

**MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE HIJAB IN KARIMGANJ: EXPLORING  
THEIR EXPERIENCES ACROSS SPACES OF HOME, COLLEGE  
AND COMMUNITY LIFE**

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
award of the degree of*

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Ferdowsee Khanam**

**Registration No: TZ202522 of 2021**



**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY  
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY  
NAPAAM-784028  
SONITPUR, ASSAM  
DECEMBER, 2024**

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

This thesis make an attempt to understand ‘*why’s* and *what’s of hijab*’<sup>1</sup> at a time when hijab and its various subcategories of bodily concealment is at the nexus of the legal and personal battle in various Muslim and non-Muslim countries. While Muslim women’s dress serves as a form of identity marker in non-Muslim land, in the context of Karimganj it is connected with much broader cultural system. With the growing significance of ‘educated’ women taking up hijab which have perplex academic interest, the thesis brings together voices from Karimganj - of unmarried college going daughters and their mothers - who observe hijab and other forms of modest muslim friendly covering and analyzed their narratives within the wider social space of construction and performance of middle-class expression of Muslim self. While all the research participants are modestly dressed for religious reasons, the levels of modesty which include how one style one’s hijab and follows Islamic dress code that is Indo-western; varies greatly and align more with social media inspired fashion and social media religious scholars’ interpretation of bodily modesty. Important themes on moral values of Muslim family, socio-political and religious reengagement, fashion have been surprisingly prevalent throughout participants’ narratives.

To begin with, the research study embarked upon the question how the construction of Muslim self especially in relation to child begins at home. Although the straight cut classic answer is socialization and its various forms-imitation, observation. But how this socialization in Muslim families take place, especially among community considered as minority, has been largely overlooked. The study underlies the importance of religious socialization in middle class educated Muslim families not only as a linear process but a lifelong process which is determined by the amount of social change. The construction and performance of middle-class habitus of Muslim self begins at most at the formal institutional level such as mosque teachings and the informal settings such as spaces of home. The stories of religious socialization which are narrated in core research findings chapter are predominantly extracted from the (young unmarried) women’s childhood and adulthood. Home based religious teachings precedes mosque teachings. Home based

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, Hijab refers to the head-cover only.

religious teachings gets embodied through visual and verbal experiences which gets further solidified in religious space such as in mosque. In the preliminary stage of making them familiar with religious practices and beliefs, the efficacy of both these settings and the social actors involved in molding the behaviour of young women cannot be overruled.

While the settings are of heightened significance in learning to become a 'natural' Muslim woman, the chapter also unpacks mother's acquisition of religious knowledge. The process of mother's acquisition of religious knowledge is characterized by fear of eternal consequences of *behesht* (heaven) and *dojokh* (hell) and is limited to the learning and observance of primary five pillars of Islam. Their relationship with learning religious practices is marked by absence of critical approach. Because cultural (patriarchal) interpretation of Islam played a key role in silencing their questioning voices. The result of these 'normative' expectations of women do not questions why's and what's of religion got configured in their experience of headcovering which they called '*matat unna deo aa*', and which extends to their '*chokor*' and '*mator purdah*' (avoiding eye contact and 'reserve' conversational tone). It is only after their marriage that they have adopted burkha. Taken together, collectively known as '*purdah kora*' (doing purdah). However, the practice of 'purdah' (which included dress, mobility and seclusion) which their generations followed, although it is followed in contemporary times by their college going daughter albeit in different degrees.

Mother's form of purdah practice immediately started with the onset of puberty, and it consisted of covering their head with *unna* and wearing loose long dresses both inside and outside home. This is considered as cultural and respectable appropriate way of presentation of Muslim women's body. The rules and cultural expectations of being a woman from a 'good' Muslim family also extended to their interactions with the opposite gender. This was largely achieved through symbolic aspects of 'body language'.

Unlike their mothers practice of headcovering which strictly started with the menarche, the daughters practiced situational headcovering. Nevertheless, the decisions of the younger participants to enter new spaces such as entry to college lead to the possibility of maintaining modesty in overall appearances. More often than not, the practice of maintaining modesty in certain specific situations is tied to the family's public 'good' image. Furthermore, the mother of these participants underlines the 'natural' differences in temperament between men and women; the same essentialists cultural teachings they

try to pass to their daughters. This in a way reflects that mothers are socializing agents formed through and by mental structures of structural identifiers of class and gender (Bourdieu, 1987).

However, this distinctive pattern in the form of ‘do as I say’ and observe what ‘I do’ (Bader & Desmond, 2006) in the construction of religious Muslim women adulthood do not attain the same result as it happened in their (mother’s) generation. This is because once the mothers believe that their daughter has (externally) learned the right way of performing religious subjectivities the role of the mother shifts to seeing how they manage these identity teachings outside of home. Given that mothers are aware of what society thinks or will think of women’s performances outside the home, self-surveillance in light of the perspectives of wider community is always present in their dialogue with inner voice. The chapter also explores *now versus then phenomenon* which problematizes the notion that Muslim women are passive recipients to what the parents teach them and ask that it is necessary to pay attention to the site of contestation which is determined by the participants interpretative stand on Islam as a flexible resource to various social circumstances. The younger participants utilize religious teachings from the online sphere which act as a ‘dynamic toolkit’ (Bartkowski & Read, 2003) to support more egalitarian views on gender relations in their own religious tradition which got hidden under patriarchal religious interpretations. As the participants attain adulthood this gender role learning amounts to the creation of (un) learning and (re) learning of a set of beliefs and practices. This makes us realize that religious socialization within the family does not take place in isolation from the surrounding society. The chapter shows that mothers’ attitudes to religious upbringing are affected by their middle-class habitus, religious capital which gets deeply embodied in bodily practices and hence is experienced as the most ‘natural’ consciousness of women belonging to ‘good’ Muslim families. The notion of habitus as something that is learned and transmitted becomes an act of ‘sustaining the middle class “good” Muslim self’ (Bourdieu, 1986).

Chapter four pays particular attention to how these younger college going hijabi participants sustain the particular embodied Muslim ideals of middle-class respectability in a space where ‘differences’ are carried out through their bodily sign and comportment. Secular college space provides a forum for the hijabi participants to discover the multiple and unique aspects of their evolving gendered self. Navigating key areas such as teacher

interactions, and conversations with friends, they continuously evolve their notions of what it means to be a friend, a student, a female, and a Muslim. Their experiences speak of a series of closed views that implies negative attribute and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims. These experiences provide opportunities as well as challenges for the hijabi participants to explore who they are and what they stand for.

The hijabi participants also speak of actively negotiating with the boundaries associated with male interactions within and outside colleges. For example, interacting with boys or having a boyfriend in the college space or outside the home. In such context of 'temporary', 'safe' yet contested haven, the religious standard of the family encourages the participants to observe certain religious practice outside home habitus. The participants constantly work through the ongoing dilemmas of having a potential romantic partners and male classmates. Because sexual ethics in Islam revolve around modest male-female interactions and modesty in clothing. When the phrase so and so hijabi has a 'boyfriend' is used, the connotation of the term in the Muslim culture with all exaggeration is that there exists intimate physical contact between the hijabi and the 'boyfriend,' (even if they do not have) and hence they are deemed to be 'immodest' or '*behaya*'. Such terms, which especially a middle-class Muslim family would not endure about his/her daughter. However, the study has found that not all hijabi follow these guidelines and there are some who seek a balance between maintaining religious requirements and tackling culturally imposed gender norms, while others feel to keep them at bay.

This chapter opens up with the story of hijabis whose adoption of hijab involves several dimensions that is, familial and social dynamics. The chapter also takes into purview the reaction of family and friends towards the hijab wearers, reactions which involve both supportive and non-supportive family and friends. There are also narratives where these college going young women are the first women in their family to have adopted hijab. In that case, they themselves become the source of encouragement for other older women around them to start wearing the hijab. Academic and social experiences also played a huge role in how the girls understood the differences and similarities between their 'stigmatised' Muslim and 'normal' self. This chapter also showed that all hijabis felt responsible for challenging the stereotypes, comments and jokes about Muslims yet their decision to ignore or respond to these remarks depend on the person and setting of the circumstances. Furthermore, it has also been found that teachers either they do not

understand the Muslim gender interaction guidelines, or they lack knowledge on the middle-class Muslim family's habitus. During the course of interview, hijab controversy of Karnataka sent shocked waves throughout India. However, considering the relative allowance of 'unna' as head-cover in combination with following rules of college uniform, the participants were informed of wearing hijab in ways which satisfies the rules and regulations of college uniform. This shows that unlike other parts of the nation where college spaces are more hostile and create further challenges towards hijabis, the college teachers of these two colleges in which participants are studying made them feel welcome in college space.

Furthermore, college is an academic space whose experiences provide these participants with exploring their intellectual interests and pursuits. At this point, a cultural misconception among many non-Muslims is that Muslim families do not allow their daughters the 'freedom' to pursue college education or complete their graduation, constrain their movement owing to religious reasons. However, the research findings report that there are infrastructural and social reasons which act as a barrier to moving beyond secondary education, nevertheless these issues did not stop the participants from enrolling in college education. Majority of the participants shared with the researcher that they have arrived at the decision regarding future academics and careers in *jaana raasta* (familiar paths) but in their opinion, families either encourage them to strive for their goals or in rare cases deter them from academic pursuits. Regardless of the hijabis choice of career path, families expect good academic achievement from them. Because at times, daughters' educational success and future aspiration are linked to the enhancement of families' social and cultural capital. At the same time being hijabi they did not face exclusion in participating in co-curricular activities. Overall, the research findings in this chapter reported of positive and negative experiences of the hijabi participants within their college campus. Being visible as Muslim brings with it its fair share of challenges, but this is not the extent that they are constantly harass or prejudiced in the classroom that they have to withdraw from the course.

The last chapter investigates the range of personal and subjective experiences- religious and hijab fashion- that have informed their decision to take up hijab. With various 'hijabista' images promoting hijab as 'fashionable accessory' (Nistor, 2017) and circulating in social media, the research findings reveal that social media applications such

as Instagram helps in explaining its popularity among the young participants. Through different narratives, the chapter has argued that hijab and other modest dress plays a definite role in a gendered masculine public space. However, the findings of this research study reveal a sense of hesitation among a few participants who are critical of the factor that hijab acts as a barrier to male harasser or hijab wearers gains respect from men. Because compelling lived experience of hijab wearers has illustrated some form of sexual impropriety while moving out in non-segregated settings.

Within the intersecting points of stigmatized and capital of respectability, participants carve their own standpoint on hijab which reflects that the meanings, rationale and benefit ascribed to it and the power relations surrounding it are contingent upon the “circumstances under which it is worn” (Mishra & Shirazi 2010, p. 193). While reviewing different works from East and West on hijab and Muslim women and their experience in arenas such as education, employment, marriage, the researcher felt that those anecdotes reinforce that Muslims, and their religion (Islam) are poorly misunderstood category. The wearing of the hijab and moving comfortably in the public domain has become a common sight in Karimganj, especially among young Muslim women. The acceptance of wearing vibrant colourful, multicoloured, embroidered hijab and abaya, with Indo-western outfit such as long-sleeved full dress in public domain, and posting them on social media, has altered the meaning of Muslim dress from an outdated-old-women to sophisticated, educated stylish women.

The overarching significance of the research study is that ‘pious’ family and resistance alone cannot capture why increasing number of active, educated Muslim women around the world have decided to take up ‘covering in different modest form’. New social factors and economic conditions in transnational space are also playing their part and are also partially responsible for the rise in hijab and other modest covering dresses. Moreover, there is evidence from the research findings which indicate that younger participants are embracing more religiosity in their lives than their parents. In addition, the reasons younger participants reveal for wearing the hijab is different from the response of their mother’s generation. This shows generational reversal in religious knowledge transmission. According to Wadud (2006), in the present times, Muslim women’s engagement with issues of concern to women’s well-being in Muslim societies has

increased tremendously because of factors such as increased levels of awareness, increased levels of education, ... religious authority, and personal spiritual wholeness.

A notable feature throughout all the chapter findings is that the younger college-going women's experiences demonstrate both quickness and resourcefulness in finding support for their own gender views and practices from within their religious tradition. The manner in which this new educated generation are claiming their critical agency is neither by subverting social dictates nor by blindly following and embodying religious doctrines. On the contrary, the form through which their agency takes shape is through interaction in particular contexts with the world of the Internet. This confirms that with technological advancement, the role of religion is gaining its foothold stronger with the availability of diverse voices of religious scholars. The thesis findings question the belief that modern life would push religion to the periphery. Instead, the findings align with what Avishai has noted that it is through religion that "the goal of becoming an authentic religious subject against an image of a secular Other" (Avishai, 2008, cited in Burke, 2012) anchors the moral lives. Participants experience suggests that where there is difficult to grasp an explicit female agency then it is important to 'look for expressions and moments of resistance' (Mahmood, 2005, p. 8). Besides the four 'dialogic' approaches to agency outlined by Burke (2012), in the present findings, three approaches - empowerment, instrumental and compliant- have been fundamental in conceptualising hijabi women's experience to social relational context.

Taking the study a bit further, a question could be posed- although the hijab wearers claim to free from the chain of capitalistic beauty standards yet 'seeing social media hijabi Muslims' collaborating with brands and agencies, running self-run hijab businesses forced the researcher to beg the real questions – Are Muslim women falling or have fallen into the trap of capitalist consumer market? Moving beyond this archetype of 'beautiful, covered body's representation, which has been strongly commercialized by market, the researcher finds herself wondering. As fashion is subject to change how would the future of Karimganj's young hijabis look like? Will they (adolescence and young adults) return to their use of cultural equivalent 'unna' when out in public space or will they form a 'strict' interpretation of covered dress, or they will adopt dress that would allow them to be *grohonjogyo* (accepted) in this changing political landscape. Ultimately the appearance of a person, one of which is dressed body, though ordinary yet it provides relevant cues



about the person. As Arthur recognizes, out of many symbolic markers dress is the most recognizable phenomenon used by conservative religious groups (Arthur, 1999). Hence, it becomes a core feature of the reflexive projection of the self.

### **6.1 Limitations of the present research and possible future research implications**

This section diagnoses the limits of the present study with future research, because diagnosing the issues can be improved by future research. Although the study focuses on middle class practicing Sunni Muslims of a specific literate age group who observe hijab. Nevertheless, expanding sample, class and sect composition would have provided unique perspective. The study did not include the experience of those who do not wear hijab. Because hijab and modesty in dress plays a key role in establishing a Muslim middle class foundation, how these young non-hijab wearers navigate the family and wider community?

To expand the investigation lens further, a comparative analysis on class compositions across regions - working class, upper middle class, women belonging to clergy family would have actually helped to elucidate how they experience their Islamic dress code when they navigate public spaces in Karimganj and beyond it.

As highlighted in research findings, the concept of hijab both in its tangible and intangible form is a requirement for Muslim men as well as women. Hence, further research is needed to investigate how Muslim men perceive hijab. Most often, the research findings reported on '*sriti*' (memories) of 'time/age' and the role of family (socialization period) while looking into their (daughters) contemporary religious self; thus, an account on the lives of Muslim man experience calls to look out for the role of familial involvement in reference to transmission of religious values specifically men's relationship with hijab in terms of bodily modesty.

Moreover, the result of the study point to the meaningful influence the Islamic posts related to Muslim lifestyle have significantly impacted their adult lives, thus there is a need for further research on examining whether young Muslim men take interest in consuming Islamic content from social media. Further research is needed in the area of whether Karimganj young Muslim men face stigma in college or in workplaces. If so, then to what degree they vary, and in which category do they fall?

The present study only captures a snippets of younger adult participants' evolving experience on hijab and Islam. The young adults that have been interviewed continue to draw their Islamic knowledge from social media, thus strive to maintain some engagement and revive their spiritual side. Understanding this phenomenon by employing longitudinal research design would be helpful in illuminating insight and awareness in knowing how social media influences individual faith over a long period of time, considering life situations- higher education, paid work, marriage, motherhood in adulthood.

Moreover, post fieldwork yet still in touch with participants, the researcher encountered several young participants operating self-run hijab, modest dress and Islamic artifact businesses. They operate all this through advertising in WhatsApp and Instagram pages. While the phenomenon of Muslim women run business is prevalent in national and international landscape, it is a trend which is comparatively of recent origin in Karimganj. Since the interesting case appeared after the end of fieldwork hence it will serve as a future case study in learning to know how it is contributes to their financial autonomy and more specifically what challenges they have to wrestle with issues of mobility.

These are the promising areas which are worth further investigation, deserve reflection and should be of future sociological interest.

## References

- Arthur, L.B. (1999). Introduction: Dress and the social control of the Body. In Linda B. Arthur (Ed.), *Religion, Dress and the Body* (pp. 1-8). Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Bader, C.D. & Desmond, S.A. (2006). Do as I say and as I do: The effects of consistent parental beliefs and behaviors upon religious transmission. *Sociology of Religion*, 67(3), 313-329.
- Bartkowski, J.P. & Read, J.G. (2003). Veiled submission: Gender, power, and identity among evangelical and Muslim women in the United States. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26, 71-92.
- Bourdieu, P. (1987). *In Other Words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology*. Translated by Matthew Adamson. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In John G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Burke, K. (2012). Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches. *Social Compass*, 6(2), 122-133.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Mishra, S. & Shirazi, F. (2010). Hybrid identities: American Muslim women speak. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 17(2), 191-209.
- Nistor, L. (2017). Hijab(istas)-as Fashion Phenomenon. A Review. *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Social Analysis*, 7, 59-67.
- Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. England: OneWorld Publications.