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What is Unveiled Through Veiling: Understanding the Complex Narratives of the Modern Hijabista Movement

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What is Unveiled Through Veiling: Understanding the Complex Narratives of the
Modern Hijabista Movement

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Abstract

Hijabista is a portmanteau comprising “hijab” and “fashionista.” The term describes young, fashion-conscious Muslim women who wear the hijab in new and creative ways that showcase their performance of agency, beauty, and piety. This movement serves, in part, to respond to and counteract Islamophobic representations of Islam in contemporary America. These representations include narratives which cast hijabi women as oppressed and lacking agency. In addition, Muslim-American women are portrayed as unfashionable and un-American. The emergence and evolution of the hijabista trend functions to empower Muslim women and redefine Muslim American identities.

This thesis investigates the new narratives created by hijabista women and the ways in which these women redefine and express agency, beauty, and modesty. I utilize theoretical frameworks established by various scholars to interpret agency, modesty, and piety from an anthropological perspective. I also provide a detailed analysis of different case studies, and incorporate the voices of hijabi women. Throughout the thesis, I situate these analyses within a broader context involving the role of market representation and the capitalist agenda. I conclude by illustrating the complexity of these themes, and I highlight the importance of questioning assumptions about agency, self-expression, beauty, fashion, and religion.

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Introduction

Historically, the *hijab*, the headscarf worn by Muslim women, has been perceived by Orientalist, Western scholars to be a symbol and evidence of the unyielding oppression of Muslim women by patriarchal Islamic values and Muslim political authority.¹ Although numerous studies have shown that the assumption that all women who wear the headscarf are forced to do so is false, this belief continues to inform popular conceptions of Islam and Muslim women.² The contemporary American political landscape furnishes us with several examples of how this stereotype informs anti-Muslim rhetoric. The focus of this rhetoric, however, appears to have shifted from seeking to save Muslim women abroad from their oppressors to seeking to defend America from Islam. In this discourse, the veiled Muslim woman comes to embody the Muslim other and epitomize the gulf between American and Islamic attitudes toward women. American Muslims have adopted several strategies to counteract this representation of Islam.

One of the responses and strategies adopted by Muslim women in particular, has been a passionate and fashionable embrace of the hijab. This includes a subculture of young, fashion-conscious women known as hijabistas, a portmanteau comprising “hijab” and “fashionista.” These women reject the idea that the hijab is a symbol of oppression and restriction on personal freedom. Instead, they use it to express style, particular notions of femininity, piety,

¹ Homa Hoodfar, “The Veil in their Minds and on our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women,” *Resources for Feminist Research* 22, no. 3 (1993).

² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

empowerment, and ultimately resistance to the Orientalist image of a Muslim woman. In the subculture of hijabistas, covering oneself with a hijab is, perhaps ironically, a way to reveal a woman's agency, beauty, and piety. In order to understand this twist, it is necessary to begin with an examination of the background against which it arose, namely Islamophobia and the struggle to counteract Islamophobic rhetoric. The hijabista trend is a global phenomenon and the cases I describe are situated in a global context. While, hijabista culture is global, there is specificity to local adaptations, like North America hijabista culture. Although some examples have been drawn from the experiences of those living abroad, the bulk of this thesis will investigate the experiences of Muslims living in America, and essential differences between the two contexts will be highlighted and explained as they arise. While scholars have addressed examples of Orientalism and Islamophobia which illustrate the background against which the subculture of hijabistas arose,³ this thesis will relate recent developments in the political and cultural landscape to the hijabista trend today.

Clear examples of American Islamophobia can be identified today. President Donald Trump, who was elected in November of 2016, ran for office on a distinctly anti-Muslim platform. Since taking office, Trump has signed an executive order banning immigration to the United States from seven Muslim-majority countries. Although referred to as an "Immigration Ban" or "Refugee Ban," many viewed the order as a "Muslim Ban" and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other civil rights groups are working to challenge the President's

³ Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of orientalism*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Yeğenoğlu provides one example of past scholarship.

order.⁴ Even more extreme examples of Islamophobic rhetoric can be found in voices like Milo Yiannopoulos, a far-right, British journalist whose perspectives have become increasingly popular in the United States. Yiannopoulos was recently invited by CU College Republicans to speak at the University of Colorado Boulder in the spring of 2017. His anti-Islamic rhetoric is an example of the widespread xenophobia in parts of American society. For example, the full text of one of Yiannopoulos' speeches can be found on Breitbart.com titled "10 Things Milo Hates About Islam."⁵ The speech mocks Islam as a religion and more specifically, Muslim women. Yiannopoulos states, "Is there anything more comically sinister than the sight of a herd of women swathed in black bedsheets?"⁶ His anti-Muslim remarks dehumanize and further alienate Muslims in America and abroad. In response to the Immigration Ban, the American Academy of Religion offered a statement which, among other things, explains that "the ban poisons the public's understanding of Islam in particular and religion in general".⁷ The continued consumption of a particular strain of Islamophobic rhetoric (characterized by extreme perspectives like Yiannopoulos', as well as those less-extreme) is poisonous and risks the further ostracization of many hard-working American immigrants and citizens, many of whom have already been seriously affected.

⁴ Javier E. David and Jacob Pramuk, "Judge blocks US from deporting visa holders detained after Trump's refugee order," *CNBC: Immigration*, January 31, 2017, accessed March 25, 2017, <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/01/28/aclu-mounts-legal-challenge-to-trumps-refugee-ban-calling-it-unlawful.html>

⁵ Milo Yianopoulos, "Full Text: 10 Things Milo Hates About Islam," *Breitbart*, September 27, 2016, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.breitbart.com/milo/2016/09/27/10-things-milo-hates-islam/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Board of Directors, "Board Statement on U.S. Executive Order 'Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,'" *American Academy of Religion*, January 30, 2017, accessed March 28, 2017. <https://www.aarweb.org/about/board-statement-on-us-executive-order-%E2%80%9Cprotecting-the-nation-from-foreign-terrorist-entry-into>

The Immigration Ban and other examples of xenophobia and Islamophobia have been protested by many Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In response, American-Muslims have been increasingly vocal about embracing their national identity as Americans. As a component of this embrace, many Muslim women have been defending their public identities by drawing on the rights to religious freedom and freedom of choice. The defense is couched with language that exhibits evidence of Muslim women acting with personal agency, something they are often assumed not to possess on account of being Muslim women. Agency, however, is more complicated than the liberal idea of autonomy suggests. Scholars like Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood have offered substantial critiques of narrow conceptions of agency. Their works will be discussed later.

Muslim women, in the past and present, face a disproportionate share of discrimination due to Islamophobia. This is in part because many Muslim women practice veiling or modest forms of Muslim dress. The hijab makes women a target because it is a visible marker of religious identity.⁸ A specific term for discrimination against women who adopt the traditional Islamic coverings—including the *burqa*, *niqab*, and hijab—is “hijabophobia.” The Orientalist obsession with women’s dress (especially religious dress) is exemplified across the world today. Girls who wear Muslim dress (primarily the headscarf) have been suspended from schools and classes in various states across North America⁹ and Muslim girls across the globe have been

⁸ Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 3-4.

⁹ “Discrimination Against Muslim Women- Fact Sheet,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, accessed February 16, 2017, accessed March 28, 2017. <https://www.aclu.org/other/discrimination-against-muslim-women-fact-sheet#14>

expelled because they wore the hijab.¹⁰ In her 2006 study, “Unveiled Sentiments”, Jasmin Zine explains that, “Muslim girls in France, Turkey, and Quebec have been exiled from public schools on account of their hijabs (a phenomenon the media dubbed ‘hijabophobia’),” and that in these contexts, “The hijab was viewed as an assault on the dominant civic values of female liberty and a denial of the dominant national identity.”¹¹ Aside from schools, there are examples of the practice of banning Muslim dress in public spaces. In 2010, the Muslim *burqa* (a floor-length, loose garment covering the entire body) was banned in Spain.¹² In 2016, over thirty French municipalities banned the *burkini* (a form of swimwear combining the terms ‘*burka*’ and ‘*bikini*’) on public beaches calling them “the uniform of extremist Islamism.”¹³

In 2010, Martha Nussbaum identified five arguments provided by governments and officials as reasons to ban the Muslim veil.¹⁴ The first argument revolves around security concerns for non-Muslims which, Nussbaum explains, are applied inconsistently. The second argument references conceptions of the veil mentioned previously, namely that, “the *burqa* is a symbol of male domination that symbolizes the objectification of women,” or that, “women wear the *burqa* only because they are coerced.”¹⁵ Scholars of religion, especially Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood, have shown that these last two points are false. Moreover, the

¹⁰ Jasmin Zine, “Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of Veiling among Muslim Girls in a Canadian Islamic School,” *Equity & Excellence in Education*, November 23, 2006.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Martha Nussbaum, “Veiled Threats?,” *New York Times: Opinionator*, July 11, 2010, accessed March 26, 2017, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/veiled-threats/?_r=0.

¹³ Joseph V. Micallef, “Is France Right to Ban the Burkini?” *Huffington Post: The World Post*, September 12, 2016, accessed March 18, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-v-micallef/is-france-right-to-ban-th_b_11845732.html

¹⁴ Martha Nussbaum, “Veiled Threats?,” *New York Times: Opinionator*, July 11, 2010.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

fact that Muslim women wear the hijab in contexts where there is no overt coercion suggests that these arguments are at least oversimplifications. Muslim women have also publically challenged these assumptions and insisted that they freely choose to wear the hijab.¹⁶ The third argument relays part of the second as it suggests that the *burqa* is objectifying in the way that it serves as, “a symbol of male domination,” to which Nussbaum replies by providing examples of common non-Muslim and secular systems of objectification like media representation, tight clothing, and plastic surgery.¹⁷ The fourth argument reiterates that women who wear the burqa are coerced into doing so. Finally, the fifth argument proposes that the burqa is harmful to women’s health, suggesting that it is uncomfortable. Nussbaum concludes that “all five arguments are discriminatory.”¹⁸ While any reasons to ban religious dress like the *burqa* and hijab in public spaces seem to be discriminatory, there is an abundance of evidence for outright discrimination and an overall rise in hate crimes against Muslims in the United States.

Over 2015 there was a 64% increase in hate crimes against Muslims in America.¹⁹ The rise in assaults, “[appears] to have been fueled by divisions over the [2016 US Presidential] election.”²⁰ This information is useful for understanding the context in which American Muslims are living. American Muslim women are easy targets because, in many instances, they are more

¹⁶ Linda Sarsour. Twitter Post, December 3, 2016, accessed March 23, 2017, <https://twitter.com/lsarsour/status/805085370631200768?lang=en>. “If I was oppressed by my hijab, I wouldn’t be wearing it. Trust me. A piece of cloth doesn’t oppress, people do. So stop oppressing me.” Julie Winokur and Ed Kashi, Video, *Hijabi World*, “What American Women Who Wear Hijab Want You to Know,” *Atlantic: State of Migration*, August 26, 2016, accessed March 28, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/497318/hijabi-world/>.

¹⁷ Martha Nussbaum, “Veiled Threats?,” *New York Times: Opinionator*, July 11, 2010.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Eric Lichtblau, “U.S. Hate Crimes Surge 6%, Fueled by Attacks on Muslims,” *New York Times: Politics*, November 14, 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/15/us/politics/fbi-hate-crimes-muslims.html>. Lichtblau cites FBI statistics for the *New York Times*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

visible. In the days following Trump's election, Muslim women, especially those living in cities, "reported being targeted for wearing hijabs."²¹ In response to these attacks, which included tearing off a woman's hijab and even assault, Muslim women have felt pressure to take off their hijabs and, in some cases, take classes in self-defense.²² The rise in Islamophobia is, therefore, affecting Muslims' sense of safety, especially women, and how they practice their religion.

The relationship between Islamophobia and the hijabista subculture is complicated by several factors. First, underlying the hijabista movement is the idea of a universal sisterhood of young, fashion-conscious Muslim women. It is presented as a transnational identity. It seems clear that there is a modern and global trend toward combining high fashion with Islamic conceptions of modest dress. Currently, Indonesia is known as "one of the top Islamic fashion powerhouses" and the Indonesian government set a goal to promote its national fashion industry and become the Muslim fashion capital of the world by the year 2020.²³ In addition, leading trendsetters and designers can be found throughout Turkey and countries in Western Europe.²⁴ Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors investigate the emergence and development of Islamic fashion in a specifically Euro-American context in their book *Islamic Fashion and Anti-*

²¹ Samantha Schmidt, "Hijab grab' defense: As reports of hate crimes spike postelection, Muslim women turn to self-defense," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/21/hijab-grab-defense-as-reports-of-hate-crimes-spike-postelection-muslim-women-turn-to-self-defense/?utm_term=.61844c75e56c.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Faegheh Shirazi, *Brand Islam: The Marketing and Commodification of Piety* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 162.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-171.

Tim Arango, "Turkey's Islamic Fashion Revolution," *New York Times*, September 17, 2016, accessed March 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/world/europe/turkeys-islamic-fashion-revolution.html>.

Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America. In this book, the authors identify what characteristics make Islamic fashion unique when contextualized within particular sociopolitical constraints. Many European countries, and arguably the United States, have, in recent history, defined their national identities, “in opposition to Islam, whether in terms of strong secularism, an apparently shared Judeo-Christian heritage or a mixture of both.”²⁵ When national identities are shaped in this way, antagonism shapes the religious identities of Muslims living in these countries.

It is essential to point out that the presumed transnationality of the hijabista movement as it is presented by many participants is not as simple as it seems. The specific context in which a new social movement thrives has an influence on its followers, and their experiences, in turn, influence that movement. Another example of differences such as these could be the evidence or lack thereof of Islamic anti-fashion. While Tarlo and Moors write extensively about anti-fashion trends in Western Europe, it seems as though there has not been a parallel response to Islamic fashion in the United States. A possible reason for this may be that the U.S. is simply still overcoming the black and white binary suggesting that Islamic dress is either distinctly oppressive or freeing. This binary might also imply that in order to prove that modern modest dress or the hijab is freeing or empowering, it must be fashionable by American standards.

This hypothesis will have to be tested in future studies. In my research, I have not come across an argument for the popularity or rise of Islamic anti-fashion (in the way that Tarlo and

²⁵Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 17.

Moors describe) and therefore this thesis will focus primarily on the Islamic fashion movement. This thesis will also primarily provide an analysis of hijabista trends in North America.

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, there are roughly, one million Muslim women in America, forty-three percent of which wear headscarves all the time while the rest wear a headscarf part-time or not at all.²⁶ With regard to the experiences of the Muslim-American women who chose to veil, some hijabistas in America have made it clear that their choice is informed by the contemporary American political climate. A clear example of this is women wearing an American flag as a hijab on television and posters. A photo of Munira Ahmed wearing an American flag hijab was recreated as a poster by artist Shepard Fairey. The poster has the words “We the People” beneath its image and has been made famous as a symbol of resistance to Trump.²⁷ The iconic poster clearly invokes an American and Muslim identity in one image. The poster conveys a heightened visual of femininity in the ways in which Ahmed’s face was edited to show bigger, sensual lips, chiseled cheek bones, plucked eyebrows, and a narrowed jawline. These traits are all considered to be characteristics of an American ideal of beauty. Further, the text below the image, “We the People,” is drawn directly from the preamble to the United States constitution. The words are undeniably a visible indicator of American-ness, while Ahmed’s hijab is a visible indicator of her Muslim-ness. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Ahmed explained that the poster is, “about saying, ‘I am American just as

²⁶ Asma Khalid, “Lifting The Veil: Muslim Women Explain Their Choice,” *NPR Special Series: hidden world of girls*, April 21, 2011, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/21/135523680/lifting-the-veil-muslim-women-explain-their-choice>.

²⁷ Edward Helmore, “Munira Ahmed: the woman who became the face of the Trump resistance,” *Guardian: US politics*, Jan 23, 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/23/womens-march-poster-munira-ahmed-shepard-fairey-interview>.

you are... I am American and I am Muslim, and I am very proud to be both.”²⁸ Another example is Saba Ahmed, an American-Muslim woman serving as the head of the Republican Muslim Coalition. Saba Ahmed wore an American flag as a hijab on Fox news when responding to President Trump’s plan to close certain mosques.²⁹ She explained her reasoning for wearing the flag-inspired scarf when she stated, “I love the flag. That’s why I’m wearing it, because I’m so proud of it.”³⁰ Munira Ahmed and Saba Ahmed have both shown their patriotism and expressed their free choice in a political way by wearing the American flag as a hijab. This analysis is complicated by the demand for Muslims to perform their Americanness to a greater, and more visible, extent than non-Muslims. In order to be perceived as authentically American, these women have had to put their patriotism on display. These claims are further complicated in an essay by Nafisa Eltahir for *The Atlantic* titled “Muslim Americans Should Reject the Politics of Normalcy,” which will be discussed at length later in the following chapter.

Other Muslim-American hijabistas are focusing on feeling beautiful when wearing their hijabs. Tarlo and Moors describe the emergence of Muslim identities online when they describe many online stores selling Islamic wear. The authors explain:

[There is] a dense web of social media which includes YouTube videos of fashion shows and hijab tutorials, Islamic fashion blogs, discussion fora, Facebook pages, and so forth that present a huge variety of fashionable styles of Islamic dress and provide advice and commentary on different ways of dressing fashionably and Islamically.³¹

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Nicole Lyn Pesce, “Muslim woman defends her wearing of American flag as hijab on Fox News to debate Donald Trump mosque stance,” *New York Daily News*, Nov 19. 2015. Accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/muslim-woman-defends-wearing-american-flag-hijab-article-1.2439132>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 11.

In addition to these online sources, there is a huge network of Muslim beauty bloggers on social media sites like Instagram, providing tutorials and teaching women who chose to veil and those who chose not to, how to recreate complicated makeup looks. The purpose of these videos is essentially to feel and look beautiful wearing the hijab and full-face makeup. One of the most famous beauty bloggers today is 24-year-old Nura Afia who has become the first hijabi to be featured by CoverGirl.³² Afia explains what she hopes the campaign can do for Muslim girls:

I feel like what I can relate to with a lot of Muslim girls is we've all felt insecure about either being Muslim, wearing a hijab, or just your culture, at one point. Just because it's not the norm here. So, I want them to feel proud of who they are, and where they come from, and what they think in when they see the commercial.³³

While Muslim beauty bloggers highlight the effects of the Islamic fashion movement with regards to makeup, hijab styles and Islamic dress are also thriving.

In Southern California, two sisters, Marwa Atik and Tasneem Sabri, founded a Muslim dress company called Vela. They sell *abayas*, hijabs, and scarves that can be worn as a headscarf or around the neck. The founders highlight the importance of national context in hijabi styles, trends, and personal identities. Interviewer Lilledeshan Bose explains that, "Vela's handmade hijabs incorporate current trends: Victorian pleating, zippers and lace- definitely not

³² Sarah Larimer, "She's one of the new faces of CoverGirl. And she's wearing a hijab," *Washington Post: Acts of Faith*, November 8, 2016, accessed March 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/08/shes-one-of-the-new-faces-of-covergirl-and-shes-wearing-a-hijab/?utm_term=.f5b06047e449.

³³ *Ibid.*

'grandma scarves' if you know what I mean."³⁴ In her interview, Tasneem Sabri fleshes this out describing the Vela style:

As American Muslims, we don't want to dress the way a girl in Turkey or the United Arab Emirates would. We have our own sense of fashion and style that is inspired by runways and the culture we live in.³⁵

Sabri explains that the creators of Vela "feel that every girl should be comfortable in her outfit choice as it is an expression of her individuality."³⁶ Sabri and others like her emphasize the ideal that style and American fashion can be combined with traditional, modest Islamic dress (long and loose clothing) and values. Muslim-American hijabistas like Sabri are defining a uniquely American style by employing trends they observe and adopt from non-Muslim designers and media. Bose points out examples like pleating, zippers, and lace. The Vela Instagram account shows their scarves on modern hijabista models, and the unique patterns and designs like marbling and chiffon flowers.³⁷

Among these values, is the enactment of religious piety. Tarlo and Moors summarize Saba Mahmood's argument (which will be expanded upon in the third chapter of this thesis) that, "literature on veiling paid only scant attention to the religious motivations of many of the women concerned."³⁸ They continue to explain that, "Mahmood emphasizes the extent to which adopting covered dress was first and foremost a religiously motivated practice."³⁹ The

³⁴ Lilledeshan Bose, "Hijabistas: Inside the World of Muslim-American Fashion," *KCET: Community Arts*, June 6, 2012, accessed March 26, 2017, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/hijabistas-inside-the-world-of-muslim-american-fashion>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Velascarves, Instagram Account, accessed March 21, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/velascarves/?hl=en>.

³⁸ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 5.

³⁹ Ibid.

fact that the hijab is a religious symbol is central to any discussion of the veil, and its religious dimension should not be overlooked in an investigation of Islamic fashion and empowerment through the act of covering. The veil⁴⁰ is traditionally a public and tangible symbol of religious piety and modesty within Islam. Mahmood explains that, “they [veiling and religious bodily acts] are the critical markers of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious.”⁴¹ The act of wearing the hijab simultaneously serves to mark religious piety and to fashion it. Philosopher, Michael Foucault, explores this same idea in his description of different “technologies” used to understand and create the self.⁴² Foucault describes “technologies of the self,” as those,

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁴³

Using Foucault’s understanding, the process of wearing the hijab for these purposes serves as one of these “technologies of the self” and relates directly to Mahmood’s assessment. This is true for Muslim women living in America as well. In the video *Hijabi World*, Rutgers University students who wear the hijab discuss their experiences as hijabi women in America.

⁴⁰ “Veil” is used here to mean the hijab, and other forms of covering including headscarves, *jilbabs*, *burqas*, etc.

⁴¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 158.

⁴² Michael Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

One woman states, “I wear the hijab first and foremost for God.”⁴⁴ The idea of “wearing a hijab for God” and to mark and preserve one’s modesty is especially highlighted in a society in which modesty and Islamic dress is not the norm. While exposure of bodies in Western societies is perceived as empowering, the act of covering bodies and finding (religious) empowerment through modesty is less common. I will discuss Wendy Brown’s analysis of the Western assumption that exposed bodies are a market of empowerment in the following chapter. The narrative that undressing is seen as liberation from tradition is one that dates back to the emergence of the bikini⁴⁵ and continues to evolve and persist today. Modern examples of the narrative of undressing and empowerment can be found in movements like “slut walks” and campaigns like #DropTheTowel,⁴⁶ which encourage women to reclaim their bodies by revealing them. These movements contrast with the ways that Muslim women are communicating their own liberation through semiotic gestures like the performance of modesty.

Thus far I have provided a brief background to Islamophobia and hijabophobia as these discourses shape the experiences of Muslim women in America today. I have also provided examples to illustrate the distinct experiences of Muslim American women who view the hijab as an effective means of communicating their agency, beauty, and piety in a uniquely American

⁴⁴ Winokur and Kashi, *Hijabi World*, “What American Women Who Wear Hijab Want You to Know,” August 26, 2016.

⁴⁵ Alissa J. Rubin, “From Bikinis to Burkinis, Regulating What Women Wear,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2017, accessed March 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/28/world/europe/france-burkini-bikini-ban.html>.

⁴⁶ Jessica Valenti, “SlutWalks and the future of feminism,” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2011, accessed March 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/slutwalks-and-the-future-of-feminism/2011/06/01/AGjB9LIH_story.html?utm_term=.9f335781c9e3.

Alanna Vagianos, “This Body-Positive Campaign Is Empowering Women To #DropTheTowel,” *Huffington Post*, July 17, 2015, accessed March 28, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/dropthetowel-campaign-empowers-women-to-never-hide-their-bodies_us_55a7db07e4b0896514d08474.

context. This thesis will explore the depth of these categories as they are embodied by hijabista women today. The wearing of a hijab had been considered an act of concealing and a function of restrictions imposed by a patriarchal religion. While there may be some truth in this view, especially for women in certain social, geographical, and economic classes, the veil also creates new spaces in which new Muslim identities are fashioned. This thesis is a small contribution to the developing literature on the veil. The contribution lies in a synthesis of three key factors: agency, beauty, and piety. I discuss how these three factors shape a particular identity that American Muslim women have cultivated to, in part, challenge the stereotype of a Muslim woman in need of a savior. Contrary to this stereotype, these Muslim women are using the hijab both as a means of empowerment and as a symbol to communicate that empowerment to the broader society. In doing so, they are changing perceptions of the hijab and, by extension, “poisoned” perceptions of Islam today. While I remain focused on this turn throughout this thesis, I am aware of important criticisms of liberal autonomy which requires further study.⁴⁷ This thesis will conclude by asking significant questions about the relationship between the hijabista movement and market forces, and how this complicates emerging identities and claims to agency.

⁴⁷ Sindre Bangstad, “Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol 28, Issue 3, 28-54, May 16 (2011).

Chapter 1: Agency

In this chapter I will synthesize Muslim and non-Muslim views on the question of agency as it relates to the wearing of the hijab in a contemporary American context. I will then situate these discussions in the scholarly literature on agency, particularly the writings of Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood. Finally, I will examine contemporary American Muslim women's voices in order to demonstrate how they perform their agency, and how these performances are shaped by local contexts.

The phenomenon known as “the global Islamic revival movement”⁴⁸ is the broader context in which hijabista culture has been utilized and framed as a function of Muslim women's agency, especially in Muslim-minority contexts. In *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors provide a useful summary of the Islamic revival movement, including the phenomenon they term “the new veiling,” which refers to the resurgence of veiling.⁴⁹ The Islamic revival is a global phenomenon that is expressed in local contexts such as Cairo's “mosque movement” and the “piety movements” in Bedouin societies, each of which has been the subject of pioneering studies by Mahmood and Abu-Lughod respectively. These local movements, in turn, inform the global phenomenon in interesting ways.⁵⁰ Mahmood frames her ethnography of agency and piety in Cairo in this global context and provides a useful

⁴⁸ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 8-11.

⁴⁹ The term “veiling” is used here to convey covered dress. Throughout this thesis, I will use “veil” to refer to covering in a general way. I will use “hijab” to refer to the headscarf.

⁵⁰ Hijabista culture exhibits the same reciprocity between the local and the global, while decisions to cover and the ways in which women cover is largely culturally influenced. This point will be expanded upon later.

summary of the characteristics of the “Islamic Awakening.”⁵¹ Tarlo and Moors explain that, “During the twentieth century in many Muslim majority countries, elements of a Western lifestyle, including the adoption of European styles of dress, became widespread especially amongst the middle and upper classes.”⁵² The Islamic revival movement emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the turn toward an imagined West and, “encouraged a growing number of women to adopt recognizably Islamic covered styles of dress.”⁵³ Far from being restricted to explicitly political groups intent on transforming the state, the revival was a broad social movement. The term “Islamic Revival,” explains Mahmood, “refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies.”⁵⁴ With regard to dress, the movement first popularized a “uniform and sober style” of dress that was “purposefully non-fashionable.”⁵⁵ In the 1990s trends shifted in Muslim majority countries to more fashionable and personalized styles “giving rise to what has become known as Islamic fashion.”⁵⁶ Within the context of the Islamic revival, young, fashionable Muslims present themselves as agentive and empowered. Based on their examination of Muslim women in Muslim-minority contexts including Europe and America, Tarlo and Moors explain that, when discussing their decision to wear a hijab, many young Muslim women use “strong reflexive language.”⁵⁷ This allows them to

⁵¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 3.

⁵² Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 8.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 3.

⁵⁵ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 9.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

present their decision as both conscious and well-informed.⁵⁸ Thus the Islamic revival is the global context in which hijabista culture has emerged. Hijabista women have adopted a language that highlights their personal choice in the matter, and visual cues that signal their independence. These practices function both discursively and semiotically to challenge stereotypes about Muslim women.

Voices of Muslim women are often drowned out in discourse surrounding questions of their agency and free choice. Islamic fashion, however, has provided an outlet through which hijabista women have been able to express the agency they are assumed to lack. According to Tarlo and Moors, “The firmly entrenched perception of hijab as a symbol of women’s subordination regardless of what hijab-wearers may feel about the subject often makes it difficult for covered women to be heard in public debate.”⁵⁹ The hijab has been presumed to be a symbol of religious and social oppression by non-Muslims, and this assumption narrows the space in which Muslim women are, themselves, acknowledged. This point is exemplified by the fact that in America, non-Muslims seem more willing to listen to non-Muslim women’s experiences of temporarily wearing the hijab than listening to Muslim women themselves. The 2016 video *Hijabi World* created by Julie Winokur and Ed Kashi features Rutgers University students, specifically women who wear the hijab, talking about their religiosity, experiences, and reasons for wearing the hijab. The short film begins by featuring two young women fashionably dressed and wearing headscarves. One student begins by saying, “There was a video that went viral all over social media where women wore hijab for a day, and... suddenly

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 19.

their experiences overshadowed ours. And people are always saying Muslim women are not speaking up or they're oppressed, well, it's because we never have a platform to speak."⁶⁰ The video introduces itself as providing a platform for American college students who observe the hijab to explain their experiences without assumption or interpretation. There have been many viral accounts of non-Muslims wearing the hijab and describing their experiences, which seem to overshadow the testimonies of Muslim Americans. For example, BuzzFeed dressed four women in hijabs for a day. These women documented their experiences and reflected on how they felt and how they were treated.⁶¹ The primary critique of videos like these are that non-Muslims disregard Muslim experience in favor of non-Muslim experience.

There have been other recent attempts at understanding Muslim women's experiences that seek to inform non-Muslims about Islam. Several high school, college, and university organizations have hosted cultural events such as "The Hijab Experiment" and "Walk a Mile in Her Hijab".⁶² These events, typically run by Muslim Student Associations or other Muslim organizations on campuses, are intended to combat negative stereotypes about Islam or acknowledge and support diversity. While these are certainly worthwhile objectives, the events

⁶⁰ Winokur and Kashi, *Hijabi World*, "What American Women Who Wear Hijab Want You to Know," August 26, 2016.

⁶¹ Chantel Houston and Ella Mielniczenko and Marina Uribe, "This is What Four Women Learned When They Tried Wearing Hijabs For A Day," BuzzFeed Video, January 28, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/chantelhouston/watch-four-women-experience-what-its-like-to-wear-hijabs-for>.

⁶² Amber Lowry, "Opinion: I wore a hijab for one day-and this is what happened," *Fox News Opinion*, April 15, 2016, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2016/04/15/opinion-wore-hijab-for-one-day-and-this-is-what-happened.html>.

Gilbert R. Boucher, "Vernon Hills students join their Muslim peers in wearing hijabs," *Daily Herald: Education*, December 16, 2016, accessed March 26, 2017, <https://www.dailyherald.com/article/20151210/news/151219957/>.

have faced criticism from Muslims and non-Muslims alike for various reasons. World Hijab Day, observed in 2017 on February 1st, is one such event. Participants invite Muslims and non-Muslims to wear the hijab for the day. The event has American and European roots and has since spread across the world.⁶³ Similar to events hosted at colleges and high schools across the United States, World Hijab Day is presented as an opportunity for experiential learning and the promotion of religious tolerance and solidarity. World Hijab Day has also been described as a day meant to show, “the world that women can choose the hijab willingly.”⁶⁴ The idea that women *choose* the hijab is directly related to idealized notions of agency, autonomy, and freedom of expression, all of which are pillars of liberal subjectivity. Initiatives like these lay emphasis on choice as a liberal ideal. They imply that to be a free and autonomous subject one must be free to make their own choices, *and* express this freedom.

Considering the relationship between hijabista culture and the expression of agency, Tarlo and Moors claim that, “Through their visual material and bodily presence young women who wear Islamic fashion disrupt and challenge public stereotypes about Islam, women, social integration and the veil even if their voices are often drowned out in political and legal debates on these issues.”⁶⁵ Tarlo and Moors argue that through their coupling of fashion and Islamic values of modesty and piety, both of which are implied in the veil, hijabista women are expressing their unique agency. The authors explain that “As wearers of fashionable styles of

⁶³ Dianna M. Nanex, “Women reveal why they will wear scarves on World Hijab Day,” *USA Today Network*, January 31, 2017, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/01/31/women-reveal-why-they-wear-scarves-world-hijab-day/97323316/>.

⁶⁴ Catrin Nye, “Hijab for a day: Non-Muslim women who try the headscarf,” *BBC Asian Network*, January 31, 2013, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21283301>.

⁶⁵ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 3.

Islamic dress, young Muslim women in Europe and America create a presence which has the potential to destabilize some of the entrenched perceptions of Muslim women”.⁶⁶ In *Islamic Fashion and Anti-fashion*, Tarlo and Moors provide detailed examples that illustrate the various ways in which hijabista trends and Islamic fashion destabilize assumptions about Muslim women. Before continuing our discussion of agency, it is necessary to step back and consider the different assumptions underlying notions of agency and what it entails.

Lila Abu-Lughod provides a foundation when she states, “Veiling must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency.”⁶⁷ As noted above, the hijab is often seen as a symbol of the subordination of Muslim women. It represents a lack of choice, and is assumed to act as a constraint. Although scholars and Muslim women themselves have challenged this assumption, it persists. For example, the video *Hijabi World* challenges these notions, as does the revival and evolution of Islamic fashion in various contexts. Scholars have deconstructed these perceptions by identifying the ways in which agency is exercised in different social, cultural, and political contexts.

Abu-Lughod references Wendy Brown when describing the influence that cultural context has on our perceptions of freedom and agency. Brown explains that in the West our views are based on the, “tacit assumption that bared skin and flaunted sexuality is a token if not a measure of women’s freedom and equality.”⁶⁸ This point is critical when questioning what exactly constitutes agency and to what extent is it culturally-determined. Brown concludes by

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, 39.

⁶⁸ Wendy Brown, “Civilizational Delusions: Secularism, Tolerance, Equality,” *Theory and Event* 15, no. 2 (2012).

explaining that the convictions that the West holds about Muslim women's "lack of choice" ignore "the extent to which all choice is conditioned by as well as imbricated with power, and the extent to which all choice itself is an impoverished account of freedom".⁶⁹ In this way, the very notion of choice, or what one sees as desirable, is shaped in a social context. Choice is a function of power in the ways that it is shaped by forces outside ourselves, and is therefore an insufficient measure by which to judge freedom. Abu-Lughod explains, "We are placed in certain social classes and communities in specific countries at distinct historical moments... our desires are forged in these conditions and our choices limited by them."⁷⁰ In other words, our desires and aspirations are shaped by structural variables. Therefore, our choices are a function of our socio-cultural horizons.⁷¹ Within those horizons, we exercise choice but the range of expression available to us is not chosen. The context of these horizons is often ignored in ethnocentric judgements about the agency and freedom of others. With respect to Islamic dress, Abu-Lughod argues that, "One cannot reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing."⁷² So, while the hijab is empowering for some women in that they assert themselves as autonomous liberal subjects and actively veil as an expression of their agency, we should not universalize these experiences.

Taking these arguments one step further, scholars have criticized the assumption that the desire for freedom is universal, arguing instead that it is culturally determined. For example, Saba Mahmood argues that, "the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, 18.

⁷¹ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: House of Anansi Press Limited, 1991), 31.

⁷² Ibid, 40.

desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject.”⁷³ Mahmood’s point is that the desire for freedom should be understood within the complex set of circumstances in which a subject finds herself. Mahmood argues that, “it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.”⁷⁴ With these statements, Mahmood and Abu-Lughod are encouraging a closer examination of the context of a subject and the socio-cultural factors that have influenced her desires and aspirations. This approach entails the simple acknowledgement that people in different places, with different experiences, might want different things. They are also suggesting that desire is not the only metric by which to measure freedom. Mahmood then explains the idea of a “willed submission” and the cultural and religious value of willed submission in Islam. Mahmood goes as far as to claim that, “coupling of the veil and women’s (un)freedom... is equally manifest in those arguments that endorse or defend the veil on the grounds that it is a product of women’s ‘free choice’ and evidence of their ‘liberation’ from the hegemony of Western cultural codes.”⁷⁵ Through her expansion of Foucault’s notions of subjectivation, she complicates the assumed definition of agency so that the hijab does not represent freedom or a lack of freedom.

Mahmood explains that, “if we think of ‘agency’ not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action, then this conversation raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm,

⁷³ Saba Mahmood qtd. in Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, 45.

⁷⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

⁷⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 195.

between performative behavior and inward disposition.”⁷⁶ While Mahmood discusses agency and piety in the distinct context of the mosque movements of Cairo, her observations are helpful when considering the hijab in American and Western society today. These cultures tend to appreciate agency only as resistance to power and norms, and while the hijab has been worn and utilized as such, it has also been a tool and symbol of agency through the act of submission and the continual reestablishment of norms. Mahmood explains that, “In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.”⁷⁷ In this way, Mahmood “proposes an understanding of agentic power as ‘a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable.’”⁷⁸ So, while agentive power can be expressed through resistance to social norms, it can also be expressed through adherence to those norms. Agentic power can be expressed through the assertion of oneself as an autonomous subject through willed resistance, but also through willed submission. To think about agency, we must extricate the concept from previous political and social assumptions about freedom. We should instead consider the cultural and religious framework in which decisions to veil or not to veil are situated. It is crucial, therefore, to listen to the voices of Muslim women and remain attuned to how they are expressing themselves, and what they are choosing to say about their experiences.

While Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Asra Q. Nomani, and Hala Arafa⁷⁹ provide examples of Muslim women in America rejecting the hijab as a function of their agency, Muslim American hijabistas

⁷⁶ Ibid, 18.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁷⁸ Saba Mahmood qtd. in Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 5.

⁷⁹ Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a former Muslim and anti-Islam activist, whose voice has been influential in developing the Euro-American perceptions of Muslim women in need of being rescued. Asra Q. Nomani

are creating and utilizing their platform to assert their agency and overturn stereotypes. Abu-Lughod quotes Ayaan Hirsi Ali as Ali describes Muslim women as “caged virgins.”⁸⁰ Abu-Lughod explains that Ali considers herself “a Muslim woman who has freed herself from the cage” and “emancipating herself through atheism.”⁸¹ In a related way, Hala Arafa and Asra Nomani have publically rejected ideas like World Hijab Day, and the movement for non-Muslims to wear hijabs as a sign of interfaith solidarity or, more recently, as an acknowledgement of the stress that Muslim women face in light of President Trump’s election.⁸² Some examples of the agentive voices of hijabistas in America today include those featured in *Hijabi World* as previously described. The young women in the film frame their choice to wear the hijab as one characterized by free will and autonomy. Less than two minutes into the film one woman, Habeeba, says, “No, I am not deprived or oppressed. No one forces me to wear hijab, and there are cases that you will find, that there are women who are forced to wear the hijab, but that’s not Islam whatsoever.”⁸³ Another woman, Hamna, explains, “I am telling you this was my decision, my dad did not force me, my parents did not force me.”⁸⁴ These statements

is a Muslim-American activist most recently receiving press for her support of President Donald Trump. Hala Arafa co-founded the Muslim Reform Movement and considers the hijab to be oppressive and a symbol of oppression within Islam.

⁸⁰ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, 19.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Asra Q. Nomani and Hala Arafa, “As Muslim women, we actually ask you not to wear the hijab in the name of interfaith solidarity,” *Washington Post*, December 21, 2005, accessed March 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/21/as-muslim-women-we-actually-ask-you-not-to-wear-the-hijab-in-the-name-of-interfaith-solidarity/?utm_term=.a30125a6796a

Asra Q. Nomani, “Wearing the Hijab in Solidarity Perpetuates Oppression,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2016, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/01/06/do-non-muslims-help-or-hurt-women-by-wearing-hijabs/wearing-the-hijab-in-solidarity-perpetuates-oppression>

⁸³ Winokur and Kashi, *Hijabi World*, “What American Women Who Wear Hijab Want You to Know,” August 26, 2016.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

emphasize choice and an autonomous decision to wear the hijab. Further examples can be found from two sisters and co-founders of Vela scarves, a headscarf and clothing company based in southern California. KCET's Artbound created a short documentary film interviewing the sisters, Marwa Atik and Tasneem Sabri in 2012. In the film, Sabri explains that, "A lot of people think that the hijab is a form of oppression to women, but actually, especially for women who *choose* to wear it in the West, where it isn't the norm, a Muslim woman who does chose to wear the veil is actually showing that she is a strong individual who can express herself and her individuality..."⁸⁵ Sabri is not only emphasizing Muslim women's agency, she is pointing directly to the agency of those Muslim women choosing to wear the hijab in a non-Muslim context, which she implies, inherently highlights the process of choosing to counteract the societal norm. The quote also underlines the construction and expression of empowerment when Sabri explains that the hijab shows that a Muslim woman is a "strong individual." There are countless similar examples, and a collection and subsequent analysis of all these examples is beyond the scope of this thesis. While these examples help to illustrate the ways in which hijabistas and fashionable young hijabi women in America are asserting their individuality and combatting stereotypes, there have been various critiques of similar assertions having gone too far.

A valuable and recent example of the complexity of questions of agency is that of Noor Tagouri, an American hijabi woman and journalist, who was featured in the October 2016 issue of *Playboy*. Tagouri was featured in *Playboy's* "Renegades" series and focused on her ambition

⁸⁵ Lilledeshan Bose, "Hijabistas: Inside the World of Muslim-American Fashion," *KCET: Community Arts*, June 6 2012.

to become “the first anchor on commercial U.S. television to wear a Muslim headscarf.”⁸⁶ In her interview with *Playboy*, Tagouri states:

I will have succeeded in effecting change when all girls realize they can do anything they want without having to sacrifice who they are as a person. I may dress a little different- I’m a reporter who happens to wear a head scarf and I live in my hoodie- but being a story teller, motivational speaker, entrepreneur and unapologetically myself has opened so many doors for thousands of people.⁸⁷

In this quote, Tagouri speaks about the hijab as an extension of her self and her values. She states that to not wear it would be to sacrifice who she is. In this way, Tagouri is speaking about the hijab as an expression of her identity which she locates within herself. She also draws attention to authenticity when she says that she is “unapologetically” herself. The idea of an authentic autonomous subject further complicates any discussion of agency and the capacity for desire or freedom. Throughout the *Playboy* article, Tagouri discusses her work as a reporter and how wearing the headscarf has helped her connect with the people she interviews. She explains that she understands how it feels to be “misrepresented in the media” and “what it’s like to have the narrative of our community be skewed and exploited.”⁸⁸ While at first glance, Tagouri’s responses in *Playboy* seem to parallel the statements made by Vela founders and the

⁸⁶ Asma T. Uddin and Inas Younis, “Playboy’s Interview with a Muslim woman mocks modesty and offends women,” *Washington Post: Acts of Faith*, September 28, 2016, accessed March 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/28/playboys-interview-with-a-muslim-woman-mocks-modesty-and-offends-women/?utm_term=.7e0b396debd4.

⁸⁷ Anna del Gaizo, “Media Wunderkind Noor Tagouri Makes a Forceful Case for Modesty,” *Playboy: Renegades*, September 22, 2016, accessed March 28, 2017 <http://www.playboy.com/articles/rene-gades-noor-tagouri>.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

University students featured in *Hijabi World*, Tagouri's interview was criticized as "a step too far."⁸⁹

Asma T. Uddin and Inas Younis writing for the Washington Post responded to Noor Tagouri's feature in *Playboy* with an article titled "Playboy's interview with a Muslim woman mocks modesty and offends women."⁹⁰ The authors begin the article by explaining Hugh Hefner's (the founder of *Playboy*) famous opposition to "religiously mandated, chastity-centered codes of sexual morality".⁹¹ Uddin and Younis discuss how *Playboy*, "capitalized on a now-prevalent trend among American Muslims, and especially Muslim women to appear 'normal at all costs.'"⁹² The authors reference a recent article by Nafisa Eltahir in *The Atlantic* titled "Muslim Americans Should Reject the Politics of Normalcy." In the essay, Eltahir explains that the pressures that Muslim Americans face to always appear and act "normal." Eltahir states that, "Muslim women especially feel the burden to appear normal," and that, "often, they are called upon to fit the Western image of a modern woman."⁹³ She continues to say, "With all the negative assumptions they face about their religion, they must actively assert their lack of oppression, rather than simply living it out in their daily lives."⁹⁴ This complicates the hijabistas claim about agency. If hijabistas are free to choose, yet pressured to be seen as normal, to what extent are their choices affected by these horizons. Social media and

⁸⁹ Asma T. Uddin and Inas Younis, "Playboy's Interview with a Muslim woman mocks modesty and offends women," *Washington Post: Acts of Faith*, September 28, 2016.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Nafisa Eltahi, "Muslim Americans Should Reject the Politics of Normalcy," *Atlantic*, September 25, 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/muslim-americans-should-reject-respectability-politics/501452/>.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

mainstream media platforms like magazines and television have been increasingly utilized by Muslim women to share their experiences.⁹⁵ Uddin and Younis explain that the *Playboy* interview seems to be another expression of this, when in fact it is an example of the harmful process of “normalizing” difference. Coupled with this process is the implicit idea that difference is only acceptable when it is normal. This is part of the complexity of hijabistas’ claims to agency: their free choice is constrained by the horizon in which Muslim women can be seen as normal and therefore, accepted. Even further, it is a fetishization of Islamic values like modesty and piety. The authors state, “For many Muslim women, the hijab is about reclaiming ownership of their image- but the *Playboy* piece arguably takes away that agency and instead imposes its own frame, making the hijab sexy.”⁹⁶

It is through the act of framing the hijab within a magazine that notoriously objectifies and mocks “feminine roles and representations” that the agency Tagouri expresses is redefined and used against her. Eltahir claims that agency is not constructed and expressed through normalizing videos like BuzzFeed’s *I’m Muslim, But I’m Not...* video (or BuzzFeed’s *I’m A Hijabi Woman, But I’m Not...* video) and interviews like Noor Tagouri’s that disrespect Muslim values and actively dismiss difference. Instead, she suggests that, “true acceptance for Muslims will only come when those Muslims who wear their religious differences openly are seen as being just as American as those whose choices hew closer to the norm.”⁹⁷ She claims that agency derives, instead, from an expression of “customs, views, or practices” even if these are

⁹⁵ Asma T. Uddin and Inas Younis, “Playboy’s Interview with a Muslim woman mocks modesty and offends women,” *Washington Post: Acts of Faith*, September 28, 2016.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Nafisa Eltahi, “Muslim Americans Should Reject the Politics of Normalcy,” *Atlantic*, September 25, 2016.

apparently different from the American “normal.”⁹⁸ Considering this example in light of various approaches to agency and autonomous choice presented by scholars in the field, we should reiterate that the experiences of many women in a variety of sociocultural contexts cannot be reduced to a single experience. What is empowering for some might not be empowering for others, and the politics of choice are tied strongly to politics of religion, yet should not be confused with each other.

The questions of freedom that Wendy Brown and Lila Abu-Lughod posed earlier in this chapter will be revisited in the conclusion of this thesis. These questions include: (1) to what extent is all freedom (not just the desire for freedom) culturally conditioned and dependent? (2) In what ways are Muslim American women’s experiences and expressions of agency related to the normalizing of cultural and religious difference? And perhaps most importantly, (3) what is lost in an obsession with human agency, and what is lost in the supposedly necessary blending of traditions like that of Islamic and American culture? These are complex questions. For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is enough to raise them and acknowledge their complexity. Before addressing these question, I will address the ways in which Muslim women are empowered by the hijab and the ways that veiling has facilitated the revealing of both beauty and piety in a specific social landscape.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Beauty

The hijab has often been viewed, by both Muslims and non-Muslims, as something that conceals a woman's beauty⁹⁹. In the previous chapter I discussed how the hijab has been used as a marker of agency. In this chapter, I discuss how a garment that is ostensibly intended to conceal also does the work of revealing a woman's beauty and sense of style. This is yet another way in which the hijab has been appropriated and naturalized in a discourse about empowerment. I will discuss fashion (understood as beauty and style conveyed through dress) and physical appearance (examined through the lens of cosmetics and makeup) as two key concepts underlying the discourse about beauty. I will also examine various representations of "Islamic" beauty and hijabi women in mainstream outlets. A more abstract conception of beauty as described in the Quran and invoked by many Muslim women in different ways will be discussed in the final chapter regarding the relationship between the hijab, modesty, and piety. The relationship between the hijab (and other forms of modest Muslim dress) and fashion requires detailed analysis as the next chapter looks at the relationship between religious ideals (primarily piety and the enactment or performance of piety) and the hijab. There is a great deal of literature about the relationship between fashion, identity, and various forms of religious dress. For the purposes of this thesis, I will draw heavily on the work of Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors in Euro-American contexts. Using examples from the United States and the UK, I will illustrate how Muslim women living in the West have drawn the hijab into their discourses

⁹⁹ Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses* (University Press of America: Lanham, Maryland, 2001), 7-9.

on empowerment through a symbolic (and at times more than just symbolic) unveiling of beauty. I will demonstrate how this is accomplished by providing a thick description of individual cases.

A discussion regarding fashion as an expression of beauty and style conveyed through dress must begin by acknowledging the relationship between fashion and the construction of identity.¹⁰⁰ In *Brand Islam*, Faegheh Shirazi explains that, “Dress obviously provides many functions, including communicating one’s identity.”¹⁰¹ Shirazi refers to the work of Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher to provide a broad definition of dress.¹⁰² According to Roach-Higgins and Eicher, “a comprehensive definition of dress includes both body modifications and supplements to the body.”¹⁰³ This definition incorporates the range of Islamic dress, however, scholars caution against over-generalizing or reducing all varieties of dress worn by Muslims to one simple category.¹⁰⁴ Emma Tarlo explains that while we cannot define “Muslim dress” as a simple category, “Muslims around the world wear a huge range of different garments, many of which relate more to local regional traditions than religious ideas, and some of which are not particularly associated with either.”¹⁰⁵

Keeping this critique in mind, it is important to acknowledge the flexibility and variability of styles and types of dress worn by Muslim women. While some choose to adopt recognizably

¹⁰⁰ Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹⁰¹ Shirazi, *Brand Islam*, 144.

¹⁰² Ibid, 146. “Dress... includes a long list of possible direct modification of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other categories of items added to the body as supplements.”

¹⁰³ Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, “Dress and Identity,” *Textiles Research Journal*, 1992, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*, 2-3.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 5.

Islamic dress (typically covering the body in the form of veiling) others choose not to veil. The idea of “Islamic” dress is itself problematic. It is a function of discourse rather than specific prescriptions located in texts. This chapter will consider forms of beauty expressed by Muslim women choosing to wear the hijab, especially in a fashion-conscious way.

One of the typical assumptions about fashion is that it is only a secular or Western phenomenon.¹⁰⁶ While Western fashion has influenced Islamic fashion in the West (this will be discussed later) it is important to dismiss the idea that non-Western religious dress is inherently unfashionable. The Islamic fashion industry itself is challenging this assumption. Tarlo and Moors explain:

The existence and growth of Islamic fashion, then, contributes to the breaking down of systems of classification by which the world is divided into the fashionable West and unfashionable rest whose only access to fashion by emulation or insertion within a pre-existing frame.¹⁰⁷

This is an important argument to make for the purposes of dispelling the fictitious binary suggesting non-Western cultures lack access to fashion outside of a Western framework. This binary rejects the possibility of fashionable religious dress, especially a fashionable hijab.

In addition, among the many assumptions about the veil is that it is inherently a rejection of fashion, as it covers the body and clothes underneath, and therefore the expectation is that veiled Muslim women lack an interest in fashion or style. Shirazi explains that “It is commonly assumed, particularly in the West, that Muslim women are indifferent to

¹⁰⁶ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 12. “Fashion has conventionally been conceptualized as a modern Western secular phenomenon.”

¹⁰⁷ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 13.

fashion.”¹⁰⁸ She continues to correct this by saying “Although Islamic clothing is indeed designed with modesty in mind, Muslim women pay as much attention to beautiful presentation as [non-Muslim] women in the West do and are highly attuned to style and fashion.”¹⁰⁹ It is from within this framework that we can begin discussing the ways Muslims living in the West, particularly the United States, are revealing their beauty and style through Islamic dress and the hijab.

American Muslims are taking part in the Islamic fashion industry in new and evolving ways, including designing and selling dress marketed as both modest and fashionable. American Muslim designers have commented on the influence that Western fashion has had and continues to have on Islamic fashion and the preferences of modern, fashionable Muslim women. Vela, a company founded by sisters Marwa Atik and Tasneem Sabri and based in California, represents the diversity of Islamic fashion and the particularity of Muslim American designs. Sabri explains, “[We] put a Western twist to [Vela designs] ... As American Muslims, we don’t want to dress the way a girl in Turkey or the United Arab Emirates would.”¹¹⁰ Sabri continues by saying, “We have our own sense of fashion and style that is inspired by runways and the culture we live in.”¹¹¹ This quote highlights the ways that Muslim designers and Islamic fashion consumers living in the United States take into consideration their surrounding culture and its beauty and fashion ideals. The Vela creators make an effort to combine the values of the hijab (designed for modesty) and the American fashion they consider beautiful.

¹⁰⁸ Shirazi, *Brand Islam*, 144.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Lilledeshan Bose, “Hijabistas: Inside the World of Muslim-American Fashion,” *KCET: Community Arts*, June 6 2012.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Islamic fashion consumers and young hijabistas in America are looking for exactly this combination. Fashion Fighting Famine, a non-profit organization founded in 2007 in California, hosts annual events to support various global beneficiaries. The event includes a fashion show featuring many styles of modest fashion. Two sixteen-year-old girls attending the 2012 fashion show said that the show was inspiring and the only one of its kind in Southern California. One young girl explained, “You’d think there wouldn’t be a way to express our creativity [in hijab] ...But just because you’re wearing a scarf doesn’t mean you have an excuse to dress boring.”¹¹² This quote shows that the girls are interested in fashion, like many non-Muslim and Muslim sixteen year olds alike, and that they are excited by the many options designers like Vela are providing. Another young woman, Zamzam Abdulwahid, attending the event told KCET that she has the same access to fashionable clothes as non-Muslim women in America. She also said, “I love colors and I love bright clothes, but I think being modest is beautiful... It shows that I have a strong faith, and I want to wear the scarf because it reminds me of God.”¹¹³ The idea that being modest is beautiful and can be fashionable is widespread among hijabistas and young Muslim women living in the United States. Modesty as a key value in Islam and the lives of Muslim women is related to dress to an extent. However, it is important to keep in mind that while the hijab (and other forms of Islamic dress) might be entirely a religious act to some women, to others the hijab is also related to beauty and fashion. Tarlo and Moors explain that we, “need to move beyond the idea that the primary role of religious dress practices is the maintenance of religious boundaries and the reproduction of tradition.”¹¹⁴ The “primary” role

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 3-4.

of religious dress is far more complicated and can carry more meaning depending on a number of factors. I will further discuss religion with relation to fashion and Islamic dress in the last chapter regarding piety. The last chapter will focus primarily on the relationship between religious values, as referenced by Abdulwahid, and modest fashion.

The company Vela provides a useful example of two Muslim American women embracing their identities and unique beauty, and encouraging other women to find empowerment by doing the same. A key feature of the Vela scarves is that they can be worn as traditional hijab or as a regular scarf, allowing for diversity and transition depending on how the woman chooses to wear it. By providing beautiful and unique scarves influenced by Western fashion, Vela allows Muslim women to express themselves creatively through their style and choices. Vela's participation in events like Fashion Fighting Famine provides some publicity to Muslim fashion, however, other representations of beauty by Muslim women in mainstream (Western) cosmetic and fashion media are critical in a conversation about the hijab and beauty.

An example of hijabi representation in Western mainstream media, which received ample press, is that of Mariah Idrissi, a model featured in H&M UK advertisement campaigns. With the understanding that Euro-American representations and receptions of hijabista style will undoubtedly differ in a variety of ways, the universality of media today ensures its widespread relevance. Therefore, news of the UK Muslim model for H&M reached the United States simultaneously, and the video advertisement featuring Idrissi was available to view online. In 2015, the short film advertisement which received the most attention, called *Close the Loop*, made a strong statement for diversity in fashion. Including Idrissi, featured in a "chic" hijab, the video also features an amputee model, plus-sized models, a Gulf Sheikh and a group

of Sikh men.¹¹⁵ The few seconds featuring Idrissi sparked national interest across both Europe and America, and in an interview with CNN in 2016, Idrissi discusses the need for more representation of the hijab in mainstream media. She explains that the video sparked a debate about the permissibility of modeling a hijab, and explains that as long as she dresses appropriately “according to Islam” then her actions are not forbidden and the promotion of the hijab is a good thing.¹¹⁶ Idrissi’s dress in the video was long and loose, qualities that Muslim women associate with modesty. She even wore large sunglasses covering her face and she makes a strong case for the fact that Muslim girls can, “adjust [the hijab] to fashion,” but must remember that the, “hijab isn’t a fashion,” itself.¹¹⁷ Idrissi’s personal campaign for modesty will be addressed once more in the final chapter.

Given that Faegheh Shirazi’s working definition of dress in *Brand Islam* includes almost anything to do with personal appearance, beauty also reflects the fashionable application of cosmetic products. An example of hijabi representation in American media is the recent inclusion of a hijabi woman in the widespread beauty campaign for CoverGirl. In 2016, the United States’ largest cosmetics company, CoverGirl, announced its inclusion of their first CoverGirl ambassador to wear a headscarf. Nura Afia is a 24-year-old Muslim beauty blogger. She grew up in Colorado and chose to start wearing the hijab when she was much younger. Her inclusion in CoverGirl’s newest campaign has been a significant point of interest. Afia first

¹¹⁵ Farah Halime, “Meet the first hijab-wearing model in an H&M ad,” *Fusion*, September 25, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://fusion.net/story/203380/mariah-idrissi-hm-hijabi-fashion-model/>.

¹¹⁶ Monica Sarkar, “H&M’s latest look: Hijab-wearing Muslim model stirs debate,” *CNN Style*, August 26, 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/29/europe/hm-hijab-model/>.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

became popular when she started her YouTube channel.¹¹⁸ Now she has over 200,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel, and over 300,000 Instagram followers.¹¹⁹ When Afia began making YouTube videos, mostly tutorials showing women and girls how to apply their makeup to achieve different looks, she noticed that there were very few videos produced by Muslims in the United States.¹²⁰ She said that some of the more dramatic makeup looks, enjoyed by many women who wear the hijab, can take practice and she wanted to participate in providing videos for these women.¹²¹ Regarding those women who wear the hijab and choose to wear makeup, Afia said “while there was a lot of content focused around fashion and how to dress, there were still very few videos out there for the massive audience of observant Muslim girls who love beauty and are constantly on the hunt for cosmetics.”¹²² It is for these reasons, and to support young girls who might feel insecure about wearing the hijab, that Afia and others consider her representation for the popular United States cosmetics brand a “milestone.”¹²³ She explained that, “It’s a big accomplishment for all of us... It means that little girls who grew up like me have something to look up to. I grew up feeling like hijab would hold me back.”¹²⁴ Afia claims that her representation in the campaign is also important because, “It shows that we’re average

¹¹⁸ Nura Afia, Babylailalov, *YouTube Channel*, accessed March 26, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/user/Babylailalov>.

¹¹⁹ Harmeet Kaur, “A hijab-wearing Muslim is now one of the beautiful faces of CoverGirl,” *CNN Style*, November 4, 2016, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/04/us/cover-girl-muslim-afia-trnd/>.

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Paton, “CoverGirl Signs Its First Ambassador in a Hijab,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2016, accessed March 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/fashion/covergirl-beauty-hijab.html>.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Harmeet Kaur, “A hijab-wearing Muslim is now one of the beautiful faces of CoverGirl,” *CNN Style*, November 4, 2016.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Americans... We're just girls that love to play with makeup and do everyday stuff."¹²⁵ In this way, Afia considers the portrayal of hijabi women in America as "normal" as a positive development for the community because it will help girls who might feel insecure about wearing the hijab or being Muslim in a minority context where wearing a hijab is not the "norm".

Critiques could be made about the rejection of normalcy, especially for minority groups and Muslims in America, however, Afia has responded to criticisms and said, "These brands aren't exploiting us... It's more about including us and making us feel like we matter... it's about them finally showing us that they know we are beautiful, too."¹²⁶ Afia, like Idrissi, believes that their representation in large branding campaigns is not a method of exploitation, or a sign of the loss of agency as Muslim women; but rather a positive, and long awaited inclusion of diversity.

There have been a variety of responses, both positive and negative, to the representation of modest, Muslim women in beauty campaigns. The majority of the feedback that Nura Afia received was positive and supportive. Shelina Janmohamed is the Vice President of the Islamic branding and consultancy agency, Ogilvy Noor in London. Janmohamed commented on the recent appointments of hijabi women in fashion and cosmetic campaigns, saying they are, "a growing recognition that the female Muslim community has a significant role in the development of this market... and that consumers increasingly want to see their

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Elizabeth Paton, "CoverGirl Signs Its First Ambassador in a Hijab," *New York Times*, November 9, 2016.

versions of themselves and their lifestyles reflected back to them by the beauty industry.”¹²⁷

This analysis could be a central reason for the large amount of support both Afia and Mariah Idrissi received. Janmohamed explains further a reason for the positivity of normalcy when she says, “There are millions of Muslim women who are very keen to both express their faith and also appear fashion forward... Self-presentation using makeup- particularly if they choose to wear a head scarf- is key to how they feel they can fit into wider society.”¹²⁸ From this perspective, it is empowering for young Muslim women to see themselves represented in mainstream media, and empowering to experiment with new fashions and wear the hijab while also revealing their individual beauty. However, these claims are problematized and complicated by the fact that the inclusion of hijabis in campaigns such as these is conditioned, to an extent, by market forces and the movements of global capital. While Janmohamed’s observations of the desire of many Muslim women to be featured and represented in mainstream media, this desire is partially conditioned by the desire to appear normal in Muslim-minority contexts. The complications of market forces, agency, and conditioned desire will be reviewed in more detail in the conclusion of this thesis.

Negative responses to Afia’s inclusion in the CoverGirl campaign focused on the assumed hypocrisy of dressing modestly but wearing “attention-seeking makeup.”¹²⁹ Critics have claimed that Muslim women who cover shouldn’t wear makeup because “beautifying

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

yourself” is the opposite of covering with a headscarf.¹³⁰ Afia takes these criticisms in stride, and focuses on the confidence that she feels by wearing makeup, fashionable clothes, and her hijab. Again however, a deeper analysis involves considering the hegemony of market forces, and how they shape our attitudes toward beauty. Returning to Mahmood’s revised understanding of agency, and the extent to which our desires are conditioned by our socio-cultural context as agents, it is worthwhile to critique the roots of the desire to beautify oneself in marketed ways. This is not to say we ought to reject the empowerment and confidence Afia and others feel, I simply imply that the conversation is complicated by the goals of global capital.

A final form of representation of fashionable hijabi women is that of “Islamic” dolls. Scholars like Amina Yaqin and Faegheh Shirazi, have analyzed the marketing of dolls fashioned with hijabs. Dolls like Razanne, the “Islamic Barbie,” come with fashionable clothes to wear at home and modest dress to wear when leaving the home. Razanne, was created and marketed by a Muslim couple in the United States and sold (primarily online) with her “visibly Muslim accessories” of hijab, jilbab, and prayer rug.¹³¹ Yaqin analyzes the popularity of Razanne and explains that, “it can be argued that she represents an attempt to normalize Muslim identity through the lens of fashion.”¹³² The focus on indoor and outdoor representation is clear, however a printed advertisement included in Yaqin’s study states, “Razanne helps Muslim girls

¹³⁰ Mi-Anne Chan, “This Muslim Blogger Makes an Important Statement About Beauty,” *Refinery29*, November 9, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.refinery29.com/2015/12/99693/nura-afia-muslim-beauty-blogger>.

¹³¹ Amina Yaqin, “Islamic Barbie: The Politics of Gender and Performativity,” *Fashion Theory*, 11:2-3, 173-188 (2007), 174.

¹³² *Ibid.*

understand that in the home they can be the ultimate fashion statement yet still have attractive attire while dressing modestly outside the home.”¹³³ Tarlo and Moors reference Razanne when they explain that the “Islamic Barbie,” “comes with a fixed set of notions about how Muslim women should look, dress, and behave... She thereby embodies and reinforces a visual stereotype of the Muslim woman as covered out of doors and fashionable indoors.”¹³⁴ This argument can be used to criticize the underlying assumption that Muslim women wearing modest, loose dress cannot be fashionable in the public sphere, an assumption that hijabistas and modern fashion designers, bloggers, and models are counteracting through their continued representation and empowerment through presenting themselves as autonomous and fashionably modest Muslim women.

Hijabi dolls also provide an interesting example of the marketing of religious piety and the representation of piety paralleled and tied to the representation of an ideal Muslim woman. In *Brand Islam*, Faegheh Shirazi explores how entrepreneurs have transformed, “an innocent, fanciful plaything into a powerful symbol for religious correctness and piety.”¹³⁵ It is worthwhile to also consider that the American Barbie also perpetuates norms and generalized, cultural ideals of womanhood. The increased popularity of ‘Islamic dolls’ and the spread of representation with Haneefa Adam’s “Hijarbie” in 2016 (almost ten years after Razanne’s debut) are examples of how women have located empowerment through the fashionable styles that dolls offer. In 2016, 24-year-old Haneefa Adam, from Lagos, Nigeria, created a “hijab-

¹³³ Ibid, 175.

¹³⁴ Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, “Introduction,” *Fashion Theory*, 11:2-3, 133-141 (2007), 135.

¹³⁵ Shirazi, *Brand Islam*, 90.

wearing Barbie doll.”¹³⁶ Adam now has almost 80 thousand followers on her Instagram account.¹³⁷ Again, Adam’s goal was one of representation and providing options for young Muslim girls to see themselves and empower themselves through their choices. Adam received her Masters in Pharmacology in the UK and told CNN that her motivations to create the “hijarbie,” “has roots in my religion and cultural identity.”¹³⁸ Similarly, Yaqin discusses retaining cultural identity when she claims that the Razanne doll, “embodies the modest Muslim woman who retains her culture and religious values while living in the West.”¹³⁹ Adam explained that, “The way Barbie dresses is very skimpy and different and there’s nothing wrong with it... I just wanted to give another option for Muslim girls like me.”¹⁴⁰ Adam said that she hopes any young girl will, “become more confident, more driven, and believe more in herself and her modest lifestyle and upbringing,” when she sees Hijarbie and her stylish, modest fashion choices.¹⁴¹ In this way, Adam is participating in the same narrative of empowerment and confident self-perception and presentation through beauty and representation, as Muslim fashion designers, bloggers, and models.

Each of these examples illustrates a partial analysis of the many ways modern hijabista women are interacting with representations of Islamic beauty and self-expression through their participation in fashion and dress. It is crucial to pay attention to the perspectives of these

¹³⁶ Stephanie Busari, “The hijab-wearing Barbie who’s become an Instagram star,” *CNN Style*, February 8, 2016, accessed March 26, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/08/fashion/hijarbie-nigeria-student/>.

¹³⁷ Hijarbie, Instagram Account, accessed March 23, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/hijarbie/?hl=en>.

¹³⁸ Stephanie Busari, “The hijab-wearing Barbie who’s become an Instagram star,” *CNN Style*, February 8, 2016.

¹³⁹ Amina Yaqin, “Islamic Barbie: The Politics of Gender and Performativity,” *Fashion Theory*, 11:2-3, 173-188 (2007), 174.

¹⁴⁰ Stephanie Busari, “The hijab-wearing Barbie who’s become an Instagram star,” *CNN Style*, February 8, 2016.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Muslim women while not reducing or generalizing their practices to refer to all Muslim women or the overarching and reductive category of “Islamic dress.” We can observe that representations of beauty and fashion are influential (as are market forces and company representation) and that many modern Muslim women living in the West are finding empowerment through these representations and feeling beautiful by wearing the hijab and modest dress.

Chapter 3: Piety

In this chapter I explore the relationship between the hijab, the hijabista movement, and religious ideals, particularly piety and modesty. First, I examine key passages in Islamic scriptures that have informed Muslim understandings of modesty and the purpose of veiling. I will primarily draw on the translations and commentaries in *The Study Quran*. Through this examination, I am not positing a direct relationship between these texts and Muslim practices; rather, I am considering these texts as one element of a historic discourse about modesty and veiling.¹⁴² Second, I will discuss how dress is used to both construct and reveal modesty. Finally, drawing on previous examples of hijabista women living in Muslim-minority contexts, I will examine American Muslim perspectives on the religious nature of the hijab. These three analyses will show the intersection of pious discourses and hijabista culture. This intersection will highlight the ways that hijabista women are performing religious piety and modesty by wearing the hijab. It will also show how hijabista women are, in some ways, *redefining* pre-colonial interpretations of these values.

¹⁴² Chaudhry, Ayesha S., "The Problems of Conscience and Hermeneutics: A Few Contemporary Approaches," *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 2008. History is an essential element to the analysis and interpretation of religious text. Chaudhry writes about the division between pre- and post-colonial discourses and "the role of historical precedent in contemporary interpretations". I have adopted this division to highlight the importance of historical and social context. Ayesha Chaudhry, "Does the Koran allow wife-beating? Not if Muslims don't want it to," *Globe and Mail*, March 27, 2014, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/its-muslims-who-give-voice-to-verse/article17684163/>. Chaudhry explains, "Religious traditions are shaped by their own social and historical contexts."

Regarding the reasons that Muslim women choose to wear the hijab, religious reasons are often dismissed by non-Muslims in favor of “practical” reasons.”¹⁴³ However, many women chose to veil as an expression of their faith. It is important not to flatten explanations of why women wear the hijab. The idea that religious dress is essentially an expression of religious sentiment is mistaken. In previous chapters, I have shown that several other factors may inform Muslim woman’s decision to adopt markers of religious identity. Sahar Amer explains that, “Attributing veiling practices to religion alone is clearly a gross oversimplification that fails to take into account the multiple factors that go into any Muslim woman’s decision to veil.”¹⁴⁴ Although it is not my intention to reduce the hijab to a symbol of religiosity, I recognize that the practice of veiling is also located in a historical conversation about religious values, and this conversation remains relevant. Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood both emphasize, “the extent to which adopting covered dress was first and foremost a religiously motivated practice.”¹⁴⁵ Mahmood’s work in particular highlights, “the strong levels of religious intent expressed by some Muslim women who adopt covered dress.” Additionally, Asad notes that many women cover out of a sense of religious duty. This chapter explores the religious motivations behind wearing the hijab, especially the religious motivations of fashion-conscious women in Muslim-minority contexts, as well as the perceived effects of wearing the hijab on subject formation.

To begin, I will review Quranic verses that were believed to underpin conceptions of modesty and veiling in the pre-colonial tradition. Today, these verses are being reinterpreted by

¹⁴³ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 5.

¹⁴⁴ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 37.

¹⁴⁵ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 5.

scholars and practicing Muslims alike. Both are reading the Quran and the hadith literature and reinterpreting their significance. In her book *What is Veiling?*, Sahar Amer begins a discussion of veiling in sacred, Islamic texts by explaining that both Muslims and non-Muslims commonly believe that veiling is a requirement in Islam and that veiling is mandatory for Muslim women.¹⁴⁶ Following this observation, she explains that the Quran never uses the word “hijab” in relation to women’s clothing.¹⁴⁷ In fact, as Emma Tarlo points out in her book, *Visibly Muslim*, Islamic textual sources including the Quran and Hadiths, “contain more references to men’s dress than to women’s.”¹⁴⁸ The Quran, “contains only a few references to women’s dress and these leave considerable room for interpretation.”¹⁴⁹ The room for interpretation and the hijabista performance of modesty will be further discussed near the end of this chapter. First, it is necessary to look at some of the Quranic verses which influenced a pre-colonial understanding of the relationship between the hijab, piety, and modesty.

The first of four verses historically linked to understandings of women’s modesty and its embodied connection to dress is Quran 24:30-31:

Tell the believing men to lower their eyes and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely God is Aware of whatsoever they do. And tell the believing women to lower their eyes and to guard their private parts, and to not display their adornment except that which is visible thereof. And let them draw their kerchiefs over their breasts, and not display their adornment except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands’ fathers, or their sons, or their husbands’ sons, or their brothers, or their brothers’ sons, or their sisters’ sons, or their women, or those whom their right hand possess, or male attendants free of desire, or children who are innocent of the private areas of women. Nor let them stamp their feet such that the ornaments they conceal

¹⁴⁶ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 21.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 9.

become known. And repent unto God all together, O believers, that haply you may prosper.¹⁵⁰

Muslim jurists have interpreted this passage differently. The editors of *The Study Quran* explain that a “kerchief,” “can mean a cloth that covers the head or neck; scarf; a flowing garment; a garment without stitching; or a man’s turban.”¹⁵¹ In addition, they explain that, “Beyond describing that it [kerchief] was worn atop the head or neck, no precise details are available for the dimensions or coverage of the [kerchief].”¹⁵² Furthermore, the word translated as “adornment” can also mean, “‘decoration,’ ‘embellishment,’ ‘finery,’ or something that beautifies.”¹⁵³ Essentially, jurists have traditionally interpreted the passage to mean that women should avoid attracting the attention of, appearing attractive to, or showing themselves to men with whom marriage is lawful. The extent of what is permissible to show has varied from including a woman’s face and hands or feet to excluding them meaning women should remain completely covered.¹⁵⁴

The second passage is Quran 33:59:

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters, and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks over themselves. Thus it is likelier that they will be known and not be disturbed. And God is Forgiving, Merciful.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran*, (New York: Harper Collins One, 2015), 874-875. All translations in this thesis are taken from *The Study Quran*. The commentary in *The Study Quran* is a synthesis of a wide range of pre-colonial commentaries.

¹⁵¹ Nasr, et. al., *The Study Quran*, 875.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Nasr, et. al., *The Study Quran*, 876.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Nasr, et. al., *The Study Quran*, 1038.

The Study Quran describes this verse as, “one of the most important verses for understanding the Quranic teaching regarding the veil.”¹⁵⁶ The editors explain that part of the purpose of the verse is to establish social norms that protect Muslim members of society. Dressing in a cloak is meant to, “ensure modesty and distinguish the free women from the slave women.”¹⁵⁷ In the pre-colonial tradition, jurists debated about the ways that women should cover: “Some say that it is to be done in such a way that it covers all but one eye, while others say it means that it must cover the forehead and most of the face but not the eyes.” However, a relative consensus can be derived, meaning that, “most jurists interpreted the command in this verse to mean that a free woman’s hair, ears, throat, and chest should be covered.”¹⁵⁸ This verse has generally been interpreted to mean that women should cover themselves so that they are recognized as faithful and are protected as such.

In her book *What is Veiling?* Sahar Amer cites Quran 33:53 as an essential verse, “sometimes referred to as ‘the verse of the hijab’ and is considered the earliest revelation on the subject of Islamic veiling.”¹⁵⁹ She explains that the word “hijab” in this verse serves as, “a physical, spatial marker... intended to safeguard the Prophet’s privacy and that of his wives.”¹⁶⁰

The Study Quran provides the following translation:

O you who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for its time to come, unless leave be granted you. But if you are invited, enter: and when you have eaten, disperse. Linger not, seeking discourse Truly that would affront the Prophet, and he would shrink from telling you, but God shrinks not from the truth. And

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Nasr, et. al., *The Study Quran*, 875.

¹⁵⁹ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 23.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

when you ask anything of [his wives], ask them from behind a veil. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. And you should never affront the Messenger of God, nor marry his wives after him. Truly that would be an enormity in the sight of God.¹⁶¹

The word translated as “veil” here has also been translated as “screen”¹⁶² and is originally “hijab.” The verse’s establishment of separate social spheres here is possibly the most important with regard to veiling. The word “hijab” is derived from, “the veil or partition mentioned in 33:53 meant to shield the Prophet’s wives from petitioners and those displaying excessive familiarity.”¹⁶³ However, the editors of *The Study Quran* have also pointed out that the, “special rules of seclusion applied to the wives of the Prophet... did not extend to other Muslim women.”¹⁶⁴

Finally, the commentary on Quran 33:32-33 contains an indication of pre-colonial ideals regarding the performance of piety. The passage in the Quran states:

O wives of the Prophet! You are not like other women. If you are reverent, then be not overly soft in speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease be moved to desire; and speak in an honorable way. Abide in your homes and flaunt not your charms as they did flaunt them in the prior Age of Ignorance. Perform prayer, give the alms, and obey God and His Messenger. God only desires to remove defilement from you, O People of the House.¹⁶⁵

The commentary in by *The Study Quran* is careful to point out that this passage is addressing the wives of the Prophet specifically, who (as we have observed) were presumably held to

¹⁶¹ Nasr, et. al., *The Study Quran*, 1035-1036.

¹⁶² Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 23.

¹⁶³ Nasr, et. al., *The Study Quran*, 874.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Nasr, et. al., *The Study Quran*, 1028-1029.

special standards. However, “*Be not overly soft in speech*, though addressed to the wives of the Prophet, is also understood as counsel for all Muslim women.”¹⁶⁶ The counsel means women should avoid flirtatious, affectionate speech, “as this can give rise to sexual desire.”¹⁶⁷ This verse (and the commentary on it) suggests that even a woman’s voice can be considered attractive so, as a function of her modesty and piety, she should avoid speaking softly or in a flirtatious manner.

In summary, most pre-colonial Muslim jurists and commentators agreed that the act of covering oneself is mandatory, and that this obligation is at least alluded to in the Quran. Opinions regarding the extent to which Muslims believe women should dress modestly, what defines modesty, and the relationship between dressing and behaving modestly as well as the cultivation of piety vary enormously.

Some scholars and many Muslims have wondered if it is permissible to wear a fashionable hijab. Shirazi explores this further in *Brand Islam*. She explains, that a number of “fundamentalist” fatwas have been issued relating to Islamic fashion and the hijab. Some fatwas condemn the production and sale of “designer burqas”¹⁶⁸ and others ban modeling or even “working in beauty salons.”¹⁶⁹ Again, we can observe the diversity of commentary and opinion surrounding women’s dress. An obsession with women’s dress (as I have also described in the introduction) is not reserved only for Muslim women, however, here I will focus on the expectations and ideals that many Muslim women perceive as valuable and required.

¹⁶⁶ Nasr, et. al., *The Study Quran*, 1028.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Shirazi, *Brand Islam*, 155.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 156.

I now turn briefly to an important distinction regarding the purpose of the hijab. It is common for non-Muslims to presume a relationship between belief and practice in which inner belief is not only prior to practice but also more fundamental. According to many scholars, “we need to go beyond the modernist concept of religion grounded in European Protestant tradition that considers inner belief and faith as the mainstay of religion, with external forms, such as ritual practices and material culture as marginal phenomena.”¹⁷⁰ For example, it is a common assumption that the external practice of wearing the hijab is only an expression of internal religious belief. While the hijab serves as a symbol of their religious conviction and faith for many women, for others, the outward act of veiling also plays an active, rather than solely symbolic, role. Tarlo and Moors explain that ritual practice and performativity such as covering one’s head and hair can be a process of actively creating a modest and pious self rather than simply representing one. The authors summarize Saba Mahmood’s work with women in the mosque movement in Cairo, stating that “...outward behavior and bodily acts were crucial means by which to realize or bring about a desired inner state of being, for it is through the repeated performance of such practices that a virtuous self is produced.”¹⁷¹ In this case, the act of veiling was part of the “technologies of the self” through which a virtuous and modest self was cultivated.¹⁷²

Mahmood expands on this relationship by explaining how the Muslim women she worked with understood the reciprocal relationship, stating

¹⁷⁰ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 5.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Michael Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) 16-49.

[T]he pious subjects of this book posit a very different relationship between outward bodily acts (including rituals, liturgies, and worship) and inward belief (state of the soul)... Not only are the two inseparable in their conception, but, more importantly, belief is the product of outward practice, rituals, and acts of worship rather than simply an expression of them.¹⁷³

In this way, the external practices (like wearing a hijab) can be understood to create and influence the state of the soul. In *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, Tarlo and Moors apply this concept to Euro-American Muslim hijab and fashionable hijabi women today. The authors explain that Mahmood's ideas about the influence of external practice, specifically dress, is not only applicable to religious practices. Instead, they explain that, "Concerning the relationship between dress and subjectivity," Daniel Miller, "[argues] that clothing is not simply 'a form of representation, a semiotic sign or symbol of the person [but] plays a considerable and active part in constituting the particular experience of the self.'"¹⁷⁴ In this way, the concept that our actions influence and shape our inner selves expands into contemporary discussions regarding hijabista movements and Islamic fashion in Muslim minority contexts today. It is important to take into consideration the many functions and purposes that the hijab might serve in reference to creating and constructing a self, specifically a modest and pious self. This is illustrated by fashionable hijabi women and their voices today.

There are countless perspectives and opinions about what it means to be modest, among Muslims and non-Muslims. It is common among Muslim women and men to believe that

¹⁷³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, XV.

¹⁷⁴ Miller qtd. in Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 5.

an Islamic interpretation of modesty (derived from the pre-colonial interpretations discussed above) involves more than simply dressing so as one is covered. Tarlo and Moors explain that

The idea that dress is a visible indicator of the piety and moral worth of the wearer is constantly undermined by the suggestion that the wearing of particular forms of covered dress is insufficient if don't with the wrong intent and if the wearer cannot live up to the moral expectations linked to particular garments.¹⁷⁵

I will discuss this further when I analyze some of the perspectives of modesty voiced by Muslim women near the end of this chapter. To summarize, modesty is considered to be an ideal that governs not only how one dresses, but also how one acts, behaves, and speaks. This is easily observed in critiques of Muslim activists and models. For example, Linda Sarsour, a progressive political activist who wears the hijab, has been critiqued by Muslims for her public behavior, with some claiming, "That's not how a Muslim woman should act."¹⁷⁶ In addition, figures like Noor Tagouri (the young journalist featured in *Playboy*) and Mariah Idrissi (the young model featured in the H&M advertisement campaign) have faced harsh criticism from other Muslims for being immodest and attention-seeking even though they have remained completely covered. Idrissi addresses criticism in an interview with CNN saying "I don't know how much more modest I could have been... even my face was covered with sunglasses... I had nothing on show except for what is permissible."¹⁷⁷ She goes on to explain that, "In terms of modeling and

¹⁷⁵ Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, "Introduction," *Fashion Theory*, 11:2-3, 133-141 (2007).

¹⁷⁶ Alan Feuer, "Linda Sarsour Is a Brooklyn Homegirl in a Hijab," *New York Times*, August 7, 2015, accessed March 28, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/nyregion/linda-sarsour-is-a-brooklyn-homegirl-in-a-hijab.html?_r=0.

¹⁷⁷ Monica Sarkar, "H&M's latest look: Hijab-wearing Muslim model stirs debate," *CNN Style*, August 26, 2016.

not being modest... that's an opinion," and that, "I believe the way that I was modeling was completely modest."¹⁷⁸ Nura Afia (the beauty blogger featured by CoverGirl) was criticized for her use and promotion of makeup products, even though she wore the hijab and modest clothes covering everything but her hands and face.¹⁷⁹ In an interview Afia described some of the criticism she received saying "A lot of people say that I shouldn't wear makeup because beautifying yourself is kind of the opposite of covering yourself [with a hijab]. But that's what helps me. It has helped me feel confident in wearing a hijab and I feel like if it has helped me it will help other people, [too]. It's my way of expressing [myself]."¹⁸⁰ These criticisms support the idea that modesty as a value within Islam is more than dressing modestly, and includes behavior, speech, and actions. The critics are employing a pre-colonial conception of modesty, while the hijabista women are offering a more complicated, and modern interpretation of what it means to behave and dress modestly. Furthermore, the hijabista claim seems to rely on the Protestant conception of religion I described above: that internalized belief is prior and more fundamental, than external actions, as a scale by which to measure modesty. However, the hijabistas replies also demonstrate the significance of and the extent to which modesty has been externalized in symbolic dress; each woman said that she was covered. Afia's response shows how she performs modesty in a way that allows her to wear makeup and in a way that reconstructs modesty so that it can be interpreted, not in conflict with beauty, but in compliment.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Mi-Anne Chan, "This Muslim Blogger Makes an Important Statement About Beauty," *Refinery29*, November 9, 2015.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

The women that have been criticized have expressed the same sentiment, that the purpose of the hijab is more than representational, and that ideals of modesty and piety require more than the act of veiling. For example, Mariah Idrissi a model for H&M discussed in the previous chapter, has explained her perspective regarding the hijab at length. In an interview with CNN, Idrissi clearly states that, “Hijab isn’t a fashion.” She explains that, “We can adjust it to fashion but we have to remember that the sole purpose of the hijab is to be modest.”¹⁸¹ She goes on to explain what it means to value and enact modesty:

As long as it meets the guidelines and criteria of what is acceptable as hijab, which is basically covering everything except for your face and your hands, then you can be as fashionable as you want. I mean there still has to be that element of modesty in terms of the way you act, which is again a part of hijab, and that’s for men as well. Modesty isn’t just limited to like covering my head right now, it’s about how you cover your whole body, it’s about how you speak, how you talk to others- everything.¹⁸²

Idrissi’s all-encompassing definition of what it means to be a pious and modest Muslim is reiterated by many young hijabi women today. Hijabistas in the Rutgers University video *Hijabi World* cite their religious values as primary reasons that they wear the hijab and that this practice extends further than simply veiling. Idrissi takes her description of modesty a step further when she discusses the inner practice of modesty. She says, “If you know you haven’t corrected your inside first there’s no point in putting a hijab on for the fashion side of it... Because then you’re defeating the object.”¹⁸³ Here, Idrissi explains the connection between

¹⁸¹ Monica Sarkar, “H&M’s latest look: Hijab-wearing Muslim model stirs debate,” *CNN Style*, August 26, 2016.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

inner belief and conviction and outer practice. While the hijab reminds women to be modest, it is not enough. The inner belief and practice of modesty is emphasized and highlighted as not only complimentary, but necessary for proper external practice. In this way, the primacy of inner belief and outer practice is complicated, however the two are tied together and “inseparable in their conception.”¹⁸⁴ The connection between inner belief and outward performance is used by hijabistas to explain how they are performing modesty while at the same time expressing their identities through fashion and style.

Hijabistas and fashionable young Muslim women in Muslim-minority contexts are voicing their choice to wear the hijab and linking the practice to their faith. Hamna, a girl featured in *Hijabi World*, described her decision to veil stating, “I felt a spiritual high and I felt like it was my time.”¹⁸⁵ The sisters and co-founders of the hijabista company, Vela, also discussed the religious reasons they veil. One of the women who attended the 2015 Fashion Fighting Famine fashion show featuring Vela designs, told KCET, “I love colors and I love bright clothes, but I think being modest is beautiful. It shows that I have a strong faith, and I want to wear the scarf because it reminds me of God.”¹⁸⁶ These examples illustrate the significance of religion and the ideal of a cultivation of piety for young Muslim women in their decision to veil. The ideal is modernized through the fashionable trends and preferences of hijabistas.

The relationship between modesty as an Islamic value embodied by practices like wearing the hijab is clearly complicated in many ways. The Quran does not explicitly describe

¹⁸⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xv.

¹⁸⁵ Winokur and Kashi, *Hijabi World*, “What American Women Who Wear Hijab Want You to Know,” August 26, 2016.

¹⁸⁶ Lilledeshan Bose, “Hijabistas: Inside the World of Muslim-American Fashion,” *KCET: Community Arts*, June 6 2012.

wearing the hijab as a requirement. More importantly, the new ways that women have adopted the hijab have created an expression through which Muslim women have redefined the performance of modesty and piety. Post-colonial traditions ought to be differentiated from pre-colonial interpretations of the Quran to facilitate easier analysis. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the complicated connection between these texts and religious practice; the latter does not always map on to the former neatly. In addition, the reasons women chose to veil are complex and understanding them in some cases requires a new perspective of performativity and inner belief. Above all, it is important to look at the ways that Muslims are expressing themselves and which part of their identity they chose to share. In some cases, modest dress plays an active role in the creation and performance of a pious self and serves as an external representation of this self. In these ways, the hijab, and hijabista fashion are revealing the religious significance that many Muslim women attribute to their choice to veil, and function as an attempt to redefine the ideal modest and pious Muslim women.

Conclusion

In this final chapter, I first summarize the fundamental assumptions about conspicuously Muslim women, especially in Muslim-minority contexts. These assumptions include the belief that Muslim women are oppressed, and that the hijab (or other forms of veiling) are symbols of that oppression. I will review contemporary examples of discrimination against veiled Muslim women in these contexts. I will then discuss the evidence, provided in the previous three chapters, supporting the claim that, through the development of hijabista fashion, hijabi women are actively combatting discrimination and the assumption that veiled Muslim women are oppressed. In addition, many young Muslim women are lobbying for representation in different social spheres, creating a new Islamic marketplace. Finally, I will problematize the narrative of liberation and empowerment that appears to be evident in these examples. While hijabista women have, in some cases, successfully confronted and denied the assumption that Muslim women are oppressed by a patriarchal and archaic religion, new market forces complicate their perceived progress. Ideals of liberation and individual autonomy are complicated by questioning the extent to which agency is attainable, especially in the face of capitalist and consumer forces. While it is essential to listen to the perspectives of Muslim women, it remains worthwhile, as analysts, to ask deeper questions. I conclude this thesis by posing some of these deeper questions, and gesturing toward avenues for future research.

In the introduction of this thesis, I discuss examples of Islamophobia in West, particularly the contemporary United States. In her book, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, Sophia Arjana defines “Islamophobia” as “the particularistic attitude toward Muslims that

scholars have often described as an aversion to or ‘anxiety of Islam.’”¹⁸⁷ Arjana’s book focuses on the conception of Muslims in Western culture as “monsters” and “the West’s *imaginaire* of Islam,” which she defines as “the idea of the Muslim as a frightening adversary, an outside enemy that doesn’t belong in modernity, who, due to an intrinsic alterity, must be excluded from the American and European landscapes.”¹⁸⁸ This thesis addresses the popularized “anxiety of Islam” and the ways in which this anxiety can be disproportionately focused on Muslim women, in part because hijabi women are distinctly visible in a minority contexts. Emma Tarlo discusses this further in her book, *Visibly Muslim*. She explains that in, “historic male-dominated Western traditions veiled and semi-veiled women from various Eastern and North African countries were represented as passive, exotic, oppressed and sensually alluring figures in need of protection and liberation.”¹⁸⁹ She continues to confirm that these discourses, “contributed to the building of long-lasting stereotypes,” and that today, Muslim women are represented as either victims or threatening terrorists.¹⁹⁰ Hijabista culture, and the increase of young, fashionable Muslim women wearing the hijab in new, stylish ways is, in many ways, a conscious rejection of this stereotype.

Through various forms of expression, hijabista women are using the hijab to reveal their agency, beauty, and religious values. They are presenting themselves as empowered with the freedom to choose. The chapters preceding this conclusion describe how young, Muslim

¹⁸⁷ Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the western imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*, 3.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

women, particularly those living in the United States, are revealing characteristics typically thought to be concealed by the hijab.

The first chapter of this thesis aims to complicate an idea of agency and its expression, at least to the extent that it should become clear that agency is not a simple concept and requires careful attention. Using Saba Mahmood's description of "willed submission" and highlighting the countless cultural factors that influence a person's desires and decisions, the concept of agency is shown to be intersectional and reconstructed. Examples of perspectives of modern hijabi women include the voices of women featured in the film *Hijabi World*, the cofounders of Vela scarves, and journalist Noor Tagouri (featured in *Playboy's* "Renegades" series). These examples highlight the ways that women have asserted their freedom to choose to wear the hijab as an actively agentic decision. The hijabista claim to agency (especially in response to Tagouri) is complicated by Nafisa Eltahir's argument that Muslim women feel pressured to appear normal in minority contexts where normalcy is defined by the majority.¹⁹¹ If women feel compelled to enact "normalcy" in a way that "fetishizes" their culture and values,¹⁹² then to what extent are their choices "free," and to what extent are they potentially "forced?" I discussed the example of women wearing the American flag as a hijab, and how these women are potentially forced to put their patriotism on display to be considered authentically and genuinely American. The issue is much broader than the case of Tagouri's feature in *Playboy*: we could ask similar questions about the commodification of Islamic values

¹⁹¹ Nafisa Eltahi, "Muslim Americans Should Reject the Politics of Normalcy," *Atlantic*, September 25, 2016.

¹⁹² Asma T. Uddin and Inas Younis, "Playboy's Interview with a Muslim woman mocks modesty and offends women," *Washington Post: Acts of Faith*, September 28, 2016.

and the commodification of these values in market economies. As companies initiate and expand the production of fashion lines targeting Muslim consumers, one might ask if the adoption of hijabista styles and the creation of a global Islamic fashion marketplace is a step toward positive representation. What sort of progress has been made toward empowerment? I will return to the questions of agency after summarizing the empowerment embodied by hijabi women through revealing their beauty and religious values.

The second chapter examines how women use the hijab to showcase their beauty in ways that are sensitive to particular Islamic conceptions of modesty. Contrary to certain strands of Islamic feminism¹⁹³, many of the women I've included in this study do not perceive a contradiction between displaying their beauty and wearing the hijab. In many ways, these women believe the hijab allows them to express themselves and be acknowledged and represented in novel ways. This representation takes the form of Muslim dolls, models featured in advertisements for worldwide, mainstream clothing lines (Mariah Idrissi with H&M), and models featured in American cosmetic campaigns (Nura Afia for CoverGirl). The inclusion of fashionable and beautiful hijabi women in mainstream Euro-American media is often seen as a positive and empowering step toward tolerance and acceptance. Many hijabistas place an emphasis on this representation, citing the importance of feeling included especially for young girls wearing the hijab. The belief that mainstream representation will lead to inclusion and the acceptance of difference, especially in minority contexts like the United States, is widespread. Models like Idrissi and Afia have been criticized by those who believe modeling or wearing

¹⁹³ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). Ahmed provides one example of an opposing and complicated perspective on the historically and politically-charged meaning of the hijab.

makeup is un-Islamic. This criticism is closely tied to the third chapter which discusses modesty and piety as Islamic ideals revealed through hijabista culture. It remains true that this phenomenon of representation leading to acceptance is complicated by market forces. To what extent is representation by major brand names positive, and where does it border on exploitation? There is a danger of being subsumed in a global homogenized culture, and a threat of losing individual and group identity in this transformation.

In the third chapter, I explore how the process of wearing the hijab in modern and fashionable ways in Muslim minority contexts like the United States has evolved into the redefinition of a performance of modesty and piety. For some Muslim women, the personal experience of wearing the hijab also functions as a performance of values held to be Islamic, especially piety. Tarlo and Moors explain, “it is not uncommon to find individual women who express both arguments, suggesting that covering is both the means to produce a pious self and an expression of that piety.”¹⁹⁴ This refers to the concept of habitus, or how the body shapes an interior state. If we can extract ourselves from the assumption that belief is logically prior to practice, then we can begin to appreciate this dynamic relationship and acknowledge that piety and modesty as values are both created and revealed through modern techniques of wearing the hijab. In the third chapter, I also examine key passages in the Quran and how these texts inform Muslim understandings of modesty and piety as core values. I also review examples of hijabista women and their perspectives on modesty and the religious nature of the hijab, especially in a fashion-conscious, Muslim-minority context.

¹⁹⁴ Tarlo and Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, 6.

In these ways, Muslim women have appropriated the hijab into a discourse about empowerment and liberal choice, one that rejects the hijab as a symbol of oppression. Hijabista women have constructed a platform and utilized new spaces to assert their liberation and advocate for a modernized understanding of the ways that the veil can be a tool through which women reveal agency, style, personality, and religious values. The hijabista approach has been critiqued and questioned by non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The “politics of normalcy” are questioned regarding Tagouri featured in *Playboy*. In addition, models like Idrissi and Afia face criticism from people claiming their actions are hypocritical. Criticisms like these function on a global level (as does hijabista culture, although it is manifested in different ways). Kubra Dagli is a 20-year-old Taekwondo champion from Turkey who wears the hijab. She became known not only for her success in the sport, winning first place with a teammate in the Taekwondo Championships in Peru in 2016,¹⁹⁵ but also because she did so while wearing a headscarf. Dagli has also faced criticism (and received praise) for competing while wearing a hijab. She insists that wearing the hijab is her right and that commentators should focus on her athletic ability.¹⁹⁶ Hijabista women including models, designers, college students, and athletes have defended their actions against criticism in a way that reclaims their independence and empowerment. However, the conversation does not end here. There are more questions to ask regarding the structures in which these women find themselves, and the reality of liberal autonomy.

¹⁹⁵ Bethan McKernan, “Hijab-wearing Taekwondo champion divides opinion in Turkey,” *Independent*, October 20, 2016, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkey-hijab-taekwondo-champion-kubra-dagli-response-a7371831.html>.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

After removing themselves from the persistent narrative of patriarchal domination and religious oppression, hijabista women face a new structural impediment to autonomy, namely global capital. The global rise in an economic interest in hijabi fashion and Islamic dress, coupled with questions regarding authenticity and agency, work to complicate the narrative for Muslim women. Muslim women find themselves now in a new structural system where companies are profiting off narratives of “freedom.” For example, in March of 2017, Nike announced the Nike Pro Hijab, “the brand’s first hijab for athletes and the first ever available on a mass-market scale,” to be released in 2018.¹⁹⁷ The announcement quickly gained widespread coverage, especially across the United States. While some might expect Nike’s announcement to be groundbreaking because it represents the first sports hijab, this is false. Muslim athletes who wear the hijab know that various sports hijabs have been available for decades.¹⁹⁸ Mara Gubuan, co-founder of Shirzanan, a U.S.-based non-profit advocating for Muslim women in sports, also commented on the response to Nike’s announcement.¹⁹⁹ Gubuan observed, “It’s interesting that it’s [the Nike Pro Hijab] being presented as though Nike invented it, which of course is not true.”²⁰⁰ Even the popular website, *Muslim Girl*, posted a recent article identifying “6 Muslim Companies That Created Sports Hijabs Way Before Nike.”²⁰¹ Nicole Najmah Abraham, writing for *Muslim Girl*, explains, “Although the inclusion and diversity displayed by

¹⁹⁷ Natalie Weiner, “Nike’s Pro Hijab Is Huge For Muslim Women, But Not For The Reasons You Think,” *Belcher report*, March 13, 2017, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2697709-nikes-pro-hijab-is-huge-for-muslim-women-but-not-for-the-reasons-you-think>.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Nicole Najmah Abraham, “6 Muslim Companies that Created Sports Hijabs Way Before Nike,” *Muslim Girl*, March 14, 2017, accessed March 18, 2017, <http://muslimgirl.com/39454/nike-just-muslim-women-weve-already-done/>.

Nike is appreciated, they are about 13 years late to the Sport Hijab rights... Muslimah designers worldwide have already tackled this problem for the hijabi athlete."²⁰² These female Muslim athletes are pointing out that Nike's advocacy should not blur the fact that corporate interests are driving these trends. Rahaf Khatib is a marathoner and the first hijabi woman to be featured on the cover of a U.S. fitness magazine in fall 2016. Khatib explains that she questions why it took Nike so long to acknowledge hijabi athletes.²⁰³ She says, "Some of my friends are angry, because they feel like Nike is trying to capitalize on this demographic and the political atmosphere... They [Nike] feel like it's really cool right now to have advertising about equality and diversity."²⁰⁴ Muslim women's awareness of the role that global capital plays in shaping fashion sensibilities adds another layer of complexity to our discussion of agency.

Nike isn't the only large brand name to capitalize on the growing Muslim market, especially hijabista consumers and athletes. Other designers, like Dolce and Gabbana, have begun to make modest clothes specifically for Muslim consumers (including *abayas* and headscarves). In January of 2016, *Cosmopolitan* interviewed five Muslim women about their perspectives on the Dolce & Gabbana hijab and *abaya* collection released that month. One of the women *Cosmo* interviewed is Deena Mohamed (creator of the 'Qahera' webcomic featuring a hijabi superhero fighting oppression). Mohamed offered her insight regarding a marketing perspective of the new line. She explains that her first reaction was similar to some Muslim women in response to the Nike hijab. She explains that her initial reaction was:

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Natalie Weiner, "Nike's Pro Hijab Is Huge For Muslim Women, But Not For The Reasons You Think," *Belcher report*, March 13, 2017.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

So what? Abayas are already being sold here, and expensive abayas are also being sold here, and this is nothing new... It seems like an inevitability that big brands would begin catering to a “Muslim” market given the massive consumer base of not just the Arab Gulf, but other abaya-wearing Muslims worldwide.²⁰⁵

Mohamed continues to explain that she was surprised large brand names haven’t capitalized on such a large market in the past, and that from a “social perspective” she considers it interesting that, “a bigger company has finally prioritized profit over excluding Muslim women from its market.”²⁰⁶ While many women praised the availability of representation allowed by a large name like Dolce and Gabana, Mohamed’s argument highlights the complexities of a brand using the guise of “tolerance” and “acceptance” for profit.

Many women acknowledge the possibility of exploitation by large brands and still find positive and worthwhile causes in representation by companies like Nike (and H&M and CoverGirl). Muslim athletes hope that the financial means behind Nike helps fuel innovations in “modest activewear.”²⁰⁷ Shirin Gerami stated that, “Nike has the potential to use really high-tech fabrics, which could make a big difference.”²⁰⁸ Gerami also comments on the potential for visibility (and representation) for Muslim athletes. She explained that, “The thing that Nike brings is huge marketing that the smaller companies already tackling this problem don’t have.”²⁰⁹ Regarding the issue of representation, reporter Natalie Weiner explains that,

²⁰⁵ Prachi Gupta, “What 5 Muslim Women Think About Dolce & Gabbana’s New Hijab Line,” *Cosmopolitan*, January 22, 2016, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/news/a52535/muslim-women-respond-to-dolce-and-gabbana-hijabi-line/>.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Natalie Weiner, “Nike’s Pro Hijab Is Huge For Muslim Women, But Not For The Reasons You Think,” *Belcher report*, March 13, 2017.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

“Spokesmodels and glossy advertising can help to create a more nuanced understanding of Muslim culture as a whole, something that, even though it’s inevitably about money, has rarely felt more timely.”²¹⁰ This last point parallels those made by Nura Afia and Mariah Idrissi. That the inclusion of hijabi women in mainstream media helps to represent Muslim women and girls in a new and more positive light. While positive and accurate representation is a noble goal, some Muslim women are still questioning if it is worth the exploitation by market forces. We continue to face the question: are Muslim women being represented in a positive light, or is Nike using their bodies to sell products to an increasingly homogenized marketplace.

At the end of her article for *Muslim Girl*, Nicole Najmah Abraham makes a strong case to abstain from buying sport hijabs from Nike. She says, “It just makes sense to buy from Muslimah brands,” because these brands, “have already been working with hijabi athletes, hiring them in their advertising, being role models to the next generation of Muslim girl athletes, and catering exclusively to fit the Muslimah lifestyle.”²¹¹ Abraham continues to argue that the women working for Muslimah brands, “know what it feels like to want to be active and not compromise your modesty as a hijabi.”²¹² Finally, Abraham calls the female, Muslim consumer to action directly, to support Muslim brands. She explains that if Muslim buyers collectively spend their money, “\$170 billion dollar buying power”,²¹³ on small-brand Muslim designers then, “that’s more Muslim dollars supporting a Muslim woman or family, that hire

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Nicole Najmah Abraham, “6 Muslim Companies that Created Sports Hijabs Way Before Nike,” *Muslim Girl*, March 14, 2017.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

other Muslims in our communities.”²¹⁴ Abraham’s argument directly addresses hijabi women and asks them to avoid Nike’s capitalist trap by supporting Muslim brands and calling attention to smaller labels.

These examples illustrate the open-ended questions that the arch of this thesis has raised. The questions collectively consider the extent of human agency and the ways that we approach agency and self-expression. It is important to ask to what extent the system of market forces is oppressive, and to what extent do capitalist agendas function to construct these narratives (and identities). In addition, one might ask, to what extent is this process necessary for Muslim women to be received as agentive and independent in American society? Furthermore, have these narratives narrowed the options for Muslim women to express their religious values and piety? In addition to these, I acknowledge three essential questions posed by Wendy Brown and Lila Abu-Lughod in the first chapter. These questions included, (1) to what extent is all freedom (not just the desire for freedom) culturally conditioned and dependent? (2) In what ways are Muslim American women’s experiences and expressions of agency related to the normalizing of cultural and religious difference? And perhaps most importantly, (3) what is lost in an obsession with human agency, and what is lost in the supposedly necessary blending of traditions like that of Islamic and American culture? These are worthwhile questions to consider especially in further discussions about the importance and function of Islamic fashion, personal expression, and agency.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

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