

CHAPTER 5

Understanding hijab: Unfolding the narratives of women who took hijab

“Who I am is defined by a lifetime of experience, imposed by many outside influences, and composed by the person through a unique process of growth that may not be without internal struggle” (Papanek, 1994, p. 44).

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the process through which young Muslim women living in Karimganj (Assam) arrive at the decision to wear the hijab. The chapter tries to answer two core research questions: 1) what is the prime factor that informed the women to wear hijab, and 2) how they use their everyday experiences to legitimate their decision to wear hijab. The chapter argues that for an observer, the manifest reasons behind increasing use of hijab may seem a reflection of heightened awareness of religiosity but analyzing the ‘interview transcripts’ of the participants reveals a different story, that is, the use of hijab as a ‘strategic instrument’ which enables them to interact with the cultural contexts within which they are situated (Hoodfar, 2003; Sabur, 2022).

Muslim women’s veil has caught the attention of social scientists across various disciplinary spectrum. Since 1970, there has been a widespread rise in veiling¹ in countries like Egypt and since then women have embraced the practice across the world. Consequently, this dramatic rise in ‘new hijab phenomenon’ (Nasser, 1999) became a focal point for debate spanning different occupational groups. Thus, multiple discourses surrounding the veil have framed the veil as a contested and symbolically complex item of clothing. As Tarlo puts it:

There are feminists critiquing it, anthropologists interpreting it, religious authorities prescribing it, hijab wearers defending it, politicians and activists promoting or opposing it, legal professional judging it, governments prohibiting or imposing it and artists and novelists exploiting its multivalent semiotic potential for expressing a whole

¹ Veiling here means various concealing forms of head-covering and dress worn by Muslim women (Carvalho, 2013, p. 338).

range of ideas about beauty, eroticism, secrecy, mystery, piety, holiness, freedom, protection, and oppression. (2010, p. 2-3)

There exists a vast amount of literature on hijab, which are thicker and denser than any other issues related to Islam and public sphere (Gould, 2014). A closer reading of the hysteria surrounding the veil reflects its polarizing nature. The meanings attributed to the veil are often thought of in two extremes - between oppression and liberation, thus, leaving no room for negotiation. As seen in the introductory chapter, significant ethnographic works revealed the complexity of veils in different cultures. It is used as a manifestation of piety, to make fashion statements, to display as an identity marker. Clearly, these works have revealed how women have used the same social institution, which the feminists such as, Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed, have identified as a tool of patriarchy, to subvert and take control of their lives.

The chapter under discussion is an add-on to the available scholarship on hijab (veil). It tries to argue that the theory of forceful covering in Muslim or non-Muslim culture do not apply to all women in any given society. When the data is examined, distinct themes have emerged. These themes are all important to the young women to situate the debate on Muslim women and their dress. These themes are examined in the following sections and attempts are made to link back to the available scholarship to see any cases of similarities and dissimilarities between others and the present research findings.

As mentioned in the methodology section, the age group of the young women comprises of 18-24 years. This age group has been described as ‘digital natives’ implying that they are familiar with the internet since childhood (Bittman et al., 2011 cited in Mahmudova & Evolvi 2021, p. 55). One part of the internet is social media. Social media not only allows one to socialize and build social connections but also acts as a ‘promotional medium’ that displays current trends. Since the advent of the internet and development of different social media tools, comprehensive studies have been undertaken to explore the nature of engagement of Muslims on the internet (Hasan, 2022). These studies have demonstrated the multiple ways in which Muslims engage with social media, as in how they present themselves, and express their religious identity (ibid.). It is evident in the present research findings that the aesthetic vision of various authorities in social media did impact on the young women’s decision to take up hijab. As Meyrasyawati highlighted, the importance of social media to hijab practices cannot be overstated (2022).

The introduction of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram and their embeddedness in everyday life makes them key mediums of communication for modern youth. Schwittay (2011) noted that 17 percent of the Indian population are between 15 and 24 years old and the said age-group are experiencing drastic changes in their personal and professional lives brought by new media technologies. Engagement with social media requires smartphone and access to high-speed internet. Mobile phones first arrived in India in 1995 (Schwittay, 2011), and since then their adoption has grown exponentially. In June 2023, India emerged as the highest contributor of mobile subscribers in the world (Source: Mint)². In recent times, India has seen entry of new mobile phone operators, which provide 4g mobile services, which means high-speed mobile internet and other services through mobile phones. Innovative features of mobile phones, reduced internet costs, has resulted in use of various types of social media platforms among Indian population.

Globally, social media has become part of the private and public lifestyles of youth (Nisa, 2018), especially the Instagram platform (Pramiyanti, 2019). The Muslim women in the present research study use social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, as vehicles to transfer their offline activities to the online space, and vice versa as well as to influence and reach out to others, especially in matters affecting their hijab practices and religious ideas. This anchor with what Miller et al., (2016) has argued in their book, *How the world changed social media*, that social media are not just a means of communication but a place for socialization. The participants in the study adopt the same approach as that was recorded in the research done by Meyrasyawati (2022) who conducted research into how young Muslim women use social media platforms (Instagram) to learn and discuss about hijab practices, consequently building solidarity among her chosen Muslim women's group in the context of Surabaya, Indonesia.

This chapter looks at how women learn about hijab practices³ through social media and more importantly how their understanding of hijab practices is informed by the 'Islamic content' of Instagram posts which they relate with and negotiate in everyday experiences. Access and their engagement with all kinds of new aesthetics have fueled discussions about the ethics of aesthetic dimension to hijab. Although all the participants expressed

² <https://www.livemint.com/industry/telecom/india-emerges-as-top-contributor-in-mobile-subscribers-across-world-7-million-subscribers-june-quarter-ericsson-report-11694145900864.html>

³ Women who engage with hijab in a more conscious and critical way and for whom wearing a hijab is an essential item in public gatherings.

their discontent towards the commodification of hijab as a fashionable commodity, this discontent is a softened one. These women strongly oppose veiling and fashion⁴. However, their statements show that they are not against hijab fashion when it has certain limits determined by religious rules. One thing common among all the participants' understanding is the clothing dilemmas that they used to face in the beginning of their hijab journey. They wish to dress in a way that is modest and in style. The shortage of modest yet elegant and graceful clothing for young women in the local market caused a problem for them and they usually tend to look out for fashionable clothing from other sources such as, online store.

Therefore, the central focus of this chapter is concerned with the way Muslim women deal with the hijab in everyday life and their process of performing hijabi self. Muslim women in Karimganj believe, and all follow the same Islamic doctrine (the source of which is Quran and Hadith), yet they have their own different takeaway of the same Islamic sources about the hijab and negotiate their hijab preferences with the people in their environment. Throughout the chapter, the researcher aims to discuss the narrative of participants' personal and social intricacies behind the practice of covering, by addressing certain questions like: why are the young urban educated women taking up hijab? Has taking up hijab helped them to become 'better Muslim'? Were they really forced by the family to take up hijab and is it they, who did not make decisions for themselves? Significantly, to understand the relationship of wearer with hijab in totality, it is essential to take into account the overall context - between different requirements and social settings. Additionally, both commonalities and distinctiveness in the participants' narratives make it possible to bring the practice of covering into question.

5.2 Exposure to religious teachings and resources on the internet: Seeking religious knowledge with the help of technology

While parents and religious institutions were the primary source of knowledge of Islam for the young women during their childhood, majority of them as they possess their personal smartphones (android and I-phone) have their own personal Instagram and WhatsApp accounts are turning to social media platform to learn, express and to engage

⁴ Participants understanding of fashion consists of provocative outfit. As Hefner noted fashionable veiling in its boldest incarnations pairs up with tight jeans... form fitting blouses... even T-shirts with exposed midriffs (2007, p. 25).

more with the religion. The young women's internalization of religious values could be a result of the unconstrained access to the world of the Internet as they explore and encounter new knowledge that resonates with their everyday challenges, provides solutions to their issues, and strengthens their faith. The narratives revealed that it is the younger generation who explore the world of internet and social media, especially Instagram as compared to their older generations. This is in line with Purnama, (2020) who highlighted that young users/millennials are the main users of Instagram who love to express their religious identities aesthetically on an online platform.

5.2.1 Muslims on social media: Instagram is the milieu that promotes visual culture of Islamic textual repertoire

Rubaya says and her statement echoes with the other participants as well:

“We follow scholars on Instagram who have a million followers. These scholars have their own YouTube channel too where they post long videos. However, nothing can beat the beauty of Instagram. It is so tempting. YouTube videos when we get ample time, we watch. But it is rare”.

To which another participant says:

“Due to our study schedule, we lack time to study Quran with meaning, so these small clippings on Islam help us a lot. There was this one message in a video post that has hit me so hard. It says that when we die, our body will be shrouded from head to toe, so we must not let our last day on earth be the first day of wearing hijab. Moreover, the post and its picturization hit me so deeply”.

Another participant adds:

“We follow them, read their posts, and update ourselves. They post verses from the Quran with meaning, recitation of Suras, which are small in length, queries of contemporary issues such as platonic relationship, small Q&A session post. When I need an answer to a question, this Q&A post is very helpful”.

Adding to this, another participant narrates:

“It is easy to listen to them or see the post, rather than going through hard binding books. Books contain difficult words; you need to search the meanings for them in dictionary. There (post) they refer to the source. They do not give ‘*aise hi*’ (translated: just like that)”.

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms in the world⁵. Therefore, it is not surprising that of all social media platforms, Instagram plays a dominant role in popularizing public figures (Purnama, 2020). In Instagram, the rise in ‘charismatic and media savvy religious figures’ popularly known as “face of cool Islam” (Echchaibi, 2011, p. 26) are successfully drawing wide audiences across the Muslim majority and Muslim minority lands. These religious scholars⁶ as well as ‘Islamic lifestyle’⁷ content creators are utilizing the social media platform to spread the positive message of Islam and to debunk the misconception and negative portrayal of Islam and Quran. They use social media as a means to reach out to the large number of masses, which they call *dawah*. The visual dissemination of religious content online (that includes teachings and recitations of Quran, Hadiths, and sayings of Prophets), with graphically appealing design of the images usually follows by a caption on a Quranic verse which serves as ethical guidance and a reminder to the followers, to inculcate certain habits to become virtuous Muslims (Nisa, 2018; Purnama, 2020; Hasan, 2022).

The uploaded images and videos contain simplification of Islamic teachings which is more geared towards the realm of everyday civic life. They do not pitch their religious message too early; they first address their audiences and followers with a well-articulated story, which could be their own personal journey and the vulnerabilities they face, which the listeners can relate to, and then they pitch their message, which is usually a form of moral lesson. This creative strategy utilized by scholars and Islamic lifestyle content creators of Instagram, to spread Islamic messages through verbal and visual language, language which contain a story with a personal touch, with a quote of positive and motivational hope has been referred to as ‘soft or light *dawah*’ (Nisa, 2018, p. 69). Such expressions of

⁵ Globally launched in October 2010, Instagram an online based social networking sites allows users to easily store and share photos, videos, podcasts with their followers. The popularity of Instagram lies in its appeal to a broader audience population along with the increasing number of its users. Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/mar/08/instagram-tiktok-app-reels-video-meta>

⁶ The researcher does not aim to focus on any religious scholars as the purpose of the chapter is not intended in that direction.

⁷ The researcher has borrowed this concept from Hasan, who understood them as Instagram users who actively seeks to represent Islamic content with focus on how Islamic content and lifestyle of Muslims inform everyday life (2022, p. 9) They are young content creators who lack training in the religious studies, yet they post religious content using sources from authoritative discourses.

educational content with a touch of youth culture stand in sharp contrast with the traditional preaching style as discussed in chapter 3. Additionally, the visual nature of the Instagram platform with photograph, as the main form of communication makes young women more attracted to it (Nisa, 2018). The scholars who engage with Islamic textual repertoire posts images in ‘bitesize, digestible chunks’ Islamic content rather than posting long videos and texts format, which while being easy to grasp and as well as timesaving for the followers and lurkers.

Additionally, the youngster is attracted towards these religious scholars in Instagram, because of their approach of “right information-proof dialogue” (Islam, 2019) in explaining issues with Quranic and Hadith references. They trust the sources they gain knowledge from and are confident enough in it to construct their lifestyle around it. At the same time, it is to be noted that the devotional and ethical content contain in the Instagram *dawa* posts has made young women more “self-reflexive about their own religious beliefs and they no longer perceive interpretations in ossified terms” (Salvatore, 1998 cited in Echchaibi, 2011, p. 34; Eickelman & Anderson 2003; Mahmood, 2005). Thus, for the participants, Instagram is an evolving learning place, a ‘space for growth’ (Nisa, 2018) in accessing and interpreting the religious sources.

Apart from scholars, the hyper-visibility of hijabi content creators in Instagram also known as hijabistas⁸ has also completely changed the way in which audiences’ access, share and acquire ideas and items of fashionable apparel. They also addressed the concept of modesty and beauty in a way that the participants had never seen or heard before. The following narratives are suggestive of it:

“Instagram has made us learn that we can follow religion while living in a modern world. There are content creators who narrates their personal journey to Islam and hijab, the challenges they have faced. All these served as an inspiration to me”. (Participant 1)

“These bloggers and influencers are from different parts of the world. A cross-fertilization of hijab competition is going on (laughing). I was baffled by the Quran themed contents posted by not only religious scholars, but also by the Muslims in general who express their youthful taste by experimenting hijab with fashion and makeup. For people of my age

⁸ The term is a combination between hijab and fashionista, making also reference to Instagram. The literature uses various denominations for young Muslim women who share their fashionable wearing of the hijab on social media platforms: e.g. hijabers, hijabistas, etc.

learning Islam from Instagram posts is a good starting point. The posts touch the heart and often it gets sync with our realities. The posts at times relate Quranic verses with the real-life experiences”. (Participant 2)

“One needs patience in imitating their hijab style. *“Tarar style amar sera bera lage”* (expressing in an irritated tone) (translated: their style, I feel is a way too complicated). But the basic idea on how to do it and how to complement with the entire outfit, one can take cue from them and one can give a signature look *“dorlam fatak se lagailam”* (translated: took the hijab and wrap it instantly)”. (Participant 3)

“The way they tie their hijab, we get awestruck. But they use fake buns and keep on adding layer after layer. They wear layer after layer clothes, which suit their climatic condition. They lead a luxurious life. Whichever transport they take is fully air-conditioned. But, for commoners like us, it is difficult to imitate or copy their styles. Although we too have the luxury to travel by our own cars but sometimes, we do take public transportation. And, when we walk on the footpath, we cannot be so fashionable. People will laugh at us”. (Participant 4)

The hijabi content creator from different parts of the continent at length shares their personal hijab stories in Instagram which inspires those who watch their videos and helps to build a “virtual trans-cultural hijabi milieu” (Tarlo, 2010, p. 75). Further, the content creator who upload and share with the audiences, the snippets of the visuals of Quranic quotes use ‘soft and gentle’ languages which the young generations find it understandable and relatable in their context. Thus, consciously or unconsciously these aesthetic posts are changing the religious practices of these women. Besides this, the participants see these hijabis as an aesthetic guide who makes them learn on making public appearance classy and beautiful. In the last narrative of this section, one participant highlights the negotiations that are made, while following these content creators. The participants stated that their lifestyle suits their place and would deflect attention, whereas she comes from a place where imitating or copying their styles would amount to attract unnecessary attention. Needless to say, then, the hijabi content creators, be it influencers or religious scholars, utilize the social media platform to market products (hijab and other modest dress that they believe to be proper attire), share knowledge to cater the need of those who want to become better Muslims (Nisa, 2018).

However, participants believe that in the process of creating a new normative version of hijab, these global fashion markets have consumed women and have fetishized the hijab and took away from its true spirit. Inadvertently subjugating and dominating us through the version of a new Muslim women-wearing hijab who wears heavy makeup such as, making eyebrows, eyelashes among others. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that given how quickly sartorial practices shift; the women do not follow the styles of any specific fashion content creator. What follows then, is that they take clothing cue from and do a “little bit of modification in their overall appearances” depending on the time, place, climatic condition, and context of the event as a way of being ordinary Muslim women. The participants understand the importance of wearing a hijab, which, to some, appears uncomfortable clothing, especially in the moderate climate of Assam.

From this, it becomes clear that social media influencers or content creators have utilized social media to spread religious and moral messages. This implies that “religion is *always* transforming” (O’Brien, 2020, p. 243). Indeed, they have changed the way a Muslim women dresses, from out of date and ‘only suitable for old women’, into fashionable attire, that is suitable for the daily lifestyles of young women. This holds particularly true when the contemporary situation is filled with assumptions regarding their (Muslim women) understanding of religious practices like ‘is it forced?’, ‘do they need to wear it in the modern era?’ ‘fundamentalists wear burkha’. Therefore, for many of the young women, Instagram as a social media platform is a space for the formation of ethical self (both in daily life and in online world) as well as improving their overall appearance. This is made possible through the adoption and practice of proper religious practices. In the case of these young girls, it is the hijab. The above narratives are suggestive of the fact that social media is considered as the main place for the young generation to obtain religious information (in this case it was hijab) and others, making its existence prominent for acquiring different kinds of information. The participants confirm the fact that they regularly check and read the daily posts of some of their favourite religious scholars and content creators. In that way, they learn their religion in an easy and fun way when scrolling daily images and captions.

5.3 Freedom with limit-story so far

Participants in the study recalled stories of their childhood and emphasized that they grew up admiring and valuing ‘Bangla culture’ such as, reading Bangla novels, listening to Bangla artists, which shaped their religious and cultural self. Nevertheless, admiring Bangla culture does not mean compromising to the teachings of Islam. The study did not find anyone practicing singing or dancing as her passion. They recalled that they had ample freedom in their choice of dress. This freedom came with a specification that dress must be decent and appropriate to religion and social norms. However, they define their choice of dress as the one they find comfort in and that does not go against the environment they live in⁹.

Compared to the one who directly or indirectly followed the footsteps of female members around them, and for whom head covering is “*yeh koi kehne ki baat hai?*” (translated: is it something to tell?) The participants in this study were the first young women in their family to start wearing the hijab. In that case, they themselves become the source of motivation for other women - old and young, around them to start wearing the hijab. They frequently expressed that, “growing up, we often heard the elders saying it is said in our religion. Beyond that our elders provide no further explanation”. It is here where the Instagram worked as a collective resource for the women to take note of ‘how a modern¹⁰ Muslim women look like’, while at the same time adhering to their gendered and religious identities. Here, we can see the role of social media influencers who reshape the religious practices among young women. They do not necessarily have to conform to a uniform dress in single colour but can add diversity in their dressed body by taking inspiration from social media influencers (Tarlo, 2010). Riquelme et al. noted that any posts in social media sustains, because of interactions with users because any posting of one user is geared towards to impact other people’s lives (2018, p. 1125). In the case of hijabi social media influencers, they motivate themselves as well as the viewers through their ‘credible’ Instagram posts. Having said this, the participants used Islamic discourse of free will to

⁹ The dynamics of living in an environment surrounded by other Muslims, as in Karimganj district, entails an overwhelming preponderance of traditions, norms and ways of life that are supposedly drawn on Islamic ethos.

¹⁰ Participants own understanding of the term, which they articulate with reference to the modernity’s universal presence.

explain their own decision to covering, which they believe align with the Quranic teachings that *there is no compulsion in religion*.

The participants acknowledged that during their period of adolescence, as a matter of ‘*let’s try*’ (in a fun way) they covered their head with a loose scarf at the wedding, imitating the hijabi wearers. Because in those days somewhere near 2012 or 2013, they remember that few hijab wearers were there in street. Therefore, in the past, out of ‘curiosity’ and ‘to look big girl’, they assumed that the enthusiasm to cover happened. But afterwards, they immediately removed it since the elders (sister-in-laws, married sisters, and cousins) giggled, disapproved, and made fun of their action. Adding to this, the women recounted that their first public coronation of hijab turned the wedding atmosphere into awkwardness and there was hesitant expression among the elders. They assume this happened because no elderly women wore hijab. They cover their head usually with the edge of a sari and ‘unna’.

The participants reported that ‘they were teased’ by saying, “*dekhte buri lager*”? (*translated: looking like an old lady*), “*ekon boyosh oise na matat kapor deor*” (*translated: now it is not the age to cover*), “*gaon er porinte matat kapor dein*” (*translated: girls from village cover their head*), “*mullah r bou*” (*translated: wife of a religious cleric*), “*koina beti oigese*” (*translated: She is trying to behave and act like a bride*), “*morobbi beti*” (*translated: an experienced old lady*).

Extrapolating from the sentences are words that are commonly used to describe young girls who cover their head, and these terms are brazenly tied to age, social class, marital status, and education. Such sentiments find similarity in the words of Saba Mahmood who expressed a ‘profound disease with the appearance of religion outside of the private space of individual belief and perceived the slightest eruption of religion into the public domain ... as a dangerous affront (2005, p. xi). The most important issue that the researcher has read is the implicit tension that the wearing of hijab by young women pose to the elders, the findings of which has been explored in chapter 4. The young woman’s desire to wear it subtly undermined the religious devotion of the elderly who resisted them by using sentences that appear to young, innocent minds as ‘teasing’.

5.4 Young women's perspectives on hijab: Why

All the participants believe that Allah in the Quran mandates hijab/covering. The participants' understanding of the meaning of hijab varies from a headscarf to baggy modest dress. Specifically, it is all about covering one's body in modest form. While the studied participants wore hijab, only three of them expressed their interest in wearing 'neqaab' in future. Even though some of the participants were not sure of wearing 'neqaab', it has been observed that whenever they go outside, they wear abaya and cover their face with a facemask. For these participants, they 'enjoy' wearing a neqaab because it provides them complete anonymity and the aura of mystery that it generates in the eyes of observer, act as a sense of pleasure within their own selves. The next section highlights their everyday experiences that legitimate their use of hijab. The themes demonstrate the diverse ways Muslim women come in terms with hijab when donning it. This concurs with Furseth (2011) who says that through discourses and social relationships, headscarf as a religious symbol is given meaning. This implies that the meanings attached to the headscarf are "constructed, contested and intersect with social phenomena" (Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 397). The analysis of narratives would show that not only are they exposed to the debates on Islam in general and dress of Muslim women in particular, that takes place in the larger society, but they also find various avenues for demonstrating their voice and expressing agency.

5.4.1 Imaginative stories were created and linked with religion

As all the participants are raised in practicing Muslim families, therefore, they express that since their childhood, they witnessed female kin both in immediate and extended kinship, the practice of head covering as a part of doing religion, custom and class practice. Covering up is a social etiquette than a religious obligation in many parts of South Asia. To put it succinctly in the words of a participant,

"Choliya jaar" (translated: They just took it for granted: the way it was followed across generations).

Again, we have noted in chapter 3, that the participants mothers' understanding of the religious practices was driven by various sorts of religious imaginary (mostly of fearful nature) that made them practice religious rules and over a period, it became a 'habit'. Fast forward in this section, the young participants in the study recollected, that as a child when they visited their ancestral places, they were told scary, and funny tales by their maternal and paternal grandmothers. In those days, they were in their adolescence period and were not aware of the authenticity of the stories, so they believe the stories narrated by their elders; so as not to make them angry. However, when these imaginative stories are related to the researcher it appeared that, with retrospection, the participants did not believe in such imaginative and human made stories. The young women characterize their mother's generation as 'analphabetic' because they perceive, in the past, interpretation and dissemination of Qur'anic knowledge was performed and monopolized by those who received Islamic training from institutional centers. Due to lack of knowledge as well as limited understanding of the religious base of hijab prescriptions, the prevalent notion of hijab/purdah in their mother's generation did not reflect the Islamic spirit. Thus, in their mothers' and grandmothers' generation, the source of guidance was word of mouth, and this is how doing purdah during their time was enacted in their lives. Below are the excerpts, which suggest that their mother's generation and preceding generations' oral tradition contained the same mix of religion and various cultural superstitions, which they try to pass to the participants.

Participant 1: "My grandmother and mother use to say that if I do not cover my head, then *Satan* will sit on the head (laugh)".

Participant 2: "I was told that if I do not cover my head, then when I die, each strand of my hair would turn into snakes".

Participant 3: "Another young woman said her *nani* used to say that *ferstha bejar oi jain* (the angels get disappointed)".

Participant 4: "Other young participants cited similar response that their *dadi* (paternal grandmother) used to say "*baaad nazar lagia sob chool pori jibo*" (casting of evil eye would result in hair loss)".

5.4.2 Becoming aware of religious obligations - It's about Knowledge

As we have seen that the participants believe that their mothers' generations were not taught about true Islam, hence religious leniency and relatively incorrect attitudes were due to their incomplete understanding of Islamic knowledge. They believe that since their generation has access to higher knowledge due to the presence of religious scholars on online platforms, they must understand the true religious doctrine inherent in the Quran. As we have seen in Chapter 4, that the young women reported that they made commitment to hijab during first year or final year of college life. Even some young women who wore *unna* (on and off) before taking up hijab cited a heightened awareness as their reason for deciding to wear it continuously. These women describe their journey to hijab not only in religious terms but also in terms of personal, social and political experience. But what came as surprising is the changed religious awareness of those who took hijab as part of a religious dress. For them, beginning to wear hijab was a part of the process of "discovering self in new ways".

As the participants put it, "we need to learn about Islam, the way we were taught about *deen* (religion) is a lot more complex than what our religion teaches us! What I know now, I did not know previously. What I have understood that one has to find Islam even if one is born a Muslim". Considering this excerpt, let us explore the participants' understanding of conforming to theological injunction on hijab and how it generates an elevated sense of self and self-fulfillment with point of no return. Such responses of the participants also resonate with other empirical studies (Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Ruby, 2006; Hefner, 2007; Williams & Vashi, 2007; Furseth, 2011).

One participant opened her diary where she notes down the post that she saw in Instagram and read out to me "Surah An-Nur verse 31 says believing women should cover their heads and their chests and Surah Al Ahzab verse 59 again says to believing women that they should drape their cloaks over themselves when they go outside".

She goes on to add that, "now, the question is who is a believing woman? If you, me and other Musalman believes in Allah and His *Rasul* (i.e. Prophet Mohammed) then we must follow the command - that is, wear an extra garment when leaving for outside world affairs and not to beautify ourselves with jewels and make up.

Another girl says,

“I know hijab as we used to mean head covering is not used in that sense in Quran. There are other words for covering, that is, khimar and jilbab. What matters is not which terms have been used to refer to covering. For me, what is important is, it is written in a straightforward way - covering of *bukh daka* (chest) and the *chool* (hair) and other body parts that are usually thought of as attractive to men. We must cover our entire body: even face too. For me, it is funny that I realized this simple piece of advice so late. As the saying goes, “it’s better late than never”.

Another participant puts it, “when I wear hijab, I constantly remind myself that I am wearing a part of a verse of Holy Quran. In this way I feel humble that Allah has dedicated a chapter on us - on women”.

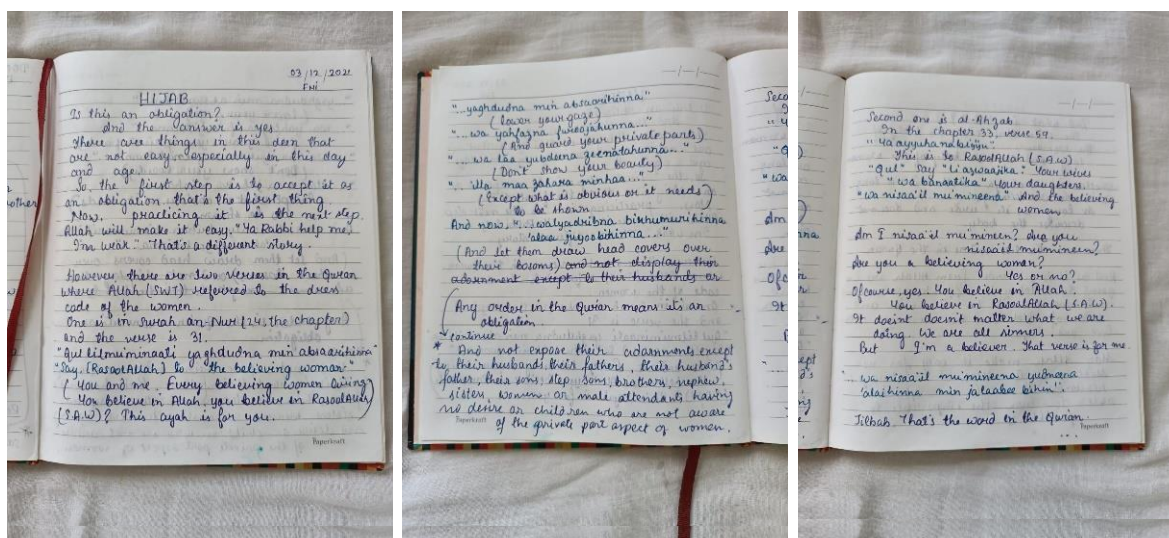


Image 5.1: One participant note down religious information in her diary

These narratives emphasize the importance of hijab as a religious obligation. These young, educated women are confident of its religious connotations when they are narrating what the scripture has to say about the way of dressing Islamically. Their citation of authoritative sources reinforces the fact that they did not blindly conform to the theological edicts as some of their mother’s generation unquestionably did. Similar notion of “tradition versus conviction” finds place among Hessini’s (1994, p. 42) Moroccan interviewees. Additionally, their understanding to covering challenges the deep-seated conviction that women are coerced, conditioned, or subtly brainwashed into ‘choosing to cover’ (Bullock, 2003, p. 214). The young women’s zeal to follow the commands of Allah arouses from her

being emotionally closer to God. Thus, the feeling of emotion produced, as a result of submitting to God makes them to stick to obedience and conformity to do the right thing thus strengthening their sense of selves.



Image 5.2: One participant shares her pre and post hijab transformation in her WhatsApp status.

From the above narratives, we can see that the participants' understanding of hijab is backed by obedience to religious edicts. Having said this, it is next necessary to ask what happens if one knows them by heart and does not follow. Therefore, the thing which is made mandatory and if one disobeys that message, what consequence one must wait for, is the next sub-theme.

5.4.3 What happens if one does not obey?

“Therefore, if I believe in the commandment of Allah and follow His instructions diligently, I will be among the people of Paradise. If I disobey, then, like all other disobedient acts, for this act too, I will receive punishment”. (Participant 1)

“Those who are not observing for different reasons, I pray that God make their affairs easy. God is seeing their daily battles, and he loves those who repent to him”. (Participant 2)

“Another says (in a compassionate tone) that we are no one to judge and grade their action. They might be doing something good in other spheres of life, which we are lacking. Having said this, it is God who guides whom he wills”. (Participant 3)

“God granted us free will. So, whoever does not follow his commandment must keep their answer ready when they meet God”. (Participant 4)

“After reading and contemplating why hijab has been bestowed on us, not following then, is tantamount to being foolishness”. (Participant 5)

According to them, the Quran talks about the Day of Judgement, the day on which human actions - good or bad - would be evaluated and graded on a moral scale. Thus, they believe that in Islam, every action is judged by the intention (*niyat*) behind the action. Here, it is important to note participants’ understanding of the concept of deed or action in this world. Good action, they believe promises reward (*sawab*), while a bad action/sin (*gunnah*) entails punishment (*shasti*).

In this context, Bayman explains in detail the gradation of action in Islam along the continuum with permitted (*halal*) and forbidden (*haram*) at the other end. According to him, there are five grades of action; obligatory or mandatory (*farz*); recommended (*wajib*); neutral (*mubah*); disgusting (*makruh*); and forbidden (*haram*) (2003, p. 75). Taking this further, Levy explains them with consequences. He also divides actions into five grades with slight difference to Bayman’s division: *Farz or wajib*; essential duty, the negligence of which is punished and the doing rewarded; *mandub or mustahab* the doing is rewarded but the negligence is not punished; *jaiz or mubah*, that which is permitted; subject neither to reward nor punishment; *makrooh*, disapproved by law but not subject to punishment; and *haram* an action punishable by law (1957, p. 202).

Based on the gradations of human actions - compulsory, recommended, and forbidden, participants believe that those who do not cover, the participants indicate, are earning sin. Yet at the same time, they understand that wearing hijab is a struggle for many, which requires mental preparation. Taking into the context, they deliberately came to know that hijab is *farz*, which they argue that one is guilty of performing sin only if one is aware that he/she is consciously violating a religious message. However, those who are truly ignorant of the rules of Islam, they believe that god’s mercy will fall on them. Further, they believe

that those who are not covering perhaps are doing good deeds in another way. However, they do emphasize that covering or not covering rests upon human will. Because God has granted human being the “freedom of choice” (Bayman, 2003, p. 75). The very fact that a system of rewards and punishments exists bespeaks human beings’ freedom to choose between good and evil (ibid.). Thus, from this it can be concluded that hijab or covering assumes a boundary between those who studies and adheres to religious edicts whereas implicitly placing the other uncovered women as either ignorant or disobedient who for various reasons fail to fulfill the religious obligations.

5.5 Hijab and male sexuality - a conundrum/ambivalence

Most of the participants believe that by fulfilling the divine mandate of wearing hijab they are not only doing good to themselves but also contributing for the betterment of society. In that way, it fulfils social duty and ethical belief. They believe that the religious idea of covering is to regulate the social interaction between men and women [covering helps in reducing the desire] and that its purpose is to protect both men and women from committing sin. Their understanding of sin implies putting a limit on sexual attraction¹¹. Closely related to the understanding of observing hijab as a precautionary measure in protecting themselves and others from being sinful, is the concept of avoiding *fitna*. The concept of *fitna* as Khaled notes is used in Quran for non-sexual temptations such as ‘money, severe trials and tribulations (2001), yet the narratives of women reflect a gendered tone on the concept of *fitna*. Underlying their muddle statement of *fitna* is their understanding of women’s body as attractive. The following interview excerpts presents their ambiguous positions located in the role of hijabs to create a better society.

Participant:

“I am aware that Quran instructed both the gender to lower their optics and guard their chastity. This is in theoretical level but in practice, how many men and women implement this? [Interviewee questioning the researcher]. From one of my daily experiences, I am narrating one incident that happened with me and one of my non-Muslim friends in a shopping mall. We both were descending the staircase, and two young men were ascending the staircase. Since I was wearing hijab, which covered my first half of the body, they only

¹¹ It must be remembered that the argument “male-female desire” contained in this section points to the sexual transaction between a man and a woman (pre-marital relation). The section does not indulge in the discussion of sexual desire after marriage.

glanced at my face. Whereas my friend wore a midi length skirt and a top, which was V cut in shape. Immediately their focus is on her cleavage and on her bare leg [I could see their expression] rather than on her face. This was the first time that I experienced something [like that]. Had she taken a scarf perhaps things would have been different. So, I believe that covering hides our beauty and desexualizes us from getting targeted as desirous objects”.

Researcher: “So, you think it is the fault of your friend that she dressed in that manner?”

Participant: “Not exactly. But she should understand that this is how the nature of man works. As I told you before, not every man is able to exercise self-restraint”.

Another Participant questioned the researcher and placed her point on the role of hijab in guarding her body and keeping the men in purer ways.

Participant: “It may sound cliché to you. But... yeah suppose you went to a shop...[thinking] say, a sweet shop. There are different types of sweets in their designated shelves, which are closed to ward off flies. And say you went to another sweet shop where sweets are left open. From which shop will you buy your sweets?”

Researcher: [confusion and awkwardness] “I will buy sweet from the shop, which is maintained well”.

Participant: “So, hijab for me is like that. It covers us [covered women with covered sweets] and those who are left uncovered [I mean clothed yet naked] are like unwrapped sweets to which a swarm of flies’ stick”.

In both the context of their narratives, Goto’s concept ‘female engendered fitna’ (2004, p. 292), appears to be particularly useful. The participants reflected on the assumption that the entire body of a women - their physical movement, the shape of their dress is filled with sexuality. They are able to instigate male sexual arousal, because women are at the same time more modest and more like to flaunt. The woman thus, “acts as a symptom: she represents a threat while being constructed as a defence against that threat” (Tseëlon, 1995, p. 24, cited in Siraj, 2011). Specifically, the participants invoke the discourse of men’s untamed sexual desire and interpret the hijab as a God ordained solution to the seeming disparities in male and female sexual desires. Even though they are well guarded of the rule in the Quran that instructs both sexes to dress modestly and preserve their chastity,

however, in practice, the sexual attraction of men for women is considered as innate and unavoidable.

Here, we can see they are drawing the discourse on sexuality as 'natural' despite the feminists' evidence that human desire is socially constructed (Bullock, 2003). Given the sexual attraction of men for women is difficult to control, what the women are suggesting that men find it easier to avert their eyes when they see a woman in hijab. Even when passing in public place, if a man stares at them, they feel the staring is more of desexualized look than of sexualized staring. Adding to this, some of them indicated that, if they are covered and the men is looking at them shamelessly, then it is the men who is earning sin and the wrath of God. One young participant narrates a hadith to the researcher to prove her point: once prophet and his cousin were strolling, and they came across a beautiful woman. Muhammed's cousin kept staring at the beautiful lady, to which Muhammed turned his cousins face towards him. The fact that he turned his cousin's face instead of reprimanding the women for not hiding her beauty goes to show the importance of men lowering the gaze first. Thus, they argue lowering gaze and wearing hijab or dressing modestly is more as a strategy to protect themselves and others from committing immorality.

Nevertheless, while the second participant's viewpoint may seem to be innocent, yet it does suggest potentially disturbing facets on the commodification of women's bodies in society, which needs to be critically investigated. Comparing covered and uncovered women with wrapped and unwrapped sweets, this participant unconsciously is trading one discourse of subjugation for another - whether it is to reveal one's skin and flesh to catch male attention or to conceal it to prevent men's sexual drive, both the patriarchal attributes have the same function conceptualizing women's role as gatekeepers of sexual liberation and moral purity (Zine, 2006).

Contrary to these two participants view, at the other spectrum lies the view of other participants who are critical of the 'sexual morality' embedded within the hijab. They argue that the dress code that has been defined for women when going outside was meant to protect them from not getting harassed at public place. This means that the Quran is saying women are the victims and men are the aggressors. But, they believe, societal acceptance is that women are the temptress that lures the men. Thus, they believe that women who claims that men are susceptible to corruption through unrestrained sexual contact with

women (Read & Bartkowski, 2000) inadvertently reverse the Quranic stand to suggest that women are the culprit and men are the victims (Roald, 2001). So deep runs the conviction that women are responsible for regulating desire, as Mahmood notes that “while women and men are both urged to discipline their sight, behaviour, and thoughts so as to prevent the stirring of illicit sexual passions, it is women who bear the primary responsibility of maintaining the sanctity of relations between the sexes. This is because the jurist Islamic tradition assumes that women are the objects of sexual desire and men the desiring subjects, an assumption that has come to justify that “women should “hide their charms” when in public so as not to excite the libidinal energies of men who are not their immediate kin” (2005. p. 110). What these participants believe is that both men and women’s sexual temptation should remain in check inside and outside the home and wonder why men seem unable to control their sexual nature to the degree that women can.

Therefore, for some participants, male sexual drive is ‘natural’ and by taking up hijab they intend to protect themselves and others from being *gunnahgar* (sinful) and thus strives towards a higher level of righteousness. Their argument is built on their acquired understanding that requires women to cover themselves in the presence of ‘non-mahrem’. And ogling (sexual) at the other gender is not allowed, therefore when women reveal themselves, they are letting men to see them, thus making both sinners and causing moral decay (*fitna*). Whereas for other participants, they question the extent hijab helps in managing men’s sexuality and are unwilling to accept that it is a women’s responsibility to exert a moral demand upon men. Their argument is, hijab is not a magical device that can tame men’s masculine hypersexuality, and like the responses of Read and Bartkowski’s (2000) unveiled respondents, they too are reluctant to charge women for managing the essentially provocative men and in a key point of departure, they believe that the underlying idea that if women are not covered, they are inviting sin, it is actually a patriarchal idea rather than a divine way of thinking.

5.5.1 ‘Their eyes are like an x-ray machine¹²-scanning from top to bottom:’ Privacy and protection from male gaze

The strongest point of agreement as noted by all the participants who wear hijab is that it “takes away the sexual tension that exists between the sexes” (Bullock, 2003, p. 102). In their pre-hijab days, all the participants echoed a similar sentiment of ‘staring’ as the most ‘common’, ‘ordinary’, ‘everyday’ experience that puts them into uncomfortable position. Next to ‘staring’ is, inappropriate touch by strangers in public places. All the participants consider this form of road harassment as one form of mental harassment. As one participant states, “like you know when they say, ‘raping with their eyes’”. The participants report of ‘used to’ or ‘ignore’ while experiencing such behaviour, nevertheless described facing such behaviour as ‘frustrating,’ ‘suffocated’.

Jeda, a 22-year-old college student, who occasionally use autos spoke of how she has experienced all sorts of creepy staring on auto-rikshaw even though she dressed in a college uniform-*salwar kameez* and *unna*. She describes how men continue to stare while travelling on autorickshaw:

“Before taking up hijab, I used to place my *unna* very decently; still some people who sat near me inside the auto would lean backward to see the cleavage, as if, they are trying to see through the *unna*. Their eyes are like, I feel x-ray machine. Who will you fight with? The least we can do is, to protect ourselves from their “wrong and dirty looks” (from becoming an object of desire). Facing such disgustful looks, I decided to take up hijab. At least now, I do not have to worry constantly whether any body parts are getting exposed or not. Even if they see, they can only check my appearance and not my body parts (laughing)”.

Another young woman shared her experience when she used to wear hijab sometimes (in an emphatic tone).

“One day I left my hair open, and a male classmate was sitting next to me in class, and he asked me, “why don’t I keep my hair open? I replied to him, “I feel comfortable when I tie my hair in a bun [I did not find the necessity to tell him that as my hair is waist length, I prefer to keep it in bun. That is why I told him ‘Comfortable’]”. Then he added, “Keep

¹² The title of this section has been borrowed from Tasneema Ashraf Amanee’s thesis “street harassment in Bangladesh.

your hair open, you look beautiful”. I gave him a did-I-ask-your-opinion look. So, after reaching home [I spend hours wondering what his gestures meant]. Then I understood a women’s beauty is in hair. Because the day I cover, the boys do not say anything [my hijab becomes like that of bald women who is unattractive]. So, for me hijab is full coverage, an encapsulated box which does not allow anyone to comment on my looks”.

The above two narratives delineate the experiences of the women before they formally took up hijab. In the first excerpt, participant in a frustrated tone describe male gaze in negative psychological as oppressive and her decision to take up hijab was a way to avoid getting objectifying stare from the fellow passengers. This is her strategic way of thinking about her body (and self) in terms of how and by whom her body is to be seen. Rather than the hijab being leveraged as a tool to control women’s body, it gives them the right to exercise her agency in public spaces by taking control of her body. The hijab may help to avert men’s gaze and even if they gaze and have erotic imaginations, the participants believe that they do not become the ‘desirous object’ that they become when under constant staring. Bullock (2003) and Hawkin’s (2008) respondents too emphasised, that seeing women in hijab can elicit desire, yet the absence of sexualized staring is experienced as a relief that allows one to partake in activities outside of the confines of their homes. Similarly, Zuhur noted that not giving opportunity to the men to comment on women’s figures or silencing the ‘eyes of wolves’ gave the younger respondents some satisfaction (1992). Bullock described such relief as ‘psychological satisfaction’ (2003) which often gets overlooked in anti-veiling discourses.

In the second excerpt, the participant narrates her struggle with cultural expectations about the female head hair – ‘long hair with attractiveness’. Scholars have noted the erotic nature of female hair linking beauty of women’s hair with her sexual power over men (Zahedi, 2007). The participant is consciously using her ‘female crown’ (hijab) to defeminize/desexualize herself. In this way, she downplays the popular perception that women use their hair to tempt men. Her realization is that when she wears hijab, these forces men to look beyond the physical dimension and see her as not part of public life. Although some may find this a heavy price to pay, yet, the participants enjoy being no longer seen by men in sexual terms.

While the above two participants mentioned covering as their primary concern, as it ultimately protects them only. Fauzia stated that covering is not a magical harass - repellent

attire that would keep men at a distance. Fauzia, a college student, who rides a two-wheeler motorized scooter, sometimes does grocery shopping on her way back to college, shared her experience of facing inappropriate touch by random persons in a crowded place, like market.

“Outside home, when a man sees a woman in hijab, they give her space to make her way. To some extent, the statement is true but not entirely. It is all about the mind-set of men”. She goes on, “I have also met with well-mannered men in my life who possess *chokor lihaz* (modesty of the eyes). What I have understood is that there seems to be a significant portion of men who cast dirty gaze towards women. Had the statement ‘men respect women in hijab’ been a true thing, then, I would not have faced the incident happened with me even though I was wearing hijab. The other day, I was at market with my father, and suddenly I felt a boy [of my age] touched my *bum* (buttocks) and moved ahead of me. He thought I will not make noise, but I am not like any other girl. I angrily called out to him “oy (*hei*) come here, why did you touch me like that?” and I looked this guy was like *lafanga mawali type* (male street hooligan).! I just went and slapped him right that moment, then the other shopkeepers assembled, and they threatened him of the police. At first, he denied the allegations. Later, when my father took out his mobile phone from the front pocket of his shirt [acted of calling the police], he apologised and said he won’t repeat the same act”. Therefore, she concludes that, “harassing women-through their eyes or through their body parts happens anyway. It is frustrating to me when the thought of going outside occurs because... you know... at home you do not have to worry... but when necessity compels you to go outside, you have to make yourself mentally prepare... think about ‘proper dress’ for ‘protection’, it drains you to constantly think about your protection”.

Her narratives highlight that wearing hijab or not wearing hijab has nothing to do with gaining respect from men. The assumption that people do ‘not push’ or “shove a woman who is covered” (Kibria, 2022, p. 37) in any way has nothing to do with the coping mechanism of wearing or not wearing hijab. Her argument is in line with Bullock (2003) who explained that hijab is not a magical device that would put a safety proof against all male aggression. Sadly, male harassment is a worldwide phenomenon, and it is all about expression of male power. There is no way of telling whether her story is true, but its accuracy is not as important as the way in which it illustrates the linkage between hijab, combatting male harassment and gaining respect. Public space is considered a masculine space and women while navigating the public space face different types of intrusive

behaviour that creates fear on public safety in their mind. The psychological dimension to this is to force them back to their private sphere i.e. the home, as the participants' emotional and fatigue tone suggests. The primary idea is that home equates protection from the outside world. It creates a barrier between her bodily self and the world. This is ironic, because in the western sense stay at Muslim women denotes patriarchal subjugation and longing to be saved, however, the participant is using homely space to express her desire for safety from male harassment.

Another girl narrated,

“when I go to crowded places, I have seen male staring gets replaced with mobile phone camera”. She later explains the posture of holding smartphone in public place and the action of looking at the mobile display periodically. “It is so risky to walk about freely with uncovered face. Now-a-days everyone has smartphone in their pocket. One day in the bridge road, I noticed a man was standing opposite to the road where I stood. He was holding his phone like this [showing me the position of phone] and periodically he was bringing down the phone to see what, I don't know. And again, he raises his phone. It seemed to me that he was filming me. If he is filming me, I don't know what he is going to do with this. I don't know what else to assess of this situation. I had my hijab on, but I did not have facemask with me. After that incident I promised myself that wherever I will go I would make sure my face mask is with me”.

The following quotation captures the essence of ‘male gaze’ as propounded by film theorist, Laura Mulvey in her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). She discussed the concept of male gaze in entertainment industry, as a feature of gender power asymmetry. Mulvey stated that women are objectified in films because heterosexual men are in control of the camera and women are represented for male gaze. In the context of the research participants, the camera of the smartphone is like the male eyes, which is active and invasive. The act of capturing the photograph of the participant is itself a sexual act where the power lies in violating her privacy and witnessing the utter helplessness of the participants. This is in line with John Berger's (1972) often cited quote “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” This pleasure of visually sexualizing woman is primarily a desire of male fantasy where men have the power to sexually examine her as some fetishized objects of ‘masculine’ gaze and women do not have any control to avoid it. Her sense of self gets divided somewhere

between the watcher and the watched (Berger, p. 47, cited in Bullock, 2003, p. 187). With no overt sexual element visible in her appearance, the participant at the receiving end is made to think that the watcher knows the women sexually by candidly taking her picture. This mode of sexual objectification made her realise her role as sexual beings available and accessible for public consumption (men). Therefore, the last sentence of her narratives as in choosing to cover her face [facemask], she is reminding herself to freely navigate the public space with a proper sense of protection and confidence, thus, removing her role as recipient of male gaze. The hijab thus, is a ‘great equalizer’ that allows women to continue working alongside men, without leaving them vulnerable to sexual harassment (Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 405).

5.6 *Ke ami, amar pehchan banai aa rakte lagbo.* (Who am I? Construction of Religious Identity in times of Crisis)

Hijab functions first and foremost as a ‘powerful’ and ‘pervasive’ (Ruby, 2006) visual marker of Muslim identity. This association of hijab with Muslim women’s image proves especially important in building close connections with other Muslims. Several young women recount that, “hijab differentiates Muslim women from non-Muslim. Sometimes, women of other faiths also wear scarf, cover their face, wear long hand gloves to protect themselves from heat and pollution. However, when you see a woman in hijab, automatically you know she is a Muslim. At times this results in conversation with [Salam]”.

Another participant describes how a dressed body overtly aids in identifying one’s individual identity and establishes group memberships. She states,

“I want to be identified with my religion. When I did not used to wear hijab, my friends did not even know I was a Muslim. They used to think I belong to other community. This struck me because every religion has some symbols. For instance, in our place, Hindu women after their marriage, they wear ‘Shankha Pola’ (white conch shells and red coral bangles). Unmarried Hindu girls put bindi or they will keep their nails, in particular, thumb or the little finger long and coat with nail paint or they will wear toe ring, and lightweight to heavy anklet. In our place, wearing *burga* implies that the woman is married and if she is not wearing *burga*, then looking at her gold ornaments one can understand that she is married (such understanding is very rare). In case of unmarried women, there is no marker. Thus, by wearing modest dress and hijab sets me apart as a Muslim from a non-Muslim”.

Mohammed (1999, p. 225) writes group identity is a constructed shared feeling and hence is relational in nature. Accordingly, the comment of this participants shows that such affirmations of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is expressed by wearing hijab and other modest dresses. Her identification as an unmarried Muslim woman is a primary consideration for her. The significant element to her statement is that she used her dressed body as a public message to emphasize her membership in the Muslim community simultaneously de-emphasizing membership with other groups (Droogsma, 2007, p. 302).

What we can decipher from the above narratives is that the participants willingly want to make their identity as a Muslim visible. Without hijab, one distinctly fails to pinpoint one as a Muslim. As hijab makes one identifiable as a Muslim, in everyday practices, it allows to build social relationships with the women inside the Muslim community through identity related greetings (Litchmore & Safdar, 2016). Such recognition for these participants becomes important in the context of Islamic teachings that recognizes that Muslims constitute a community, and hijab is an acknowledgement of their commitment to the larger community for Islamic believers (Read & Bartkowski, 2000).

5.6.1 Changes in political attitudes of Muslims

5.6.1.1 Effects of internal and external events

Four of the participants expressed strongest political statement to establish their political identity and express solidarity with other Muslim women. In January 2022, in a pre-university college at Udupi, six students were denied permission to enter classrooms, as they were firm on wearing a hijab (Jain, 2023). The resentment towards Muslims is an ongoing affair and heightened by the rightists’ ideologies and activities. Participants told the researcher,

“Whenever we open our social media app [Instagram], we see the news that somewhere in this world map, someone has burnt Holy Quran, mosques have been vandalised and innocent lives are being attacked [referring to people of Palestine]. To which another participant added, “the present government is leaving no stone unturned in targeting Muslims for their Friday prayers, Muslims and other marginalized communities are targeted on the false pretext of killing cows, Muslim women are targeted online and even the Tablighi Jamat group was held for spreading corona. The list is endless [in a distressed voice]. They [state] just wait for an opportunity to defame Muslim”. Another participant

agreed with this view and in a rebellious tone asserted that, “they [state] want to instil fear in us. But we won’t back off”.

One consequence of these national and transnational events had been self-evaluation on the part of these participants. They ask themselves what it means to be a ‘true’ Muslim and if indeed, they are Muslims in any meaningful way. A participant who was interviewed in 2022 and is now a teacher, put in in this way, “In times of crisis, we need to define ourselves. I saw a video where the women of Palestine is steadfastly holding onto their hijab even when they are going to sleep. The genocide that is happening in Palestine, in her perspective, while having a psychological impact for Muslims all over the world, is overall not a bad thing for Islam. The genocide has exposed the resilience of Palestine people at the hands of the oppressed. People have started learning about Islam, embracing the religion, and posting their *shahada* (declaration of faith in Allah and His Messenger) videos on social media. Indeed, my identity as Muslim has become even more stronger during this time (happily smiling)”.

Geographically and socially, the countries share no commonalities but politically, the interests of the participants get reflected in their cultural embodiment and religious implications. To an extent, the narratives of the participants reflect the stereotypes they get to hear in media – ‘super spreaders’, ‘corona jihad’ (AlJazeera, 2021). The urge to voice out in public sphere has also been censored by the incident of *sulli*¹³ deals. Quite a few participants vehemently assert that they are robbed of their agency. Muslim women when they are covered, the assumed perception is that they are ‘silent’. The negative connotations with which their body is inscribed is based on dominant stereotypes. And when they stood up to fight, this has created dissonance in the mind of the patriarch state who is taking every possible measure to crush their voice. Given the hostile environment, instead of avoiding its display, in contrast, they are desiring to show who they are. Thus, the hijab as an identity marker also has political implications and serves as a sign of resistance to the Indian state. Given the noticing political and social changes in India and worldwide surrounding Islam and its ethos, the result is that it has united the diasporic communities and internally managed Muslims into a more cohesive ‘imagined

¹³ A harassment app that targets Muslim women in social media.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sulli-deals-bulli-bai-and-the-young-and-educated-hatemongers/article38305009.ece>

community'. Although the state's increasing attack on the Muslim community is pushing the community further to the periphery and this has resulted in reactive tendencies making the women to assert an identity of difference, thus, making them seek refuge in their 'exclusive spaces' (Jain, 2023, p. 456). On the other hand, following the ongoing genocide in Palestine, the participants are studying Quran, watching videos of religious scholars who explains the verses of Quran in the light of the genocide. Watching and learning all these, they feel, is making them drawn closer to their faith, which overtime is strengthening their religious identities (Peek, 2005).

5.6.2 *Adab* - modest public behaviour

While the hijab operates at multiple levels - as a symbol of devotion to Allah (Bartkowski & Read, 2003), as individual and group Muslim identities (Ruby, 2006), Nasser (1999) notes that its use as visible symbol "conveys a public message/statement, both about the wearer and about the relationship between the wearer and potential viewers" (Nasser, 1999, p. 409). They contend that wearing hijab requires enormous commitment to act in certain ways. The participants emphasise that it cannot simply be reduced to a physical form, as they perceive that many do [those who lack knowledge of Islam and cover according to the social media influencers]. In other words, it is both practice and symbol.

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, that viewers [Muslim men] view the hijab wearers as 'calling attention to their body' and 'being complicit in their demeanour', these participants agree that some, but certainly not all engage in such acts. Grappling with the prevailing critical notion such as, what is the point of wearing hijab when instead of concealing the beauty you are calling attention to your body or you are wearing hijab, but your behaviour speaks something else about you". The participants claim that when they are in public sphere, they make conscious effort to monitor their behaviour. They proclaim that wearing hijab implies that "I am representing Islam" to others. This concurs with Brenner for whom Muslim veiling serves as a perpetual, bodily reminder to be a committed and dutiful Muslim (1996). Hence, a dimension of high behavioural expectation is reinforced. One participant account succinctly describes the situation:

“When a woman wears hijab, first and foremost, she is identified as a Muslim woman. Making myself visible, I am constantly worried about my simple acts. You see, now-a-days, hijab is utilized in different way, which goes against the ethics of Islam. Even hijabi girls goes on dating, which I would personally call time pass because I have seen [referring to her acquaintances] there is no trace of intention to get married, which is totally unacceptable. They are exchanging glances, getting intimate with them in restaurants, shopping malls. Moreover, sitting behind someone else’s bike, hanging out with multiple men. All this casts a bad impression on hijabis who are wearing hijab for the right purpose. They are normalizing things such as premarital relation, which goes against the tenet of Islam. So *only* [emphatically] wearing hijab is not adequate”.

To which the other women admonished a woman who practically transgressed the etiquette of hijab,

“So, there is this one hijabi student in our college. She did her higher secondary in a college popularly known for Islamic environment. Therefore, when she joined in degree classes, she was demure and very serious. Not even one year has passed, she removed her hijab - wear it one day and then take off few weeks later. In any college events, she used to do loud make-up. In class, she used to sit with male classmate, joking and pushing male colleagues was her habit. You can see she ruined all of [those who wear hijab for ‘right’ reason] our image. Why behave like that when you are wearing hijab?”.

If wearing hijab has the potential to make their identity as Muslim visible, it can also make one vulnerable to scrutiny and surveillance - for example, as someone who wears hijab, yet trespass the border of behavioural modesty. While few of them acknowledge that this is a bit pressured, yet it allows them to regulate their own behaviour. The foregoing discussion seemed to suggest the “ethical standards and behavioural restrictions” (Hefner, 2007, p. 11) that they place on one another through specific encounters in public places. The behavioural divide - not to touch the male member, or to ride on the bike with an unrelated male classmate that is associated with the hijab wearers are weighty. The young women who behave in undesirable ways in public, her behaviour is thus, brought attention to the eyes of the public. Her negative behaviour is thus, used by spectators to essentialize all hijabis who wear hijab for the ‘right cause’. In light of these expectations, those who wear hijab take every possible measure to remain vigilant of their behaviour to sustain a particular image of a person with a particular moral stance.

5.7 Hijab with fashionable clothes- comfort, modesty and fashion

5.7.1 Hijab now- fashion and social media

As noted in the beginning of the chapter, that social media especially Instagram, a simple scrolling to it show many hijabs related fashion images. These images influence the followers to learn about colour, and how to harmoniously match it with different types of clothing. Through such practices, participants acknowledged that they got encouraged to cover their head with beautiful hijab and compliment with fashionable outfit. Hassan and Harun (2015) has identified reasons such as vibrant colours, tempting accessories, delicate prints, style of wearing hijab that demonstrates a person's own skill as the easy influence of hijabista on ordinary Muslim women. The following sections confirms this aspect from the participants' experiences who explained seeing and buying hijab and other modest dress as tempting for them. Thus, in recent decades, the meaning of hijab has moved beyond its conventional boundaries of 'religious values' and has seamlessly transitioned into a potent symbol of personal expression of fashion statement. In the context of the participants in the study, they indulge in modest fashion, which reflects their taste and differentiates them from the other social class. They express their desire to express their class through the material and quality of the dress and hijab they purchase. As one participant puts it:

"Fashion is a taste and not everyone possesses it. It is cultivated and inherited. When we wear hijab, automatically the look to appear modest arose among maximum people. We will go for three quarter or full sleeves clothes. We will look for baggy jeans or trousers and the top dress would cover at least up to the knee. The result is a modest physical appearance. Of course! I will not commit aesthetic failure by wearing half sleeves dress or short hands dress or tight bottom with hijab. Neither will I go for hijab that is too shimmering. Koto *azeeb lagbo* (translated: it would look weird). I have a collection of more than 40 hijab of different material for different occasions. Whenever I see hijab, I could not control myself and I end up buying (Laughing)."

This participant has a very detailed requirement for her modest appearance in respect to colour, covering ease, comfort and her desire for accumulation is particularly driven by her economic and material conditions. Her understanding of modest dress is guided by her taste. Taste, as defined by Bourdieu (2010) as the capacity to evaluate and appreciate something, is a type of class behaviour that defines individual habitus. Participants like

her, claim of having a huge collection of hijabs with other modest dress that goes on to show that hijab fashion is irresistible. Many of the participants the researcher spoke to explained that they wanted to dress modestly but also be fashionable. Their modest dress practices incorporate full covering dresses such as flared kurta (*Anarkali*), long dress, long shirt kurta, abaya. Their consideration of loose dresses as outside worn item has to do with practicality (breathable) and modesty of dress as explained by these participants. Since modesty in dress implies bodily presentation, participants who claim themselves as heavy weight takes extra dupatta and place it on one side along with hijab to maintain extra bodily modesty. Like such stories, one participant mention of *chikankari* kurta whose both hands are transparent. When she wears it sometimes, she wears long sleeves t-shirt underneath the colourful *chikankari* dress and sometimes she wears a lightweight denim jacket - a compromise she is happy to make to avoid her from attracting ‘unnecessary looks.’ Experience like this highlight the negotiation that takes place between various standards of modesty set by social acceptance and appropriate apparel for desired coverage. For these women, this is what Tarlo (2010) noted, looking Muslim is a subtle process, which involves layering of fashionable attire so as not to reveal too much flesh or body shape.

They showed the researcher hijabi influencers and pointed out how much easier it has become to find modest clothing in store, which surprisingly earlier was difficult to find in market. These participants employ the characteristics of a fashion-conscious consumers who are aware and take concern of their appearance and try to stay in style (Gutman & Mills, 1982, cited in Hassan & Harun 2015, p. 480). Fashion-conscious shoppers pay attention to the current style, try to update their wardrobe collections, imitate their dressing style and enjoy shopping. They tend to absorb the images and fashion ideas presented by the social media influencers.

5.7.1.1 Dynamism to practice of covering

Personalization of hijab by draping it in in different way varies from country to country. Nevertheless, since Instagram gave them access to a global public, draping styles travel across borders and thus, the participants actively engage in discovering and crafting their own styles. It is to be noted that participants’ hijab styles are more in line with age-groups, and which is in vogue and bears no link with any political affiliations. The quest for individuality also indicates a strong association of fashion senses in wearing hijab as a fashion symbol. This fashion dynamic cannot really be explained by cultural religious or

political motivations, as the different ways a woman wears the hijab around her head and draped over the shoulders are subject to fashion and trends (Williams & Vashi, 2007). In the beginning of the present fieldwork, participants used to drape hijab in multilayer and now the style of hijab draping is throwing over the head and shoulders and bringing both the end of it to hung down loosely in front. Whereas others drape their hijab loosely around the face with one end at the front, while the other across the shoulder. In their daily use, they wear simple and muted coloured hijab and refrain from using gorgeous sparkly decorative accessories. Only one participant did self-painting to make her plain hijab appear beautiful. As noted in the beginning of the chapter, the participants in the beginning of their hijab journey, watched hijab tutorials to learn different draping techniques, which implicates that they follow the hijabi influencers as they want to appear to be beautiful in hijab (Karakavak & Özbölük, 2022, p. 2918).

The participants also stated that influencers' experiment with different styles of draping hijab and one style which they consider as 'disapproved style' of draping hijab among the participants is the artificial enhancement to the volume of hair. Such artificial additions are done either with a large bun of fake hair or large hairclips. Almila (2019) describes similar hijab binding techniques. This is done by some of the hijab wearers, and the participants believe that the action behind this is to create a false impression on the observer of the wearer's thick long hair. However, they consider such practices as using extra material to create a high and voluminous headshape as not only distasteful; but also because they came across one hadith post in Instagram, which says that when the time of apocalypse would near, one sign of it is that women would develop a strange custom of arranging their hair on top of their heads that would be like camel's humps (Clarke, 2003). Yet some of them secretly confessed that in the beginning they too have indulged in the aesthetic faux pas. However, even after getting aware of the doctrinal point of view they still prefer to enhance their hijab 'a little'. From this, the researcher deduced that although the influencers present visions of stylized hijab that, even if not entirely successful, aesthetically and ethically, yet introduce Muslim women to aspirational hijab styles. Although the style of hijab draping is driven by aesthetic cause, majority of the participants revealed that they drape hijab according to the shape of the face. One participant confides to the researcher since she has chubby cheeks, and acne scars, people always keep on advising her to reduce her weight and suggests different facial packs to remove the scars, which she finds frustrating. Therefore, when she drapes hijab, it hides her scars and thus, functions as a protective

shield against “appearance-based public scrutiny” (Al Wazni 2015, p. 3, cited in Kibria, 2022, p. 35). While hijab can ostensibly ward off others scrutiny gaze from someone’s face, yet the beautiful and modest appearance of women in hijab has the adverse effect of enhancing their desirability to other’s eyes, which will be discuss in the section, “hijab in social gathering”.

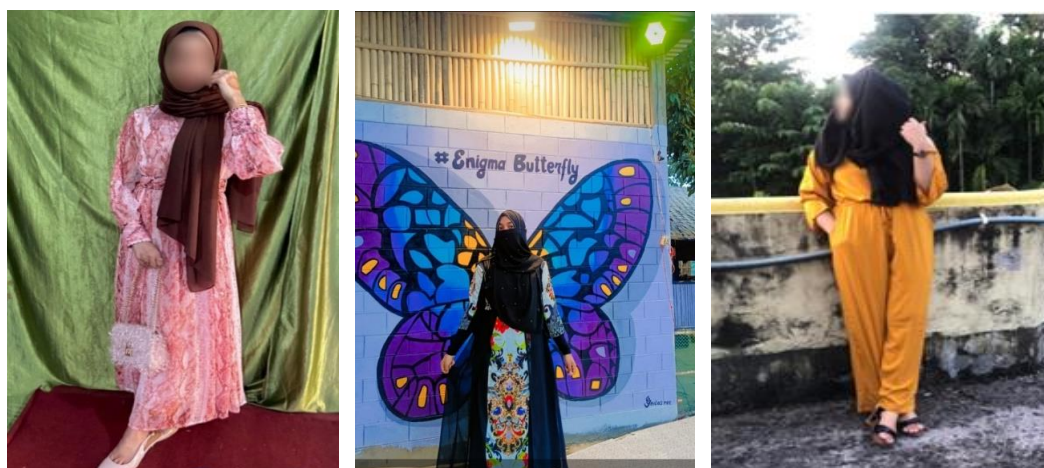


Image 5.3: Hijabi and neqaabi participants outside home

5.7.1.2 Fashionable hijab wearers and its discontents

Under the section of ‘Adab’, one of the participants mentioned about a young college-going women who they think defies hijab ethics. The researcher was fortunate enough to see the women in one of the shopping malls when she was with one of her participants and what follows is, the description of violation of hijab rules, an outcome of ‘blindly’ following the images circulated by fashion industry.

Upon seeing that young women, immediately my participant turned to me and sighed, raising her eyebrows, and shaking her head in disapprovingly. Upon asking what exactly, the problem is, and she expressed, “have you seen her hijab and the dress she wore? She is a good example of those women who lacks common sense, violate the rules of hijab and wear hijab according to their whims and fancies. When the researcher asked her what violation of the rules of hijab means, she responded, “At first, she is wearing a short hijab, wearing a bottom, which is showing both her ankles, the sleeves of her churidar are short and tight, the back of her churidar is designed in such a way that it exposed the upper back of her body”. Additionally, her friend chimed in, “Plus the way she has designed her eyes and wore bright lipstick... this is totally following fashion”. Others point out that tying a

belt in waist when they wear abaya is like describing the body even though you are fully covered. Fashionable hijab wearers are '*nautanki*' (gimmick) as they wear hijab when their desire strikes". They add that women like them entirely miss the point of hijab - of a more covering enough.

The women, in the above narratives, identified in general, the features that result in violation of the rules of hijab and that is primarily based on fitting of the dress and the exposure that it results in. Parts of the body that are legally and aesthetically need to be covered are ankle, upper part of the chest and back. Contrary to this, the young women in discussion was performing the opposite function - exposing the outline of her body, her hair was cascading below the hijab, the upper back was exposed, wearing short hijab and tight sleeves beneath which flabby arms is showing, wear tight kameez that emphasize their breasts size and hip area. With heavy makeup putting eyeliner, kajal and bright lipstick, she is losing the simplicity of hijab, which the Islamic discourses emphasise. Thus, making her appearance more sexualized and alluring to the opposite sex. In their opinion, it is an intentional display to catch 'unnecessary attention'.

Having said that, those who wear hijab '*sometimes*' (reasons best known to them), many doubt the religious sincerity of the wearer. Due to their inconsistency in wearing, the women who had chosen hijab for various reasons, they experienced, are viewed with suspicion. This finding seems to be particularly tricky and touchy. Therefore, these participants consider 'consistency' in wearing hijab as a counter response to negate the mind-set of those who assumes that 'following fashion trends nowadays everyone wear hijab' (comment they often got to hear in the beginning of their hijab journey).

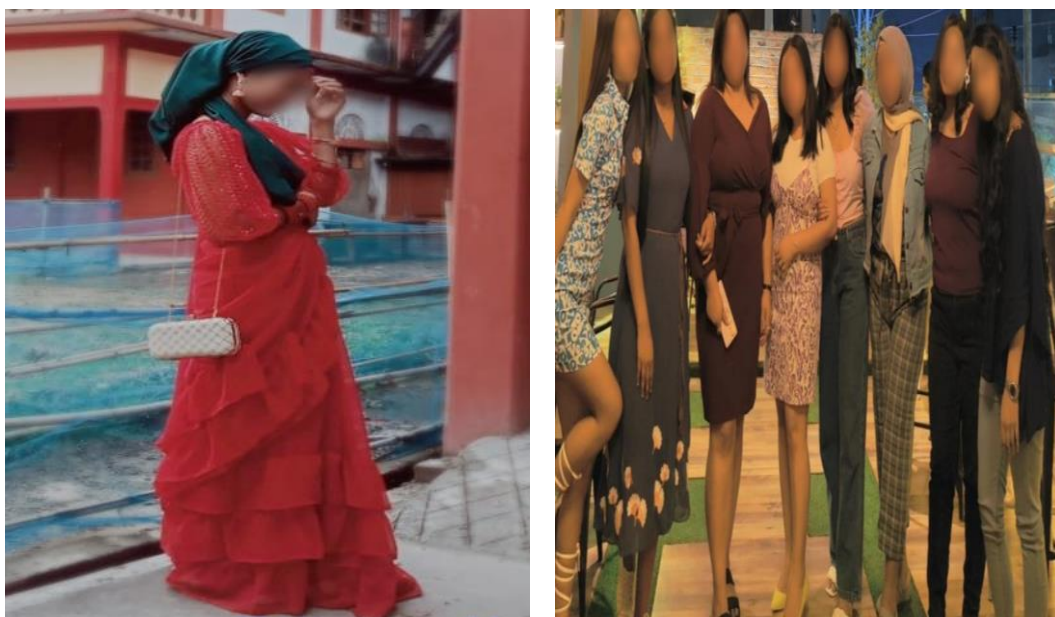


Image 5.4: Moral policing exists for these kinds of Hijabi ‘fashion’ participants

5.7.1.3 Moral policing

Religious studies scholar, Elizabeth Bucar in her book, *Pious Fashion* mentioned about ‘gatekeeping practices’ in her case studies of Muslim women’s styles in three locations - Iran, Indonesia, and Turkey. She noted that practices of gatekeeping involve ‘watching’, ‘noting’, and ‘commenting’. The findings of the present study in Karimganj speak of presence of similar practices. The case of those who wear hijab ‘sometimes’, to those who enhance their hijab style - those narratives show how they observe and critique one another. In the case of the present study participants, if any women in their close group crosses the border of what is considered as ‘proper’ modest dressing - for example, imitating the influencers, wearing short kurta with short sleeves and short hijab, they are either reproached directly or sometimes through WhatsApp status post. The WhatsApp status that they post contain quotes on ‘proper hijab’, which they take from Instagram shared by knowledgeable authorities. Such corrections and monitoring of women’s public presentation have the result of exercising control, establishing oneself as an unlikely aesthetic authority “thus playing an essential part in the collectivization process within the group” (Bendixsen, 2013, p. 278).

5.8 Sources of hijab information and shopping practices

The choice to stylized hijab and other modest dress involved extensive fashion research. The research involves collecting information on different kinds of hijab collections (both head and body covering dresses), hijab accessories (such as hijab pin, hijab cap). All these ‘starter kits’ are needed to cover the hair and keep the hijab in place. When seeking information on hijab, they look for product features such as colour, texture, ambient temperature, size of the hijab, transparency, and occasion. The participants look out for colour palettes such as, peach, grey, beige and some goes for solid colours. It has come to notice that excessive bright and ostentatious hijab and body covering dresses are avoided as they are aesthetically unpleasing, and they are identified with lower class dress style. Majority of the participants shared that they choose colour of hijab that suit their skin tone and complement with the rest of the outfit. By employing the evaluation criteria, the participants make a choice of buying the product. The primary motive for gathering feedback on the material of hijab is to minimize ‘risk’ and ‘uncertainty’ involved while purchasing them. As one participant explains on how her initialization into hijab involve consulting numerous Instagram pages,

“When I decided to cover first, I was careful not to experiment with any type of hijab material. Because experimenting with different type of hijab material would incorporate a whole range of hijab, which would be of loss for me. Therefore, I kept in mind to look out for, the mistakes that people make while buying hijab in any Instagram video. I note down all these. Next, I make myself remember to look out for the reviews that people make after wearing a particular hijab material, the preferred material and things needed for wearing hijab”.

With respect to hijab fashion, it seems that fashion-conscious participants look for information about the latest fashion trends (Hassan & Harun, 2015) and they become aware of new clothing styles by identifying fashion information sources (Nam et al., 2007). Hijab fashion information is primarily gathered from Instagram and sometimes gathered from personal sources such as, friends, and cousins in social get-together. For the participants, the preferred source of hijab related information for new trends are image-based and video sharing media such as Instagram and WhatsApp groups. They buy hijab and abaya from Instagram boutiques (those who do individual marketing business such as, LBH - Little Black Hijab). The price of hijab falls within the range of 150 to 500,

depending on the material (cotton, georgette, satin, silk, chiffon) and festive occasion. All the participants possess the above stated classification of fabric, which speaks of their belonging to middle class status. For daily use, most popular and in demand material of hijab is crinkled cotton hijab. The reason cited by the participants is that being cotton, it is breathable and suitable for the climate of Assam. The price of full body covering dress ranges from 1000 and above. These Instagram boutiques also known as “digital fashion magazines” (Karakavak & Özbölük, 2022, p. 2918) sell modest dresses to create a more cosmopolitan modest look. They are watched and followed in the way one views the fashion magazines where hijab wearing women learn about colours, draping style, which are ‘in’ and which are ‘out’. And sometimes some friends or acquaintances import small amounts of hijab, ethnic wear and other modest dresses and sell them through WhatsApp group and Instagram pages to their acquaintances who in turn use their network to communicate the message to others. In this way, they increase their economic capital. While accessibility to hijab and other cosmopolitan modest dresses is mostly defined by economic capital, it can also be enhanced through an individual’s social capital. As it is evident from a few of the research participants who get it through their relatives (social capital) who stays outside of India or when someone visits to other parts of India. In this process, the relatives (social capital) and money (economic capital) gets converted into cultural capital (dress sent from abroad or outside the states).

The second preferred sources are online shopping apps such as, Meesho, Amazon and Flipkart, which they say *sometimes* lacks trendy collections. The least preferred sources are local market. A widespread complaint among the participants is that the local market stores offer hijabs, which are relatively limited quality of the material and colour. Thus, unavailability in terms of desired quality of hijab material and colour in the market provides them to look out for online shopping. This highlights that the participants buying behaviours is guided by their taste and wealth as noted in the section ‘hijab now - fashion and social media’.

5.9 It is not plain and boring - Hijab in social gatherings

The researcher’s conversations with the young women revealed the dilemmas and feelings they experience as hijabis while navigating the complex social and cultural worlds. The participants spoke with pride on their skill of managing their impressions. Depending on the contexts, they use their knowledge of fashion as a visual and material means to enhance

their femininity thus, up-playing their religious and cultural attachments (Tarlo, 2010). As one participant (winking her eyes) notes,

“Just because I have taken up hijab does not mean I’m typical [not aware of hijab fashion]”. I want my appearance to be appealing and modest to outsiders. Therefore, when I attend any event, be it in college or at anyone’s house, I match my conspicuous colour hijab and bright dress-sari or salwar kameez. Since I drape my hijab in a traditional way that covers my ear, so on top of the hijab I wear a decorative jewellery known as *maang tikka* [worn on forehead]. Therefore, if it is like a special occasion, I wear jewelry. But on an average day, I really do not wear jewellery or do make up”.

Another young woman says, “I let my earrings poke out of my hijab whenever I wear turban style hijab. I also do mild make-up. Light makeup confused people whether I did make up or not (laughs at her own statement)”.

Religious holidays, weddings, and family get together for *dawat* (invitation to attend a feast) requires assemblage of modest things such as, beautiful modest dress, hijab, jewellery, purses and make up. Some of the women approved of no-make-up-look (which includes nude lip colour, kohl, concealer) and others spoke of ornate/flashy jewellery that would be worn to weddings or celebrations. When they wore hijab there arises a heightened awareness of how they are going to be perceived by others. Thus, wearing makeup is a matter of mental thought, a point of negotiation for the younger participants. Some women considered wearing heavy or bright makeup to be immodest as it easily catches the ‘critical eye’ of the observers. One woman spoke at length how she wore bright lipstick [red colour] when she is with her kith and kin. Again, we noted in chapter 3 that mothers support their daughter’s decision to wearing hijab in occasions such as, wedding because it speeds up their marriage prospect. As in wedding, it has been reported by the participants’ mothers that mothers search for ‘good’ daughter-in-law. Therefore, wearing hijab in weddings enhances their desirability in the marriage market. Thus, their different opinions and styles of hijab -integrating with other items of dress consciously or unconsciously reflect agency in negotiating norms around modesty. What emerges is that in response to social and cultural expectations, these young hijabi women actively construct their ‘presentation of self’, including material aspects of their physical appearance such as, clothing, makeup, and accessories in the realm of specific occasions.

These paraphernalia are part of the performative aspects of gender and, while personal, they are also contextual and specific to time, culture, and place.



Image 5.5: One participant on her wedding day

5.10 Conclusion

The chapter discusses the ways in which women understand and practice hijab in their everyday lives. The Islam-focused content in social media especially Instagram contains persuasive quotes from Quran and Hadiths, which the hijabi content creator and religious scholars imbue with real life experiences. This ‘soft’ approach of telling authentic stories with a personal touch has a profound effect on the digital natives of the 21st century. The participants, though they follow the hijabi content creators for getting stylistic ideas on hijab and modest dresses, yet they are critical of the way they have commodified hijab. Nonetheless, it has been found that as long as the hijab and the dress they wore is in harmony with modesty, the participants are ready to accept it.

The significance of the chapter lies in the way that they are convinced of the concept of covering mentioned in Quran, whereas their mothers had less thorough knowledge of Islamic doctrine. Not only this, but they are also aware of rules regarding men’s modest approach. This underlies the importance of literacy and individual engagement with the knowledge imparted by religious scholars to Islamic consciousness. Since hijab is worn outside

homes, this leads us to the concept of ‘gendered space’ (Furseth, 2011). The participants (re)make the gendered space where we can see the two types of threads that has emerged. One type portray men as powerful and sexual and wearing hijab accentuates the belief in sexual difference whereas the other participants going by the Quranic understanding questions this social construction of men’s desire. It is also worth pointing out the narratives of Fauzia points to a more complicated ways of thinking about hijab as protection. On the one hand, they believe that men should be re-educated, and on the other hand, they valorise hijab and modest covering as a defensive mechanism to counteract male behaviour.

Some women’s experience to hijab is informed by the worldwide events publicly associated with Muslim and Islam. As Islam and Muslims comes under intense scrutiny, these have strengthened them to reconsider their Muslim identity on an individual and collective scale. Consequently, this section of women by declaring their identity visibly, they are also bringing a change in their selves that such representations engender.

While attending to their day-to-day negotiations and their individualized experiences with hijab, the findings of the present study align with Baerveldt who argues that hijab should not be interpreted solely in discursive terms as marker of identity or resistance (though the discursive account is only a minor part). Instead, Baerveldt treats hijab as a component of the overall ‘expressive style’ (2015, p. 540) of individual women, tied directly to their individual bodies and life stories. Getting dressed is a social bodily practice. The participants expressed that, technological system have allowed them to exchange stylistic ideas on hijab and modest dress. They are fashion conscious participants for whom taste, and consumption expresses the class differences within the Muslim population of Karimganj. The idea of modesty is built into these clothes through the fact that the clothes cover the entire body without outlining their body shape. However, the modest dress they wear is inspired from multiple aesthetic resources of Instagram. By using the cultural knowledge of the hijabi content creators, they articulate and communicate their own Islamic appeal dress in relation to ethnic wear with ‘foreign’ wear. While the preoccupation with dress and modesty is maintained through discussions and exemplary practices and sharing of dressing ‘correctly’ images get circulate in social media, few of egregious hijab wearers who violate the ‘proper’ ‘modest’ dress code are judged as lacking in moral character and appropriate religious intentionality (Bucar, 2017).

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