

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, the state prohibits 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 both 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 Udupi town of Karnataka were denied permissions 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 on hijab ban saw a sudden hue and cry over use of hijab in educational institutions which slowly spread to the other schools and colleges within and outside the state of Karnataka. What is distinctive in this case is the changing sociopolitical ecology of the country, a unique type of ‘orientalist fantasy’ (Kirmani, 2009) where Hindus are projected as ‘sons of the soils’ of India thus the process of making of Hindu Rashtra while at the same time assisting the State and its (repressive) apparatuses to increase security practices against Muslim men and Muslim communities (Gupta et al., 2020).

It is important to note that the existing scholarship on adoption of hijab and various forms of body concealment by young, urban, educated, working, middle-class women conducted in the West has widely concentrated on the experience of ‘immigrant’ Muslim women of second and third generation hijabis. Their experiences throw light on racism, discrimination and multiple meanings of hijab which the wearer attribute to wide individual and social expectations. The context of India, more particularly the state of Assam, also witnessed young college going women adopting hijab and other forms of complete bodily coverage, which, by the by, has escaped the scholarly attention or overlooked in South Asian research. This missing feature has motivated the researcher to undertake the qualitative research.

How can society say they have knowledge on Muslim woman and her relationship with hijab? What does *amra jani* (we know) involve? And where is this knowledge derived from? Given the limited interaction non-Muslims have with Muslim women, why did they feel that this knowledge is sufficient to draw comparisons between all Muslim women? The debate around the hijab being a choice or something someone is forced to wear; this thesis critically questions these assumptions particularly in the light of the complex issues young Muslim women of Karimganj faces. Muslims are largely seen as united by homogeneous faith group without diversity in practice of their beliefs. When this happens, commoners assume that all Muslims are the same and label Muslim women stereotypically (McDonough, 2003). Reading the results of this research would make clear that reason like ‘religious obligation’ could be the macro view, many are intra and inter reasons thus strengthening the large body of scholarship which argues that Muslim women are not forced into wearing the hijab but take into consideration many factors or moments before

they make the decision from going pre- to post-hijab transformation. While it is a universal fact that there are political and familial instances that forces women to cover up, yet at the same it is important to acknowledge that there are others who employs willful discourse. Dismissing their calculative decision as ‘false consciousness’ runs the risk of sabotaging their experience, particularly during periods of rapid socio-economic upheaval, and as Hoodfar (2001) argues ‘to deny this is also to deny Muslim women their agency’. The narratives provided by the women expose the wearing of the hijab to be a complex issue than what outsiders think. Besides the political and legal battles to decide ‘what is best for her’ (Medina, 2014), there is a whole world of everyday experiences that goes into the construction and performance of Muslim woman.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of hijabi’s experience of their adoption of hijab, the present study is designed on the following research objectives:

1. To provide a background on arrival of Islam in Karimanj and contextualize Karimanj Muslim women.
2. To examine the pattern of inter-generational religious upbringing in their home space which influences the religious experiences of young hijabi women.
3. To explore the hijabi women’s social experience of college life in relation to their adoption of hijab.
4. To understand their everyday experiences which informed them of their decision to wear hijab.

Literature Review

A literature review is an account of knowledge and ideas which have been established and published on a topic by scholars and researchers. Holistic knowledge of the literature of the field helps a researcher to think broadly and explore ideas relating to the body of existing knowledge with that of information gathered from the field. As the present topic explores hijabi’s experience with the Hijab in Karimanj, it is necessary to review the diverse collections of work on topics related to it.

The most basic debate over the hijab is whether it is a requirement or not. So, how did this debate on hijab begin? There are two opinions to this; there are those who say that the hijab is a requirement because it is in the Quran and Hadiths and those who say that it is

not because it is not part of the Quran. Works of Fatima Mernissi (1991), Katherine Bullock (2003), Leila Ahmed (1991), Fadwa El Guindi (2000), Soraya Hajjaji-Jarrah (2003), Saher Amer (2014), Linda Clarke (2003), Anne Sofie Roald (2001), Barbara Stowasser (1994), Amina Wadud (2006) and Asma Barlas (2001) has helped in understanding the meaning of hijab in its totality. These scholars have systematically reexamined the language and vocabulary of the Quranic text on hijab and women's clothing and contextualize the verses and hadith reports within specific historical and cultural moment. Although they all differ in their conclusion, nevertheless, disagreement is natural and integral to human experience and most importantly it is exhibited in knowledge building.

Although several scholars have elaborated on the different conceptual representations of hijab arguing it from their specific standpoint, yet it has come to notice that in the last few decades the knowledge structure on hijab research has expanded exponentially encompassing voices of diverse group of women of different ethnic, racial and national backgrounds. Encountering with these empirical works revealed that the ideological tug-of-war on hijab and women's body as oppressive and liberating is actually in no sense peculiar to feminists- secular, Islamic, Muslim and Progressive's concern- it is happening in many countries which has a lengthy jurisdictional restriction on what women can wear in public place. The focus of much of the work has been on the MENA region and European nations. A variety of explanations have been offered on why of 'new veiling' or 're-veiling phenomenon' that made its presence felt among young educated and urban Muslim women since the late 20th century. In recent times demand for more covered and modest dress resulted in greater recognition of the modest fashion sector in regions such as Indonesia, Tehran and Turkey which functions and promises to fulfill the fashion tastes of contemporary Muslim women. Scholarly investigations attempt to analyze the complex relations between fashion and religion in which social media played a crucial role in disseminating information on 'Muslim lifestyle'. Furthermore, research on pious/modest fashion highlights that fashion and Islamic is a rough and complicated labyrinth which is carefully navigated by the hijabis across the world.

When speaking on hijab, Muslim lifestyle and social media, the context of India has received little attention so far. Partially this could be explained with the prevailing system of 'purdah practices' among both the Hindu and Muslim communities. Another closely

related explanation could be the manifestation of the cultural equivalent of hijab is 'dupatta'. When speaking of Muslim purdah in terms of dress what quickly comes in mind is the image of black burkha and its associated 'negative' images. By suggesting that, it runs the risk of erasing a number of different dresses, that the young participants in the study have adopted; other than the burkha to conceal their bodies, including but not limited to the niqaab (face mask), salwar kameez, dupatta, abaya and long dresses are also in vogue. These dresses are 'situated', 'embodied' practice that come in different styles, colors, and materials, shapes; the thesis chapters encapsulate this.

In the mapping of Purdah practices on women's bodies, noted academicians such as Hanna Papanek (1973), David G. Mandelbaum (1988), Patricia Jeffery (1979) identified the framework of male-female dynamics with the idea of family honour link with women's bodies. Apart from these classic work on Purdah practices, Tabassum Ruhi Khan (2015) and Saba Hussain's (2019) in depth engagement with the Muslim subjectivities residing in Delhi and Assam further helped in research process. After the hijab ban in Karnataka, scholars made an attempt to explore and study it from a variety of perspectives - historical, ethnographic, political, educational, personal (Arafath & Arunima, 2022; Jain, 2023; Rumaney & Sriram, 2023). The fact that the literatures are still dealing with Muslim women, their choices to cover or not to, amidst the multiple negotiations these women have to undertake to navigate their 'intersectional differences' is a testament to the reality that we are still blind to the experiences that they encounter.

Methodology

Mary Jo Deegan says, "Sociologists are expected to 'see' the world and record it as it is rather than try to change it" (Deegan, 2014, p. 79). Going with what Deegan says the study adopts a qualitative approach to unpack the meanings people give to their subjective experiences. Informed by qualitative method, the study has adopted semi-structured interview schedule followed by one-to-one individual interviews and focus group discussion to delve into different scales of tensions which young participants experience at the intersections of their gender, and religion, and a host of other factors ranging between subjective, pragmatic and wider structural conflict. It is essential to point out that this study is composed of two sets of samples. One sample group between 18-24 years of age, and the older group comprises of their mothers or other similarly aged maternal figures from

the younger subjects' families. The research site is Karimganj, a district of Barak valley situated in Assam.

Organization of the thesis

Each chapter of the thesis interpret and discusses the results within the respective chapters with particular emphasis on the research question, existing literature, concepts and theoretical framework. The thesis is divided into six chapters, in which the first chapter introduces the research topic by highlighting the research problem, objectives and questions concerning the study. Besides, the chapter also discusses the theoretical and conceptual framework used in the study, along with the methodological approach used in collection of data, which is followed with outline of chapterization.

The second chapter provides the historical overview of arrival of Islam in the Barak valley region, by contextualising it in Karimganj. The necessity to study the arrival of Islam in the region arose because of participants self-characterizing themselves as religious which is visible in their observation of five fundamental pillars of Islam and the manner of dress and deportment they follow in their inside and outside space. By tracing how Islam made its way in Barak valley the chapter highlighted the process of Muslim settlement of different social groups. Through the process of discussion of social group, the chapter locates the normative understanding of women from 'good' Muslim family gets largely embedded in tradition and class status. It briefly discusses the socio-economic background of the women which highlights the social structural issues that has shaped their middle class embodied habitus. Their repetitive use of phrase *amrar somoyt* (during our time) shows their identification as distinct from women of other social groups. The chapter further provides snippets to the context of change in generational age - social, economic and technological which while bring new reasons of self-presentation and determines new norms of Muslim embodiment and, thereby, shape the hijabis experience in Karimganj.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters are the main core chapters of the study, which analyses the findings of the study under various themes and sub-themes. It is not that there is no work on hijab, but the greater proportion spans across theological, resistance to colonial power, to a more aesthetics and ethics of covering practices. While hijab is known around the world as a testimony to Muslim's identity and is referred to as religious obligation the question arises how this notion of religious identification is internalized into inner

subjective self which gets reflected in external marker. How does the notion of a ‘religious home’ over time gets tied to middle class moral habitus? It is here that the third chapter-context of home space and role of family members occupies a prominent place in the formation of religious subjects.

Before the children learns the doctrine of Islam, Islam gets embodied through various visual-verbal practices of home spaces. The chapter further explores the role of maternal who exercise their subtle influence and engage in construction of Muslim middle class respectable selfhood, with a focus on the role of religion, and power relations within the family- status and honour- that capture the significance of intersections of gender, (religious/cultural) dress and space. The third chapter demonstrates that religious knowledge gained during childhood socialization does not assume a fixed entity. Although it shapes their understanding of what it means to be a Muslim, but the received religious and cultural teachings remain inadequate in answering their daily challenges as they move in and between different spaces as emerging college going adults. The void is filled by social media app where they visually engage with religious intellectuals and pick the knowledge that best suits their issues at hand. With this, they bring religion as part of their conversation on issues such as education, paid work, ‘ideal type’ modest women and men’s hijab.

Given the current hostile climate faced by Muslim community as a whole, the necessity of exploring hijabis college experience cannot be overestimated. Their journey to the hijab highlights their decision to adopt hijab and other forms of modest covered dress at different turning and specific points of their life which contrast with the one-dimensional stereotypical understanding that they face familial pressure to change their appearance. As the women moved through college spaces they are ‘sojourners’ between two worlds-home and college. At one level, they have to deal with the insecurity of the parents who are aware of the moral ambiguities, unconventional activities that college space entails and at another level they have to regulate and deal with standardized set of Islamic norms and practices and their reassurance to their middle-class respectable status with different social actors of colleges - teachers and peer groups. While participants’ narratives suggest that their visibility with hijab made them susceptible to judgmental stares and presumptive comments, curious, ignorant questions and feedback; it is all these stigmatized moments (direct or indirect) that make them adopt coping strategies. The chapter highlights that the

participants are independent, thoughtful, and responsible students who are evolving as ‘enlightened’ individuals through their college lived experiences. Their college experiences demonstrate that as hijabis they did not face outright exclusion or any hostile humiliation within and outside the classroom.

While the previous two findings chapter placed younger participants experience of hijab in broader context of middle-class family and college, the last finding chapter, before turning to the conclusion chapter, elaborately deals with the social agent that has appropriated the meaning of religion and its symbols and has used social media to spread religious and moral lessons. The social media hijabi content creators have endeavored to create a fine balance between religion and fashionable aesthetics in head and body covering practices which has significantly influenced and attracted the younger college going participants to seek both beauty and modesty. Furthermore, the chapter examines their everyday experiences in ordinary events of life which cause deep emotional stress and anxiety thus resulting in a change of their dressing styles.

While many of the responses in the chapters resonate with other empirical findings, the uniqueness of family environment in sowing the seeds of religiosity has been largely ignored in wider scholarship on hijabis experience as Muslim self. Unlike other parts of the region where certain organizations regulate the dress code of Muslim women, in the context of young hijabi Karimganj participants it is the technology that has played a huge transformative part. Although participants have the complete freedom to choose or not to choose Islamic content, however, they are not blind to the popular discourse on hijabi women, and Islam and instead of mimicking deliberate ignorance of their mothers they engages with new media technologies which are presented by intellectuals whose aim is not to present unequal social order or negotiation of gender role in an archaic fashion. Moreover, the young participants do not engage with these religious content as blank slates but as members of a Muslim family who have socialized them from birth and from them, they have learned ideals and principles which also likely influences how they interpret the information they consume. Although, opposition, bargaining has been noticed in the ways they (younger participants) and their mothers articulate ‘misleading’ patriarchal content in the name of religion, nevertheless, the research findings challenges the tacit understanding of Islam as a repressive factor in young women’s lives and argues that well-educated, young female Muslims with access to technology in Karimganj use knowledge of ‘real’

Islam to oppose ‘misguided’ ethno-cultural traditions that supports restrictive gender norms. Their reflexive capacity shaped by Internet occupied a ubiquitous place over their performance and presentation of self in everyday lives. This opens up sociological dialogue about the diversity of experience which exists among Muslim women and everyday expressions of Islam which have been sidelined for institutional political depictions.

Thus, the thesis brings forth a body of narratives which in itself carries life force. They act like doorways through which one enters the world of feelings, perceptions and experience which may help us to understand how the hijabi women carries the weight of the world marked by different struggles in different social contexts. The younger participants find themselves in complex constellations of belonging with specific spatial norms and expectations which require performance on their part as ‘in’ space or ‘out’ of space. Thus, their adoption of hijab is in a way, tied to the wider construction and performance of middle-class moral habitus in family, college and community spaces in Karimganj.