hair and body. For them feeding one and their children are the primary concern. Beauty is whatever Allah has assigned to them. Apart from those getting new clothes for oneself and family is a great thing. The woman has a son of ten years old. She needs to feed him and even send him to school, and it is difficult for her since she is a single mother and domestic help. She can't afford to buy creams, powders, and cosmetics to look beautiful but instead asks and borrows from those households where she works. She also added that she got the bangles and earrings from the people she works.

¹*Tablighi Jamatis* is an organization to preach Islam and it mainly focuses on to return to orthodox Sunni Islam.

A Bengali Muslim, Aleema Pathan, a woman from Barika Chuburi village, who is again in her late fifties, was wearing a saree with the *uroni* covering her head and carrying a *tasbih* (where one counts religious words and sentences). During her childhood she used to wear skirt and tops and frocks and started wearing salwar suit after puberty. And after marriage she changed to saree and continued to wear saree. Her husband is a government schoolteacher. She had a different viewpoint on beauty. She believed that a woman should not flaunt her appearance in public being a Muslim woman. But we live in a society where covering one is regarded as an act of backwardness. A Muslim woman should always cover herself in public. She gave her opinion that a wife in her husband's home never tries to look attractive; she always wears casual dresses, wears no ornaments, and does nothing to enhance her facial attractiveness. In a party or when going out of her house, the same woman wears her best and puts on the makeup and even wears earrings, bangles, and everything to look attractive. Why? A woman and a man should show and look beautiful in front of one's husband and wife. In today's society, it is the other way round; a wife tries to be attractive in front of other men outside her home, whereas she should try to look beautiful inside her house with her husband and cover herself whenever going outside her house. Islam asks women to cover herself in front of men other than her husband.

All the four women are from different financial backgrounds. Robiz and Rohima work as domestic helpers and are from same village Bhujkhuwa Chapori village. Rabia is also from same village but is economically better than Robiz and Rohima. Rabia's husband is a vegetable vendor and earns well, so Rabia do not need to work outside. She unlike Robiz and Rohima have to cover herself before stepping outside the house (Fig. 4.1 and 4.2). Allema is a resident of Barika Chuburi village and financially sound. Her husband is a high school teacher in government school and has land to cultivate. She is staying in Assamese village cannot wear *hijab* and *burqa* since her neighbours do not wear it and consider it as a sign of backwardness. So, she stays mostly at home and whenever she needs to come out, she always wears her *uroni* without showing her hairs and ears.



Fig. 4.1: Bengali speaking Muslim Woman in streets



Fig. 4.2: Bengali speaking Muslim Woman at Home

Robiz and Aleema are from different villages, but both are Bengali speaking women. Robiz is a domestic help while Aleema is a housewife. Though Aleema is far more financially sound than Robiz, Robiz was more independent in caring out her everyday life. Aleema, on the other hand, had a different opinion on the beauty that a woman should try to look beautiful inside her house and cover her while going out. Robiz is a single mother of a ten-year-old son. She likes to use makeup and style herself, but her finances do not allow her to invest even on least beauty products. She is so passionate about looking beautiful that she asks the woman of the house, where she works for the products, or she borrows it from them. Robiz thought that people would keep a beautiful and clean looking woman as a domestic help rather than an ugly looking woman.

4.3.1. Veiling among the Bengali speaking Muslim women

The narratives of the Bengali speaking Muslims, shows that they covered their head, neck and ears wearing *burqa* and *hijab*. The section of wage labourers and domestic helpers do cover their head, neck and ears in public but at their workplace they cover only their head. They visit their friends and relatives covering themselves in front of the male members and walking in streets. The Bengali speaking Muslim women perform their bodies through veil, but their performances have hybridities. Two Bengali speaking women with different financial backgrounds mentioned above (Rabia and Robiz), where Rabia is a wife of vegetable vendor and Robiz is a domestic helper perform their bodies differently. Rabia, whenever visiting her friends and relatives cover herself with *burqa* and *hijab* but Robiz cover herself when she is out in streets. Robiz do not cover herself when working as a domestic help since it is uncomfortable in working with her head, neck, ears, and hands covered.

4.4. Lived Experiences among Hindi speaking Muslim women

Heena is a 30-year-old Hindi speaking woman, living in village Barika Chuburi, she has two sons, one is ten-year-old, and the other is a seven-year-old. She is from Bihar and came to Assam with her husband. During her childhood she wore frocks for some years and latter switched to salwar suit even in her childhood. Her husband has a shop in town where he sells eyeglasses and frames. She was of the opinion that beauty for a woman is necessary to get married. Nobody likes to marry an ugly looking girl. She said that if a girl is not beautiful, her family will have to give a lot of dowries to get her married. Only if the

girl earns a lot of money, might she get married. Again, getting a good job for women is far more complicated than a man getting a job. She adds that she has a sister who has albinism, and she is yet to get married. Heena likes to put on makeup to look beautiful, but she hardly goes out of her house. She came to Assam after her marriage and have been staying here for more than a decade. While she was in Bihar, she used to cover herself in Hijab and then only she could move out. But in Barika Chuburi village, she does not like the culture of not wearing the veil. Since she cannot wear the veil, she hardly goes out of her house. Heena has been staying in Assam for fifteen years and still trying to balance her 'self' from Bihar and the 'self' that she is forming by staying in the Assamese Muslim village.

Shamsa Khanam is also a Hindi-speaking woman in her late sixties. She also said that it is necessary for a woman to be educated, beautiful and understanding. She is staying in Assam for forty years. Her opinion was that woman should require all her features in correct positions to look beautiful, and fairness will add to it. She should not showcase her beauty in public and attract other's attention because that will be against Shariah. But since she stays in an Assamese Muslim village, she finds it difficult to perform her religion and wear *hijab* or *burqa* inside the village premises.

Asma Khatun is a Hindi-speaking Muslim woman from the village Saikia Chuburi. She is around 27 of age but separated from her husband and stays with her mother and with her brother who has his wife and children. As she was staying with her brother, she also helped him by earning through her tuitions. During her childhood she wore skirts, tops, and frocks but after puberty she started wearing salwar suit and even after marriage, she continued wearing it. She likes to wear *hijab* but since she stays in an Assamese Muslim village, she only takes the *uroni* with her *dupatta* (a scarf worn with salwar suit) when going out. Since they have been staying in an Assamese village, her father didn't force her to cover herself. For makeup, Asma uses lipstick and *kajal* (kohl) and she shares her skin care products from her mother.

Manjura Ali is 30 years of age which was also discussed in Chapter three, who is a Hindi speaking women who love to wear fashionable dress. Manjura Ali's life in school as a teacher away from her domestic life has a different story to tell. She comes from a family where women did not work outside their homes. She is the first woman graduate in her family and the first Muslim woman to work outside her home. She is a schoolteacher and

despite of her background of being orthodox, she said, “I love to try new fashion, even if I look odd, but I always wear a dress that doesn’t have a too much skin show. Since anyone can be fashionable without revealing their skin.” So, she wears a modern dress following religious ways of shariah.

Heena, Shamsa, Asma and Manjura are Hindi speaking women but all three of them are from different financial positions, different age groups and different habitat. Heena has only spent a decade in Assam and though she stays in an Assamese Muslim village, she could not do away with her ‘self’ which she used to be in Bihar like wearing *hijab*. Asma’s family on the other hand are resident of Assam since three generations and so her dress code is like that of her Assamese speaking neighbours. She is not being forced to wear *niqab* or *hijab*. But Shamsa also do not use *hijab* but takes the *uroni* like the other Assamese women. Shamsa is older compared to Heena and Asma and though she is residing in Assam in the past forty years has a different view regarding her dress. As she is getting older, she is inclined towards her religious laws which asks to cover head, neck and ears. During her younger days she was happy and did not think about religion, but she said that as she is growing older, she thinks that one has to do what Allah has ask one to do and only then her afterlife will be happier.

The Hindi speaking Muslims reside within the Assamese Muslim villages and follow the same ‘*uroni*’ (Fig. 4.3). Some of the women who are married from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and find it difficult not to wear *burqa* and take Hijab. So, they do not step outside their houses Since these villages are Assamese, so these women try to merge themselves according to the cultural norms of these villages.



Fig. 4.3: Hindi Speaking Muslim Women in Village Barika Chuburi

4.4.1. Veiling among the Hindi Muslim women

Through above narratives, it can be discussed that the Hindi speaking Muslim women do cover their head and body while moving out but do not wear *Hijab* or *Burqa*. The financial well-off families residing in Assamese speaking village, find it difficult not to wear *Burqa*. So, they do not move out of their homes and when there is urgency, they go out in cars and wear *burqa* inside their cars and in places like hospitals. As they reside in Assamese Muslim village, their Assamese neighbours consider covering as a sign of backwardness. So, they do not want to be judged based on covering. Moreover, some of the Hindi speaking women residing in villages Barika Chuburi and Saikia Chuburi when there is an urgency to attend weddings and in public gathering, they do cover their head with an *Uroni* in such a way that the neck, and ears foreheads could not be seen.

4.5. The Lived Experiences among Assamese Muslims

Most women in the Assamese speaking villages prefer Mekhla Chador as their first choice of dress in public and private contexts (Fig. 4.4). Mekhla Chador is the traditional handloom attire for women in Assam.



(a): Assamese Speaking Muslim Woman from Barika Chuburi Village



(b): Assamese Speaking Muslim Woman from Beseria Muslim Village

Fig. 4.4: Assamese Speaking Muslim Women do not observe any kind of Head Cover

The uniqueness of this dress is differentiated into two parts and worn with a blouse. The bottom part, the Mekhla which is fitted and pleated to fit in the waist and the Chador is the upper part covering the chest and falls from the left shoulder. Assamese Muslim women dress up their bodies with this attire that they consider the essence of their culture. The married women attending any private functions and festivals wear this dress in their daily life. There are no Hijab, Veil and covering of head can be seen among these Muslim women while wearing this Mekhla Chador. The headcover *Uroni* is also not that strict in their dresses.

Jeena, is a 55 year old Assamese speaking woman, from Saikia Chuburi Muslim village, wearing a mekhla chador, talked about her looks and said that her daughter is a young woman now and so she is the one who should be talking about makeup and looking beautiful. According to her, girls should look beautiful to some extent and must get married. Women only thrive on being healthy without any major sickness at their age. Beauty is just taking care of her skin so that the ageing signs disappear. She moisturises her face and puts on a little lipstick while going out. She also added that ageing treatment is too expensive. Her husband is a retired man, and she has a daughter to be married off. Her son is yet to find a job. So, she can't spend money on buying expensive beauty products. She is worried that she does not get more apart from the old wrinkles. She walks in the morning hours not to be slim and look beautiful but to be healthy to face fewer health issues.

Salmara Khanam, from Barika Chuburi village, an Assamese speaking Muslim lady, age 55, her husband is a P.W.D. Engineer, and she owns an ample number of shops, which she had given out for rent. She has two sons. One is 26 years of age, and the other is 23 years of age. Her younger son cannot walk and has to be carried everywhere for daily life activities. Her body weights are very high than the average women folk in the village. She is being overweight, feels comfortable in wearing maxi dresses at home. When she was young, she and her elder sister use to wear all kinds of fashionable dresses like bellbottoms, skirts, and tops and even frocks. She did not find any restrictions in dressing during 1980's but life changed after marriage and after having kids. She now likes to go out, but she cannot leave her house because her son needs extra attention. The only beauty care she does is put some cream on the face and oil in the body. She believed that making up and looking beautiful is not essential for a woman like her, who hardly goes out. She liked to

attend weddings and functions held in the village premises or the Tezpur town area. But she cannot participate in such functions for her son's condition. So, she thinks that when one does not get out of her house, there is no point in looking beautiful. She is also a diabetic patient and weighs more, and so with that weight, she finds it difficult in moving out and attend functions and weddings. She has the treadmill and the cycle at home to maintain her weight, but she has no time to run on the treadmill or cycle either.

Razia Begum, a seventy-year-old woman, spoke that she only used to put *surma* (type of *kajal*) in her eyes during her time. In 1960's, when she was young, other than *surma* she and her sisters did not know about any of the beauty products. During her childhood she remembers wearing frock but as soon as she was 10 years and even before puberty, she started wearing *mekhla chador*. She saw some people wearing *salwar suit* but being an Assamese, she and her sisters wore *saree* or *mekhla chador* even the school uniform for middle school was green border *mekhla chador*. During that time, there was no beauty parlour in Tezpur. She, after marriage only used to put that *surma* and even now, she said that she is comfortable only with that. She added that beauty only means having good quality skin and being fair is not that important. Moreover, whatever Allah Almighty has given, one should not try to offend Him.

Suraiya Ahmad, a woman in her late fifties, said her cousin used to style a lot. She added that her cousin during the 80s used to wear pants, t shirts and skirts, and she was 17 years of age when she got married. So, she did not get opportunities to style herself in pants and t-shirts rather she after marriage started wearing *saree* and *mekhla chador*. She did not get opportunities to style herself in pants and t-shirts. She said that she puts cream, *kajal* and lipstick whenever she goes out. During winter, she uses moisturisers, and during summer, she uses talcum powder. Other than that, she does not know the name of cosmetics. She added that whatever you do to look attractive, age will leave its mark at one point in time. She walks with her neighbours to remain healthy, but she doesn't like to walk alone in the early morning since it is not safe.

Morina Begum, a Moria community woman from village Beseria, which also has a Masjid Parichalana committee like all other villages. This village also follows the *Ahle-Sunnat* ideology. Morina is a 30-year-old woman wearing a *salwar suit*, *hairs tied up in a bun*, and a nose ring. She got married after passing her matriculation. Her husband gives cars for rent, and he is a freelancer. She stays with her in-laws, and they share a grocery shop

together. She stays in a family where she has eight members along with her. She has a nine-year old daughter and a four-year-old son. Her daughter is in an English medium school, and she also plans to send her son to an English medium school. This requires her to save money for them, but she adds that whatever be your financial position, people should always keep themselves clean and wear clean clothes if not new. She likes to style herself, likes to wear makeup and use cosmetics. She goes out with friends and relatives, attends weddings, and likes to attend political meetings and self-help group meetings. She meets many people, so she must be presentable. She also adds that she danced to her heart content in a recent wedding. Her father-in-law and mother-in-law also joined her, whereas in Islam, dancing in public and attracting male gaze is considered a sin. She is in a family where she faces the least restrictions on performing whatever she likes, so she also goes to a beauty parlour to look beautiful once a month.

The way one dresses or makeup, or cover their body is contextual. It changes with their social and spatial locations. The dominant Islamic *shariah* suggests that women have to cover their entire body and not invite men's attraction except her husband. For them, women's sexuality is a threat to the social order and therefore controlling sexuality become important for the social order.

When asked about the type of dress they were allowed to wear, Assamese speaking women said that they did wear everything during their childhood but after puberty, frocks wear not allowed. Whether it is father, mother, or elder brother, they suggested that grown up girls should not show off her legs to others. Few opined that they were not allowed to wear according to their choice only after marriage. They were also allowed to play and interact with boys, and there were no such restrictions during childhood and after puberty. One of the respondents was a daughter of a policeman. She said that there were no restrictions on her dress during her childhood, and she even played with boys till she got married at the age of 19. There was no restriction on her even in celebrating other religious festivals like *Puja*, Holi and Diwali.

The adult Assamese speaking Muslim women preferred to use Mekhla Chador as their preferred choice of dress in public. Such a presentation of the body through Mekhla Chador without any headcover is significant for the community they live with. This dress code is central to their claims of their Assamese women identity. The dress often embodies one's culture and identity of the community. Here, these Assamese Muslim women do not follow

the pan Islamic dress: the *Abaya*, *Burqa*, and covering of face with the veil and head with *Hijab*. These women are Muslims but are Assamese. Their dress holds the strong statement of Assamese nationalism. Though their identity as Muslims is important to them, their identity as Assamese in the regional popular is dominant through their dress codes of *Mekhla Chador* and Assamese ornaments. At the same time, *Churidar* and *Salwar kameej*, the Indian national popular dress codes, are also seen in their body performances. So, these Assamese Muslim women identify themselves with this national populars. They are aligning with the larger imagination of India and that of Assam.

Jeena, Salmara Khanam, Razia Begum, Suraiya Ahmed and Morina are Assamese speaking women, but all have different opinions regarding beauty in their lives. These five women have different financial backgrounds. Razia Begum is one of her nine siblings. During her younger days she was always busy helping her mother since she had many young siblings to take care of. That is one of the reasons that she further could not carry her studies in college because her mother needed her more at home. She did not get married, and hence she stays with her brother. So, she had the least public appearance. Her brother takes care of her after her parents have died, she hesitates to ask him for cosmetics. She was happy that her brother provided her with medicines. She had two sisters who are government employees and visits her thrice a year. Her sisters give her the necessary skincare products, and other than that, she hesitates to ask them because it involves a lot of money.

Suraiya Ahmed, is also involved in self-help group, and she likes to go out with her neighbours; she goes to the market for daily groceries, attend weddings, visit family and friends. She does the minimum to look beautiful since she has a family of eight members to be fed. She uses the same products bought for her sons and husband, soap, shampoo, and moisturisers. Though she likes to wear makeup and go to the beauty parlour to get a facial glow, that is getting expensive, and her finances have other more essential alternatives to be met.

Jeena and Suraiya have almost the same financial background and still like to wear makeup (lipstick and *Kajal*) to look beautiful. Jeena thought that as her children are growing, she needs to look younger and beautiful and if she looked like an old lady, people might think her daughter is too old to get married. Suraiya, on the other hand, has three sons, and she often goes out to do several works other than cooking inside the house. So, she too wears

a few cosmetics to appear beautiful. Salmara has another story, it's not her financial position that restricts her from going places, and it is the standards of beauty that her body could not meet. She has an overweight body, and her everyday life involves a son who needs 24 hours attention. Razia Begum, her younger days was during 1960's, and at that time in her everyday life, she was ignorant of all the beauty stuff and its effects since there was no television and buying newspaper every day was an expensive affair. She was unaware of the beauty products because she had little or no interaction with the outside world, and she added that this might cause her not to get married. Morina is also Assamese speaking woman but from a Moria community. Her financial condition does not restrict her to spend money on beauty products to look beautiful. Morina, compared to Jeena, Salmara, Razia and Suraiya, is relatively young and energetic. Her young 'Self' and her societal interaction make her to enhance her beauty to be presentable according to society's standards.

4.5.1. Purdah and veiling among the Assamese speaking Muslim women

Nehrun Nessa, a 68-year-old housewife living in village Barika Chuburi, stayed with her husband, children, and grandchildren. She was wearing a cotton mekhla chador at home, a short-sleeved blouse, and her hair tied to a bun. She was almost old and was seated in her bed; she narrated, "I went to school at the age of five. I got married at the age of fourteen when I even didn't understand the meaning of marriage. Till the age of fourteen, I used to run, play a lot, climbed trees for berries and mangoes, and when I got married, I was still a child. When I became the bride, I took the *uroni* as per the custom but later stopped using it... after all, I still was a child and *uroni* for a child hardly mattered to any of my in-laws. It was not strict at all". While narrating her life and her dressing style, she alluded that she didn't get a chance to wear salwar kameej for the marriage that happened when she wore a frock. She never heard about the word *hijab*. When asked about Hijab, she replied: 'Hijab...? What is it!' She looked a little confused with the term since she had never used this term for a headcover. Later, she admitted that it's good for a Muslim woman to cover her head. But for her, covering the head is always practically tricky as it hinders the household chores. She added, "Neither my parents nor my in-laws taught me about *hijab* in Islam, but now I know that it is necessary in Islamic books and quran, but in Assamese society and culture, we don't follow it."

On one side, Nessa was showing that she was a keen Muslim woman, accepting the headcover as a mark of honour for a Muslim woman because *hadith* has said so. At the same time, she believed that the *hijab* would restrict a woman to let her do even her daily housework. Here Nessa's problem in her life was not the headcover or *Uroni*, because it was not strictly observed, but rather it was getting married at such an early age. Her childhood was broken up by her early marriage and the responsibilities associated with that marriage, not by *uroni*. She would have run and played like her brothers, but the dark shadow of marriage came with her menstrual cycle that snatched her childhood. She could have been livelier and happier if she could have completed her school education and got married at a later age. Her hardships don't end here; before she could realise the responsibilities of a married woman, the teenager gave birth to a baby at the age of fifteen. It could be seen that instead of veiling, to protect her from gathering attention in public places, a girl child is married early to protect her from diverting her own mind and minds of others. So, the work of a veil or *hijab* is seen done by an early marriage.

4.5.2. *Uroni*: the head cover

A lady of 45, Sabina was wearing a maxi and working in her kitchen; when asked when you use *uroni*, she replied, "Though I wore long frocks, I have never been told about covering the entire body and wearing *hijab* since childhood and even after marriage. I took the *uroni* (head cover) only during the initial stage of marriage, but later I stopped taking it. I used to take *uroni* after marriage but later when it gets difficult in working, I abandoned it. My in-laws saw it but did not object because practically they too knew that carrying the *uroni* every time everywhere is difficult. But a newly married girl must take the *uroni* in the initial stage of marriage because, unlike Hindu ladies who take the *sindoor* (vermilion) we do not have any sign of getting married. So, to show that we are married, we should take the *uroni* and wear bangles." Now, here again, the question arises why women should cover her head after marriage? Why do they have to take the vermilion? Why should they use a symbol to show in public that they are married? The answer lies in that, the uses of symbols give her a feeling of protection that she being a wife of someone will not be harassed or molested. So the primary purpose of taking the *uroni* is to restrict other males' approaches towards her, hinting that she has already been 'owned' by a male and that she is needed to be in her reticence. But this is just a sense of belief in women; in reality, there

are many instances of molestation and harassment in public places with or without a headcover.

It has been seen that *uroni* is only taken after marriage and it is abandoned in the latter stage of marriage. Since *uroni* unlike *hijab*, is a form of head cover that is not tucked anywhere, the chances to fall off the head are very certain. It is very difficult for a woman to carry the *uroni* and work at the same time. So, it is obvious at home that a woman is understood not taking the *uroni*. Moving out in public, a married woman needs to cover her head, but in her later stage of married life, she relinquishes it. Does this attitude also have specific reasons behind how severely the *uroni* culture is followed in her community? Secondly, how deep her in-laws ask her to observe this principle? Since no one in her community takes the *uroni*. All this sway her attitude towards the head cover and her decision to abandon or to embrace it at home and in public places largely depends on her habitat.

One of the very significant grounds of women's not embracing the *hijab*, is that the cultural tradition which shapes their identity is deep enough to restrict any kind of bond formation towards the foreign preachers of Islam and their way of living. Mamuda, an unmarried woman of age forty, narrated that, "Only during Azan I take the headcover. Since I am not married, I don't take the head cover. *Hijab* and *burqa* are some people's tradition, so they wear it. One day I saw a girl going to tuition covering the entire forehead like a Rajasthani girl. Though it cannot be said as bad thing because it is their culture, they are following. It is sometimes good not to attract people's attention but, in our society, we do not need to wear it because that is not our tradition and if we wear, people will comment us as Pakistani or Bangladeshi, we are born in Assam and speak only one language, unlike others who speak two languages." Mahmuda's statement on her part is retrieving her assertion of identity. The argument lies on the fact that, an environment has been created locally and globally where the Assamese Muslim community feels that their identity should not be confused with Bengali and Hindi speaking Muslims in public places. Along with language, dress and customs also classify cultural identity. So *uroni* and *hijab* are two different dressing styles used to cover one's head. *Uroni* is a head cover worn almost by all the women living in Assam, whether performing any religious ceremony or in any auspicious occasion like marriage and even in gloomy events like the death of anyone. *Hijab* is a typical covering of the forehead, ears, and entire neck worn by a Muslim woman

worldwide and particularly in Muslim majority countries. Mamuda fears her identity of an Assamese Muslim to be confused with other Muslim women residing in the same village. The fear catering into the minds of the Assamese speaking Muslim women began with the advent of new groups of Muslims entering Assam, which challenges their identity and livelihood. For Mamuda, wearing a veil will prejudice her society and mislead people to think she is, which she is not.

Moreover, *hijab* has been considered the orthodox icon of backwardness of Islam. So, the Assamese speaking Muslim women do not want their identity to be associated with the assumed identity of Muslims globally. This behaviour on their part can be again traced back to history. The Assamese speaking Muslims consist of the descendants of war prisoners taken captive throughout the Muslim invasions, the local people who converted, and the immigrants i.e, the Muslim artisans and learned men imported by the then Ahom rulers. These Muslims settled down in Assam and married here. With the passing of time these Muslims got assimilated into the mainstream in such a way that they had hardly anything left relating to the larger Islamic culture. Shihabuddin Talish who accompanied Mir Jumla in his expedition to Assam, wrote in his *Fathiyah-i-ibriyah*,

As for the Muslims who had been taken prisoners in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese and have nothing of Islam accept the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims... (Ahmed 2007).

Razia begum, a lady in her seventies, commented on *hijab*, said, “my father was a Muslim Marriage Registrar (M.M.R.) in Darang district in sixties. He also taught Persian and Arabic in Bengali Government Boys School in Tezpur. Though being in that profession, he never told us to wear *hijab* or *burqa*. We all the sisters wore frocks and after growing up, we all started wearing *mekhla chador*.” Nazmi Begum says, “I don’t like *hijab*. It diminishes women’s freedom. Every society has a different culture. For example, I can’t wear *saree* in a Middle Eastern country; I might get killed by Taliban. I used to take *uroni* after my marriage because my father-in-law was a *hajji* but still, he never asked me to wear *hijab*.”

4.5.3. Assamese Muslim Women: Performing Nationalism & Religion

The lived experiences of these women suggest that they dress according to the way their community has been dressing for quite long. They prefer Mekhla Chador or Salwar Kameez over Burqa. The younger girls go with the trendy dresses of the time too. Once they get married, there are restrictions on covering their body, especially of their head. The field suggests that there are three categories of people who practice head covering differently. Firstly, some women haven't followed the headcover during childhood, but they have started using it for different reasons after marriage. Some women take the headcover only in the initial stage of their marriage. In the second category are the women who don't use any kind of head cover at all. In the third category, women like to wear hijab if they get a chance, but they have reasons for not using it.

In the first category, the women start taking (*uroni*) headcover only after marriage. They adopt to take the *uronis* because they don't have any other symbol of married women, unlike Hindu women, who take the vermilion (*sindur*). Another reason is that it depends on the kind of society one lives in. A woman living in a community that doesn't practice *hijab*, will not start taking *hijab*, since traditionally, her society have not been following it. Similarly, a woman married in a community that practices *uroni* after marriage follow the *uroni* culture.

The second category of women don't practice any kind of *hijab* or headcover. The reasons behind their practices are their cultural background. The families of these women did not follow such covering during their times and hence their daughters and daughter-in-laws don't practice it. If suddenly they start adopting it, people might tease and pass comments on their identity. So to avoid such situations, they don't follow it. Another reason is that some poorer families marry off their daughters at the age of not more than fifteen. So, child brides can hardly make any difference between a married and unmarried life. Being a child, she will not practice or be forced to practice any kind of covering unlike the elderly ladies. So, her habit of not taking *uroni* still prevails even after she grows old.

Third category of women takes *uroni* (head cover) and wills to practice hijab if they are asked to take it. Since they live in a society where they do not observe so they too not follow it. The first reason behind their willingness to practice *hijab* is that they like the new style and fashion of *hijab*, besides it protects one from dust and pollution. The second

reason is that these women are religious and offer five prayer times, but they hadn't seen *hijab* when they were a child. But now, when they have come across the *Hijab* form of covering, though they perceive it as a good way of living, being a true devotee, they find it difficult to follow, as their tradition and society don't follow it.

From the above classifications, it can be argued that though there is no such *hijab* form of head covering practised among the Assamese speaking Muslim community, still there is a headcover (*urooni*) practised among this community of Muslims.

To know the type of headcover a community follows the rules and regulations followed by the Masjid committee of that particular village. This Masjid committee of Barika Chuburi village doesn't emphasise any type of covering for Muslim women living in that village, unlike other villages. Muslim villages, to some extent, have changed their traditional ways of life owing to the *tablighijamat* which is a movement that urges Muslim people to return to their orthodox Sunni Islam, and influence them to change their ritual, dress and personal behavior. *Tablighi Jamatis* an offshoot of the Deobandi Movement. These preachers of *Tablighi Jamat* stays in the village Mosque and moves from one house to another preaching Islam, leaving significant impacts on the minds of both men and women. Later this woman either wears different types of head covering like *Burqa*, *Hijab* and *Naqab*, or the men force them to do so. But the village authority decides whether this Tablighi Jamat will be allowed to enter the village or not. In his article Why is veil such a contentious issue? Imtiaz Ahmad argues that there is clear theological and historical evidence that shows that *shariat* has hardly demanded the veil. It wasn't common practice in Arab.

The Quranic verse which the Muslim clerics cite as endorsing the veil amounts to no more than a recommendation that women should dress modestly and go about with circumspection in the public domain. Veiling was not a common practice in Arab society for long time after the advent of Islam. Veiling existed in pre-Islamic times and was not introduced by Muhammad. As among the Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Assyrians, who too practiced veiling, it was connected with social status. Only the women of upper social strata wore the veil. Commoner Muslims neither wore nor were obliged to wear it (Ahmad, 2006).

This village follows the ideology and practice of *Jammat Ahle Sunnat* and hence does not allow the foreign practice of living to accommodate in their lives. The Masjid committee

of Barika Chuburi village does not allow any preachers to enter the Masjid premises. So, this is one of the reasons why people of the village are still following the old traditional ways of living. Women adhere to their traditional attire of *mekhla chador* and saree and are not familiar with the different types of dresses with head covering, which are worn across by the Muslims in India and other parts of the world.

What was observed among these Muslim women was that they were a kind of balancing their identity between their traditional lifestyles and the new globally accepted cultural identity of the Muslim women wearing *hijab*. The third category of women mentioned above, who like to wear *hijab*, pray five times daily. These women have access to religious books, which are primarily patriarchal interpretations, and through these books they become familiar with the concept of *hijab*. Though they consider *hijab* to be the attire of a 'real' Muslim woman and that rejection of the veil is the rejection of the true Muslim culture, these women don't follow the veil because their traditional society where they live don't practice.

The historical location of these Muslim women also needs to be understood in its larger spectrum for their popular nationalist discourse on covering their bodies. As discussed in the second chapter the historical trajectory of Assamese Muslim is different to that of the other Muslims residing in Assam. They prefer to be identified as 'Assamese' and 'Muslims', wherein little nationalism and religion negotiate each other and offer hybrid performances. The stigma attached with the identity of immigrant Muslim community as outsiders and the recent political history of Assamese Nationality make the *Thaluwa Assamese Muslims* to live in the age-old local Assamese nationality and keep the local practices alive which can be seen reflected in their dressing of *uroni*, and in their Assamese customs. So, they try to retain their long history of assimilation being a Muslim and an Assamese at the same time. The Modern social values like education and exposure through social networking add up to their traditions like the mother-in-law will know the hard ship of a daughter-in-law to take the *uroni* and work at the same time. So, it is ok not taking the *uroni* all the time. The case is different only when a woman performs Hajj. This is that a woman after performing Hajj is seen taking the *uroni* all the time but not the *hijab*

4.6. Discussion

4.6.1. Context of Hybrid performances

The time of 60's fashion in the location Bombay is different from the same time of 1960's in a Muslim village in Assam. Razia in 1960's is a young woman who was exposed with only one beauty product that is *surma* (Kohl). All the women discussed above have different situation during their childhood and different situation after getting married. Salmara is a woman with a rich financial background, and she even likes to attend parties. She can get any cosmetics she likes to enhance her looks but due to her situation of being overweight, she finds it difficult to meet the standards of beauty. Secondly as she says that her younger son needs her to stay at home. So as her movement being restricted, her public life is least interactive. She does not feel that she should look beautiful as she does not get out of her house much and because she does not go out, she feels that there is no means to look attractive at home. Aleema had a different Islamic situation where she had a different idea regarding staying inside the house. She believed a woman should look attractive at home in front of her husband rather than flaunting her appearance in public. But since she lives in an Assamese Muslim village, she cannot do her will since her 'Self' is guided by the standards of beauty constructed by the Assamese speaking Muslim village. She would have covered herself in public but since she will be looked down upon in that society, so she hides her 'self' and performs her everyday life as she is expected. The practice of dressing in a particular way is developed through time and space. There is different social situation which affect the habitus of an individual and is then embodied and expressed through the lived experiences of the people.

4.6.2. Space and Embodiment

The choice of stylisation of dress also depends on the spatial location of the people. The upper-class Hindi speaking women wears Burqa outside Assam. But the Hindi speaking families residing in Assamese speaking village find it difficult not to wear burqa. Aleema from the Bengali speaking Muslims and Heena from the Hindi speaking Muslims wants to wear a burqa but since they reside in the Assamese Muslim village, cannot wear one.

4.6.3. Class and Embodiment

The financial capability to purchase certain variation of the Burqa can be seen among the Hindi and Bengali speaking Muslims. At the same time among the Assamese speaking Muslim women the financial independence brings in the freedom of choice of clothing and designs. Dilnar and Manjura discussed in the previous chapter are working women outside the house. Dilnar being a working Assamese woman had a choice of dress but Mansura from a Hindi speaking background, who had a job was also happy in wearing dresses with new trendy designs but with an Islamic twist. Again Jeena, a housewife, due to financial condition of her home, she can't afford to buy expensive beauty products. Robiz is a Bengali woman and is a domestic helper. She loves to look beautiful and clean. So, her financial position doesn't stop her from adorning herself. She makes a way out by asking already used makeup product, dresses, earrings, bangles etc. from her places of work.

4.6.4. Age and Embodiment

All the older women of the communities are of the view that girl should wear dresses that makes her look respectable without showing much of her skin. As the women age, they turn to the *shariah* explanation of covering of one's body. Younger women across the different linguistic category showed more fluid understanding on such arguments.

4.6.5. Personal comfort

The comfort that the body feels in a dress also becomes important in the everyday life of an individual. Comfort may be physical and mental. Salmara being overweight doesn't feel comfortable in wearing dresses to parties. She also with her p son do not feel mentally comfortable to adorn herself and go out. Similarly, Aleemanad Heena find it uncomfortable in wearing *hijab* and *burqa* residing in Assamese speaking village. For everyone the notion of comfort varies.

4.7. Conclusion

The space of Muslim women in performing her bodies have variations and these variations can be seen through the prism of hybridities, their geographic locations, their financial class positions, their age in terms of dressing and their personal comfort while performing their bodies. Purdah being the essence of a Muslim women's dress worldwide, there is a

nationalistic approach among the Assamese speaking Muslims which challenge the pan Islamic identity created through the wearing of *hijabs*, *burqa* and *abayas*. The Bengali speaking Muslim women are seen to be more inclined towards the religion which could be seen through their acceptance of the pan Islamic dress code of covering in public places and visiting religious *jalsas* (public gatherings to learn religion) but that again is guided by the hybridities of women with different financial class positions and geographical locations. The different financial position of two Bengali speaking Muslim women will make a difference in performing their bodies specifically in public spaces. Again, two Bengali speaking Muslim women with different geographical location performs according to the culture of that particular location. The Hindi speaking women on the other hand though they are inclined towards the religion but could not perform their bodies in accordance with their different ideological backgrounds. Their performance in their spaces is always disposed in accordance with the geographical locations where they perform their bodies following the culture background of the dominant Assamese speaking Muslims.

4.8. References

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