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ABSTRACT

Muslim women's donning of hijab and the various forms – 'niqaab' and 'burkha' has become a subject of obsessive attention and extensive interpretation which have occupied academics, researchers and politicians like never before (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Davary, 2009). Because there is this prevalent notion among many Western scholars that 'veil' equates oppression and subjugation, a patriarchal constraint on women which denies gender equality. Moreover, after 9/11 and other forms of extremist attack that followed, hijab and other forms of Islamic dress stereotypically came to be associated with religious extremism, security, nationalism. In various parts of the globe, state prohibited the wearing of hijab, niqaab and burkha in public institutions with the aim to incorporate 'a secular regime' into the political structure. The fall out of this ideological fight is increasing discriminatory practices towards hijab wearers. A common analogy similar to Muslim women's head-body covering practices that one gets to hear is that of Christian nuns who also veils to this day. However, among these faiths there exists ideological differences of performances of womanhood and the notions of sexuality (Guindi, 2000). Nevertheless, as numerous scholars have pointed out, of all the various forms of cultural expressions used for different purposes and evidence of its manifestation in different cultures and religions across history (Hindus, Christians and Ultra-Orthodox Jews), Muslim women's veil seemed to be the most controversial and stereotyped one. It is seen as 'ahistoric', 'static', 'uncivilized', 'gender-oppressive'. Droogsma (2007) quite rightly points out that despite there being a complex cluster of meanings inherent in the veils and veiling practices which varies greatly from one phase of life to the next there is a tendency to 'ascribe' meanings as opposed to 'describe' its functions or benefits it accrues in their lives.

While hijab as a scholarly topic is not unique, as there are many research studies conducted on the subject across Europe, America, Canada and Middle East; in the context of India until December 2021, few academicians were interested in hijab wearers as it was not considered 'controversial' and 'restrictive' practice. Prominently, academic spark in the symbolic use of hijab grew significantly after the incident of January 2022 when six students at a pre-university college in Udipi town of Karnataka were not permitted to enter classrooms as they were wearing a hijab (headscarf) (Jain, 2023). Their firm assertion of not removing hijab stands in violation of the college dress code. Their acceptance and rejection of hijab became a litmus test to access their educational knowledge. Country like India where there was no prescription and the enforcement of hijab saw a sudden hue and cry over use of hijab in educational institutions

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