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*Faith, Fashion, Feminism: Interrogating the Islamic
Veil in Contemporary Britain*

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Faith, Fashion, Feminism
Interrogating the Islamic Veil in Contemporary Britain

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Abstract

The Islamic veil has become one of the most controversial sartorial items of the contemporary milieu and an ultimate symbol of unwanted British otherness. Fuelled by political and media preoccupation with the subject, the resentment towards Islamic veiling is grounded in partial and often erroneous representations of a 'veiled woman' as on the one hand being a passive victim of patriarchal oppression and on the other hand being an active threat to British security and identity. Based upon a two-year multi-sited ethnographic study, this thesis contests such static images of the veil. By deploying ethnographic interviewing, participant observation and an analysis of the British mainstream press, social media, policies and artistic representations, it explores veiling as experienced by British Muslim women from diverse backgrounds.

The central focus of this work is to accentuate the various implications that veiling carries for the everyday lives and identities of Muslim women in Britain. This thesis places a special emphasis on exploring intimate sentiments for veiling: the very reasons for adopting the hijab as well as perceptions of spirituality, modesty and beauty. Arising from these different and often contradictory perspectives held by Muslim women, the veil is not perceived as a rigid structure that is imposed on an individual. It is rather viewed as an altering, hybrid and antagonistic concept that is largely dependent on personal negotiations and appropriations.

Whilst emphasising the role of female agency in shaping the semiotics of the veil, this thesis simultaneously examines how personal values, meanings and social relations are shaped by broader social, political and religious discourses regarding the veil. This thesis thus critically observes how and when the Islamic veil appears in fashion, pop culture, art, public politics, legal rhetoric and the media and the ways in which such representations influence Muslim women themselves. Subsequently, the ever-transforming meanings of the veil are observed at the intersection of conflicting processes, shaped by representations, British and European political dynamics and the women themselves.

Acknowledging such divergent forces, ethnographic accounts are contextualised within the macro perspective of British society and its practical challenges. This thesis, hence, aims to contribute to the field of anthropology of religion, gender, fashion and citizenship with a timely case study. Close-up ethnographic accounts and anthropological contextualisation of the topic moreover offer a profound insight into the public polemics regarding the place of the Islamic veil in British society, with the issue being rethought from an emic perspective of women who continue to be conspicuously absent from public discourses on the subject.

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Declaration

The work and contents of this thesis have not been submitted elsewhere for any other degree or qualifications.

Statement of Copyright

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Glossary

Baju kurung	A symbolic traditional costume in Malaysia that is very important in the fashion industry.
Burqa	An enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions to cover themselves in public.
Burkini	A type of modesty swimsuit for women.
Chador	A large piece of cloth that is wrapped around the head and upper body leaving only the face exposed.
Desi	A loose term for the people, cultures, and products of South Asia and their diaspora.
Eid	An Islamic religious holiday.
Fatwa	A ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority.
Fitna	Unrest or rebellion, especially against a rightful ruler.
Hadith	One of various reports describing the words, actions, or habits of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.
Halal	Any object or action which is permissible to use or engage in, according to Islamic law.
Haram	Forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law.
Hijab	Multiple meanings: veil; any head, face, or body covering worn by Muslim women that conforms to a certain standard of modesty; the seclusion of women and men in the public sphere (see Chapter III for further conceptualisations of the term).
Hijabi	A woman wearing/observing the hijab.

Ijtihad	Independent reasoning.
Imam	The title of a worship leader of a mosque and Muslim community.
Inshallah	The Arabic language expression for "God willing" or "if God wills."
Jahiliya	Ignorance of divine guidance, also Arabia before Islam.
Jilbab	Any long and loose-fit coat or garment worn by some Muslim women.
Keffiyeh	A gender-neutral chequered black and white scarf; also a symbol of Palestinian nationalism.
Masha Allah	An Arabic phrase translating as "God has willed", expresses appreciation, joy, praise, or thankfulness for an event or person that was just mentioned.
Munafiqun	Hypocrites; a group decried in the Quran as outward Muslims who were secretly unsympathetic to the cause of Muslims.
Niqab	A cloth that covers the face as a part of sartorial hijab.
Niqabi	A woman wearing the niqab.
Purdah	The practice in certain Muslim and Hindu societies of 'screening' women from men or strangers.
Ramadan	The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, and is observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting.
Revert	A person who has converted to the Islamic faith.
Salat	It is a physical, mental, and spiritual act of worship that is observed five times every day at prescribed times.
Sari	A long piece of cloth that is wound around the body to make a dress and is usually worn with a fitted top and a petticoat.

Shalwar Kameez	A suit consisting of loose trousers and long shirt or dress.
Shia	Muslims who believe Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, to be his rightful heir.
Sunni	The mainstream sect of Islam.
Surah	A chapter of the Qur'an.
Tob	A traditional Sudanese dress, a 15-foot long piece of material wrapped around the body worn by both men and women.
Umma	The Muslim community.

Preface: The Hijab Tax

“My friend has this theory which she calls the hijab tax. If you wear the hijab, you have to pay the tax. Say, if I wear the hijab, I have to be a happy person, otherwise people think I’m a crazy psychopath who wants to blow things up.”

–Hannah

Hannah is a British hijabi, and one of the young women we will get to know during the course of this thesis. Her theory of the hijab tax stems from and reflects several decades' worth of experiences that veiled Muslim women have lived in the United Kingdom, their struggles, coping strategies, creative subversions and intimate reflections. Hannah and other women who will be presented in this thesis have all paid the inevitable hijab tax in their own way; when applying for jobs, going about their daily business, partaking in activist engagement or exploring their sexuality, for example. Their stories reiterate over and over again how being a visibly Muslim woman comes with innumerable challenges. Their accounts also demonstrate that a relatively small piece of cloth is a powerful emblem which has transcended the realm of religion and spirituality. In twenty first-century Britain it is an omnipotent political, cultural, social and religious insignia with strong symbolic power.

It is precisely the symbolic power that the hijab holds in contemporary societies that has inspired this thesis. During my master’s studies, I was closely following the events that took place in France in 2011, which controversially resulted in the inaugural European ban on the face veil in public spaces. It was not the populist demagoguery and the warped ideas of liberalism that shocked me back then; it was the conspicuous absence of the voices of women who were at the centre of these debates. Women who had been actively co-creating French society – as French

citizens, permanent residents or visitors – had their voices ignored and trodden on by the politicians, activists, imams and self-proclaimed community leaders whom the mainstream media and politics found better-placed to comment on the oppression, liberation and rights of veiled women.

At the time, I was working on an EU-MENA media project, editing a feminist radio programme, and felt nostalgic about the year I had spent studying abroad in Turkey. The events in France brought together a plethora of fields that interested me, and I could not stop thinking about various nuances of the burqa ban polemics that called for further reflection. I was wondering about the feminist arguments, I was interested in how the meanings of the hijab and the niqab travel through time and space, and how women cope with the aftermath of the ban and with increasing Islamophobia. I decided to write an article for a newspaper I was working for at the time. As my desk research unfolded, the volume of data and further questions quickly exceeded the word count and rigidity of a single article...

Fast forward three years, I am sitting in a Brick Lane cafe with Hannah and a friend. By now, I have interviewed over two dozen women and read, thought and written about the hijab for nearly two years. Chatting to Hannah defies a single story of the hijab and its wearers that is commonly reinforced by the media and political discourses: the one focusing on Muslim women as oppressed victims of an aggressive religion and corresponding political regimes. A conversation with Hannah throws into relief alternative experiences of veiling and observing the hijab. She speaks about how the hijab manifests her faith, fashion and feminism.

Hannah is well aware that wearing the hijab comes with 'the tax'. Centuries of colonialism, decades of Western military interventions and years of fearing internal enemies have all contributed to deeply-rooted stereotypes and biases

which are exhibited by everyday Islamophobia and institutionalised discrimination against Muslim women. But Hannah has, just like her fellow hijabis in the UK and beyond, developed multiple coping strategies and subversive responses to challenge and change the status quo and promote alternative readings of the hijab. It is precisely these creative responses and diversified meanings of veiling that lie in the focus of this ethnographic account. I hope reading it will be half as interesting as years of researching it with the help of fascinating women have been.

Chapter I: Introduction

Terrorism, oppression, fundamentalism and victimhood are only a few of the buzzwords that inevitably accompany discussions about Islamic headgear. The Islamic veil has become one of the most controversial sartorial items of contemporary milieu and an ultimate symbol of unwanted British otherness. Fuelled by political and media preoccupation with the subject, the veil is frequently framed as a piece of cloth imposed on an individual by her religion and culture. But beyond the oft-peddled static images of oppressed and depressed Muslim women, the reality is far more dynamic. In multicultural Britain in particular, women of all ages, ethnicities and economic backgrounds purposefully don the hijab. Many see it as an important element of modern British female identity and a powerful manifestation of faith, fashion and feminism.

It is thus clear that the hijab cannot be perceived as a simple garment, but has to be considered in the context of the multiplicity and fluidity of the meanings that it holds for those who observe it as well as their families, communities and societies. For a majority of women, embracing the hijab is not just about a particular sartorial presentation but about a set of visual, spatial and ethical guidelines with which they comply in their search for deeper spirituality. In the context of the current political climate determined by the ongoing war on terror and subsequent Islamophobia, the hijab can also transform into a compelling tool for campaigning and resistance. For some other women, wearing the hijab brings them closer to their cultures and countries of origin. These are indeed just some of the reasons from a non-exhaustive lists of possibilities.

Whilst the hijab is celebrated as a positive and important practice and symbol by many, it continues to generate controversy at home and globally. Building upon the remnants of colonialism, various Western foreign interventions in recent decades have additionally fanned the negative imagery linked to Islamic practices of veiling. The hijab subsequently remains entangled in the semiotic webs of female oppression, international terrorism and threats at home. These meanings contribute towards moulding public opinion on the veil, and affect the ways in which women and their communities perceive themselves and respond to these opinions in order to overcome innumerable challenges. Unavoidably, this results in changing practices, attitudes and meanings.

It is precisely this tension and these metamorphoses that have inspired this thesis, which explores multiple and rapidly transforming practices, meanings and attitudes towards the hijab in contemporary Britain. Indeed, similar scholarly projects have been carried out, and have been sprouting especially visibly in recent years, following 9/11, the 2005 London bombings and the recent series of terrorist attacks claimed by ISIS. For example, Emma Tarlo has offered a rich anthropological insight into the dynamic veiling practices of Londoners and Muslim fashion in Britain and elsewhere (2007, 2010, 2013); Reina Lewis, too, has documented the diversified field of the Muslim fashion industry and its multiple meanings (2013; 2015); Sara Silvestri has analysed British women's perspectives on burqa bans (2008; 2012); Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor has written about the place of the hijab in Muslim feminism and the construction of British identities (2011, 2012), with many other scholars exploring the role of the hijab from different angles.

Instead of focusing on one locality I wanted to look into the broader geographical scope of Britain, and rather than investigating a single area of research, I was interested in delving into a plurality of different meanings that are constituted by

and are constitutive of the symbolic practice of veiling. I felt that no discipline could serve this purpose better than anthropology. With its rich theoretical corpus and methodological approaches, anthropology is well-positioned to explore veiling practices from an emic Muslim female perspective.

Rather than peaking behind closed doors and veils, I consciously decided to work with the breadth and wealth of accounts that are available publicly, and to listen to female voices that wanted to be heard. By doing so, I wished to acknowledge years of Muslim feminist engagement, activism and creativity, and the impact they have made in British society. I envisaged to contextualise those various voices, different experiences and multiple nuances of veiling into a single timely study, situated in the specific context of turbulent changes in the British political and social landscape. Against this time- and space-specific backdrop, the ambition of my research is to investigate personal sentiments for wearing the veil from British Muslim women and to explore these individual experiences in the context of contemporary United Kingdom.

In order to address this ambition, this thesis follows two specific aims. Firstly, my study aims to locate the Islamic veil within the social milieu of contemporary Britain, and to do so, I will analyse public responses towards the various forms of the veil which women wear in the United Kingdom. Secondly, I will explore the personal dimension of veiling in the UK by engaging the perspectives of Muslim women, to understand their motivations for veiling, and the significance the veil holds for them. In doing so, I will specifically focus on the alternative readings of the Islamic veil that go against the grain in relation to the political discourses which dominate the mass media and thematise the veil as a tool of oppression. These aims and objectives will funnel back to the overarching themes of this thesis: faith, fashion and feminism. These three concepts will be observed, questioned and analysed from various vantage points.

This introductory chapter will establish the research foundations for the thesis. I will outline some of the thoughts and challenges behind constructing the ethnographic field(s) and selecting a diverse group of respondents. I will also explore the rationale behind choosing and developing specific methodological approaches, alongside some ethical dilemmas that emerged when putting them into practice. Finally, I will introduce the structure of this thesis and outline the themes of the upcoming chapters.

1.1 The complexity of the field(s)

Traditionally, anthropological fieldwork involves the total immersion of the researcher in the field setting, typically located within a single community, for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for at least a year (Ellen, 1984: 66; Whitehead 2005). Influenced by such classic conceptualisations of fieldwork, I was initially hoping to contour my research project in a way that would comply with textbook requirements and recommendations for ethnographic work. However, I was struggling to identify a single community which would suit the purposes of the study and its focus on the dynamism of the veil located in the plurality of meanings and motifs, disparities of religious and political engagement, and metamorphoses of its practices.

Whilst I was indeed interested in local changes in the practices of observing the hijab, I did not feel that the conventional single-site *mis-en-scene* of ethnographic research could respond to the needs of my research aims. It was thus necessary to reconsider the the traditional sites of ethnographic fieldwork and seek more suitable alternatives for the purposes of this particular project (see Marcus, 1995: 99). I eventually decided to move out from the single site and an

explicitly local research setting to embrace a multi-sited ethnographic research design, which followed women, events and projects across the UK. Rather than settling for a specific geographical area, I let the research project take unexpected trajectories in “tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity” (Marcus, 1998:34).

I decided to limit the geographical scope of my study to Great Britain.¹ The overwhelming majority of my activities and interviews took place in England, with only a few of them conducted in Wales and Scotland. Most of my engagement was focused on Britain's major urban centres, particularly London, Birmingham and Manchester. As I lived in Durham and London whilst undertaking my research, the most significant proportion of ethnographic activities took place locally; in the North East of England – more specifically in Newcastle, Darlington and Durham – and in London. Further research, especially interviews and participant observation, was also undertaken in Cardiff, Bristol, Edinburgh, Leicester, Liverpool, Cambridge and Oxford.

Pursuing multi-sited research allowed me to investigate the twofold processes of global-local exchanges. I was able to observe how certain local events influence wider communities and, in turn, how particular global events are reflected in the lived experiences of local communities. For example, in one of the chapters, I explore how the global fashion industry and trends are consumed, embedded and appropriated in the everyday styles of British hijabis. In the same chapter, I also observe how London-based designers whom I interviewed for the purpose of this research influence broader fashion trends among Muslim and non-Muslim women globally, from the Persian Gulf countries to the US. Especially when scrutinising transnational symbols such as the hijab, observing such exchanges in

¹ My fieldwork was conducted exclusively in Great Britain, namely in England, Scotland and Wales. However, I often speak about the United Kingdom more generally, especially when I refer to policies and the media.

global, political, marketing, cultural and social circuits can be particularly significant. Having not opted for a multi-sited approach, grasping the interconnectedness of these multiple processes at local, national and global level would not have been possible. It is only with this wider temporal and spatial scope offered by a multi-sited research design that I was able to capture the circulation of objects, meanings and identities (Marcus, 1998: 34).

A multi-sited approach has also enabled me to avoid some non-ignorable logistical constraints. As my study features women who work, study and live an active family life, engaging in participant observation for a prolonged period of time, such as a year, would hardly have been appropriate. For example, following women to their offices and lecture halls would not be possible, whilst staying with them for an extensive period of time might have caused inconvenience for them and their intimate social circles. The same practical obstacles are also recognised by David and Craven (2016) in their discussion of the challenges faced by feminist ethnographers, which outlines a new ethnographic trend of researchers no longer spending years in one location undertaking research, but instead designing ethnographic projects which are of a shorter duration, or involve research across various locations (*ibid.*: 102). By drawing on anthropologist Susan Erikson and her research on global health across several continents and with various constituencies on the topic of reproductive imaging, David and Craven further underline the importance of making strategic choices about where to conduct research, arguing that the lived experiences of research participants should guide those decisions (*ibid.*).

In addition to multiple geographical sites around Great Britain, I identified one field site that did allow me to partake in participant observation at all times – the Internet. I argue that it is impossible to speak about activism, social change, the circulation of symbols and urban cultures without acknowledging the importance

of online engagement. In the case of studying the hijab in contemporary Britain, the Internet plays a crucial role in forging meanings, identities and trends. Thus, utilising online environments, particularly the social media, as another research field(s) was unavoidable.

Drawing on Therese Tierney (2013: 81) and her writing on the public space of social media, I observed two important trends pertaining to online hijab communities. Firstly, I was interested in online social networks as an extension of 'real-life' interactions, based on geographical proximity and close contact, known also as strong bond. With their approval, I 'followed' and 'liked' my respondents online, consequently engaging in their lives and thoughts from the distance of my desk. Secondly, I also interacted with various niche or shared-interest groups. Based on knowledge and acquisition, these types of groups extend beyond "physical boundaries of neighbourhood to encompass national or global communities" (ibid.). From hijab fashion blogs to activist Facebook groups to feminist Twitter accounts, such niche groups provided an invaluable insight into activities of British hijabis and their place in wider global networks.

Whilst in the field from August 2013 to November 2014, my time was mostly split between Durham and London. When in Durham, I attended Friday sisters' circles at the Durham Islamic Society Mosque, frequented activities organised by the Newcastle-based organisations and attended interviews around the region. Every other week or so, I travelled to different parts of the UK. I normally organised my visits around various events and attempted to schedule interviews with respondents around those dates. I was particularly interested in meeting the same women at different locations and accompanying them on their travels. Throughout the entire duration of my fieldwork, I continued pursuing cyber ethnography and recording interviews online, mostly via Skype.

Despite its numerous advantages, I was aware that a multi-sited approach poses a number of ethnographic challenges and methodological anxieties, with the pivotal one lying in obtaining a profound and detailed corpus of qualitative data (Falzon, 2009; Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995). Being aware of the limitations of such an ethnographic approach, I ensured that I upheld the quality of the research by capitalising on the advantages of multiple locations. For instance, I observed the impact of living in a larger Muslim community as opposed to residing in a Christian-majority/secular social environment, compared veiling practices in different locations and explored whether Islamophobia is experienced similarly across the board, to mention just a few examples.

All in all, this research is the result of a multi-sited research project which took place in various locations around Great Britain, mostly in urban England. However, various additional sites were reached digitally, as the Internet presented a central research site for both interacting with respondents and engaging with niche hijab-related online communities.

1.2 The respondents

There are currently no statistics available about the estimated number of women who wear any type of Islamic headgear in the UK. The available statistics are limited to the findings of the 2011 census (UK Office of National Statistics, 2011; Statistics UK, 2012), which offers an estimated number of 2,706,066 Muslims residing in England and Wales, of whom 48% are women. According to the same census, Islam is the second largest religion in the United Kingdom with 4.5% of the total population identifying as Muslims. The majority of Muslims in the country live in England (2,660,116), whilst only a small proportion reside in

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The census further shows that Islam is the fastest-growing religious confession in the United Kingdom, as statistically the Muslim population increases at nearly ten times the rate of the non-Muslim population. Furthermore, the vast majority of British Muslims identify themselves as belonging to the Sunni denomination; Shia or Ahmadi denominations make up only a small minority. Ethnically, the British Muslim population comes from a variety of backgrounds, with the largest groups being Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, followed by Indians, Arabs, Kurds and Africans (ibid.).²

When designing my research, I wanted to capture this dynamic and varied demographic landscape of British Muslims by selecting respondents from different ethnic and class backgrounds. My research comprised 45 individual interviews and about 20 further interviews with various professionals and other individuals whose work or social engagement was relevant to the focus of this study. This number is not exact, as many of the interviews were informal and took place either at events or online, with some of them being limited to exchanging a couple of Facebook messages, or receiving a single email. Out of all the interviewees, one person was male and two people were non-Muslim. Nine interviewees, eight women and one man, were not British, and four of them did not reside in Britain – those interviewees were chosen due to their expertise on the subject; for example, some of them are artists whose work features at the beginning of each ethnographic chapter.

Out of 45 interviews with Muslim women, 30 women are of Asian origin. The women in this group identified as being of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Afghan, Maldivian, Iranian, Turkish and Bruneian backgrounds. Seven women

² The 2011 census provided a fixed number of ethnic categories from which people could choose, along with the additional option of 'Other'. It is thus not possible to have a more detailed break down of British Muslims' ethnic backgrounds.

identified themselves as Arab: Palestinian, Qatari, Yemeni, Omani, Egyptian and Algerian. Five respondents are from African backgrounds, namely of Somali and Nigerian descent. Moreover, three women are from white European backgrounds, two of them from Britain and one from Bosnia (see Image 1). The respondents' ages range from 17 to 45, with the majority of the women aged between 22 and 35. I focused on this age group due to their active engagement in social movements, fashion and other activities in the centre of this research. The respondents come from different socio-economic classes, namely working class and lower and upper-middle class. While English is not all respondents' first language, all interviews were conducted in English.

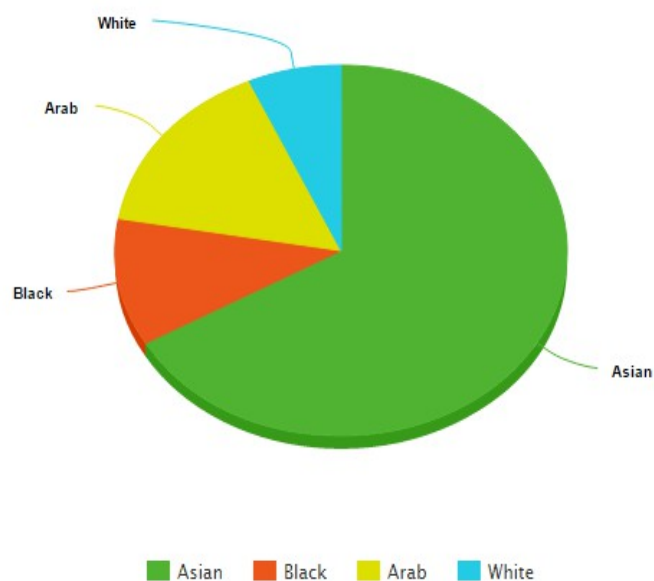


Image 1: Ethnic breakdown of respondents

I sought respondents through different formal and informal channels. Firstly, I opted for convenience or haphazard sampling, thus selecting respondents on the basis of their accessibility and willingness to participate in the research (Nkwi, 2015: 83; Russell Bernard, 2006: 192). I deployed my existing links with various Muslim women across the UK to engage the first batch of participants. I met

additional respondents by attending various events and I also wrote emails to faith-based organisations and Islamic societies at different universities, and asked the administrators of subject-specific Facebook groups, Google groups and forums to disseminate my open call among their members.

Whilst effective in reaching and engaging respondents, this approach only included women whom I knew or met coincidentally and thus excluded representatives of some of the groups whom I wished to include in my research project, for example niqab wearers or women of African descent. I reached these specific groups by utilising purposive or judgement sampling. According to Patton (2002: 230), the rationale and power of such sampling lies in ethnographic research selecting information-rich cases for study in depth." For example, by speaking to certain artists, activists or fashion designers, I was able to comprehend a great deal about some of the issues of central importance to this research. Moreover, I also selected additional respondents via so-called snowball sampling. This strategy enabled me to involve more respondents; "because the snowball process involves respondents nominating other respondents and identifying other possible chains of respondents, the likelihood of excluding is minimised" (Fagan quoted in Fleischer, 1995: 23).

Although I tried to encompass a plurality of voices and ensure that the diversity of British hijabis is reflected in the selection of my respondents, I do acknowledge that my sample of women by no means mirrors the eclectic group of women that this research project centres on. Reflecting the experiences of all British hijabis was never my intention. As already mentioned, the central aim of this project was to capture the diversity of views of cultural and personal meanings, practices and experiences that is exhibited by veiled women in Britain. Against this background, I developed a sampling system which allowed for the development and evaluation of a multitude of meanings and experiences (see Luborsky and

Rubinstein, 1995).

1.3 Designing the multi-method research

As shown above, the nature of this particular project requires various sources and multiple locations. Unavoidably, such a multi-sited ethnographic project is drawn towards employing the multi-method research design. Therefore, this research project transcends the traditional anthropological approach to fieldwork by expanding it to the analysis of various representations of the veil, ranging from media depictions to artistic portrayals, to opinions expressed on social media. Combining conventional ethnographic methods in the form of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with anthropological analyses of the secondary data allowed me to capture the multiple and diverse meanings of veiling in the context of Great Britain.

The enclosed table (see Table 1) details how different methods assisted in addressing different research aims and objectives. I shall now expand on the methods utilised and the ways in which they were deployed during my fieldwork.

Aims	Objectives	Corresponding methods
To locate the veil within the social milieu of contemporary Britain.	To examine differences and similarities in the perception of the veil and its various nuances by Muslim women.	Ethnographic interviews Participant observation Digital ethnography Visual ethnography
	To analyse public responses towards the various forms of the veil in the UK.	Critical discourse analysis Digital ethnography
To explore the personal dimension of veiling in the UK.	To provide the emic perspective of Muslim women in the UK on decisions for veiling or not veiling and meanings the veil conveys.	Ethnographic interviews Participant observation Digital ethnography Visual ethnography
	To identify how the veil influences the construction of identity and otherness as experienced by Muslim women.	Ethnographic interviews Participant observation

Table 1: Aims and objectives of this research, with corresponding methods which address them.

1.3.1 The vigilance of ethnographic interviewing

In *Anthropology of British Subjects*, Jenny Hockey (2002: 209) writes that with “heterogeneous and scattered” research sites, dire weather and “everything interesting [happening] behind closed doors”, anthropologists in Britain often need to negotiate “the fluidity and openness of participant observation” and reduce it to semi-structured interviews and focus groups, alongside documentary research. Studies based primarily upon interviewing have become prevalent in anthropology (Davies, 2012; Spradley, 1979), especially when conducted in time-

pressed and disperse Western urban contexts.

With this particular project facing such conditions, I decided to deploy ethnographic interviewing as a paramount research method. Although I initially anticipated only 30 interviews, the number eventually swelled due to a high volume of interesting individuals that continued appearing on my research radar. As already outlined, the interviews mostly centred on Muslim women wearing different types of Islamic headgear, from the headscarf to the full-face veil. All face-to-face interviews took place at a location of the respondent's choice, with some of the places including mosques, homes, offices, libraries, restaurants and cafes, university buildings and parks. Situating interviews into a known and comfortable environment increased the respondent's confidence and simultaneously enabled me as a researcher to observe and engage with people in their usual environment. Due to the familiarity of the place, the interviews tended to be informal and chatty, and occasionally also interrupted by other activities, such as children playing next to us or an acquaintance joining in. Rather than being an obtrusive nuisance, such spontaneous interruptions only added an additional ethnographic layer that prompted unexpected encounters and conversations.

The interview setting facilitated the creation of a dynamic conversational space that partially followed a predesigned trajectory, but at the same time allowed the respondents to co-create the conversation. Whilst the initial interviews were more rigid in their structure and covered all of the areas of interest identified in the pre-fieldwork research phase, I was continuously updating the questions and interviewing techniques as my research unfolded. I was eventually able to make quicker connections and comparisons, and offer examples and references which allowed me to engage in more profound conversations. In addition to semi-structured interview questions, I occasionally accompanied my interviews with a

set of photos, memes,³ tweets and newspaper articles which I showed to respondents to seek their responses. This interview approach proved to be especially useful for opening the interviewing sessions with more reserved respondents, encouraging them to open up, for reflecting on secondary sources tended to be an easier introduction than speaking about their own experiences would have been.

Nearly all interviews were recorded digitally using a voice recorder and directly transcribed in order to ensure the best possible accuracy of transmitting the conversations (Hollan, 1998). Some informal interviews were not recorded and whilst writing these up I had to rely on my own post-interviewing notes. I tried to omit any direct quotes when incorporating such data into the thesis. Moreover, having been awarded a faculty grant, I was able to record five women with a video camera. The filming took place in a series of locations and allowed me to capture not only words but also meaningful facial expressions, body language, hesitation and other expressions of the respondent's emotional and psychological state.

Following the advice by Les Back (2014), I did not rely exclusively on offering faithfully transcribed block quotations from interviews and instead paid more attention to contextual texture of the conversations with my respondents. As maintained by Polsky, "successful field research depends on the investigator's trained abilities to look at people, listen to them, think and feel with them, talk with them rather than at them" (1967: 119). Knowing that transcription is not description, I did not try to rely solely on recording technology to deliver my data

³ A meme is a term that was initially coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* to describe any ideas, behaviours or styles that spread from person to person within a culture. When I speak about memes in this thesis I refer to Internet memes - visual and textual messages that spread speedily from person to person via the Internet, largely through emails, blogs, forums, imageboards, social networking sites, instant messaging and video hosting services.

and convey the women's narratives. I stayed vigilant and attentive during my interviews, informal chats and other social interactions in order to capture the social vitality of the women.

1.3.2 Situating the interviews into broader contexts

In order to capture my respondents' vitality, participant observation was a crucial element when conducting interviews. Just as much as I focused on the words that were spoken, I equally paid attention to the ways in which things were said, the context in which they came to life and to things that were left unsaid. Although in most cases the time spent with respondents did not involve sufficiently prolonged interactions of traditional participant observation, the elements of participant observation remained strongly incorporated in the research design.

The principles of participant observation were implanted onto the methodological premises of the research in two principal areas. Firstly, the observatory practices were utilised at various events, mosque visits, home visits, conferences, Quranic sisters' circles, Friday sermons, protests and fashion shows, which allowed me to observe respondents' interactions in different settings. Whilst being actively involved in these activities as an (accepted) participant, I was able to witness "situated conversations" and "situated actions" within a compressed time period (Brockmann, 2011). I kept a notebook and a digital diary monitoring all significant situations and conversations. Secondly, I had the chance to accompany some of the women during their everyday activities in order to observe their interactions within their local community and majority British society. These activities developed an understanding about how the veil facilitates or hampers relations with the environment, with a special emphasis being placed on behavioural changes between the public and private spheres.

Additionally, I also experienced veiling myself. During my fieldwork, I embraced different types of headgear and full-body attire in different spatial and time contexts; I wore the hijab as part of 'hijab day' in Newcastle and took on the niqab for a short period of time in London. Although not being Muslim, and having no prior personal experience with Islamic veiling, this methodological approach enabled me to observe and experience the self-perception in the public sphere whilst wearing different types of veil. This practice also gave me a valuable opportunity to test the applicability of common anti-niqab arguments, such as the argument that the niqab obstructs efficient communication and everyday life activities, from driving to hearing properly. However, I did not incorporate the experiences of veiling into this thesis for a number of reasons. I strongly critique the need for a non-Muslim woman to embrace the hijab in order to convey the authentic experience of wearing it – an idea which will be reinforced when analysing the examples of common media reporting strategies. Moreover, this thesis will argue that the hijab transcends the physical and practical dimensions as an expression of faith, spirituality and belonging. It is due to these phenomenologies that the wearing of the hijab for a day would not render an acceptable or insightful experience.

1.3.3 Embedding and embodying the Internet

The role of the Internet and social media in forging and expressing contemporary socialities cannot be ignored, and it is thus not surprising that digital ethnographic methods are increasingly thrusting their way into the anthropological research corpus (Kozinets, 1998; Pink, 2009, 2012; Postill, 2010). Taking advantage of the Internet and its everyday presence in the lives of my respondents proved to be of paramount importance.

As suggested by Christine Hine (2015), various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, as well as blogs, vlogs⁴ and YouTube are commonly embedded into many different forms of fieldwork, as they offer a convenient way to sustain continuous contact with research respondents. Drawing on Schneidermann and her ethnographic study of hip hop in Uganda (2014), Hine explains how social media was vital to the practices and routines of the studied group and an integral part of the meaning of hip hop in their lives. Schneiderman thus found it essential to participate and observe the interplay between social media spaces and geographical spaces to comprehend the various forms of socialities and mobility that resulted. Social media, for her, provided an ongoing sense of co-presence with the field even when distant from it geographically. Moreover, social media helped her facilitate fieldwork visits to Uganda and also provided the contextual background, of a globally interconnected hip hop movement.

Following Schneiderman's example, I utilised social media for similar reasons. Employing social media has facilitated "a longitudinal dimension to the research" (Hine, 2015: 72) through its ability to sustain a close link with the respondents despite our physical distance and the impossibility of regular offline interaction. My Internet presence was crucial in creating a wider and profounder ethnographic context for framing the face-to-face encounters and interview narratives. Moreover, social media played a central role in engaging respondents, arranging interviews and visits, and following up with them post-fieldwork. Echoing Schneiderman, social media furthermore helped me to build a bigger global picture of the hijab movement, which offered an important insight into the circulation of identities, meanings, symbols and practices.

An additional significance of the Internet was recognised in its role in

⁴ Vlog is a portmanteau of video and blog.

contemporary activist movements. With this project being particularly attentive to existing activist engagement and listening to female voices, utilising a digital toolbox represented a paramount element of ethnographic inquiry. In that sense, the Internet enabled me to comprehend the breadth and diversity of activist and feminist voices online. I was able to analyse the digital traces of public conversations and activities captured in these cyber environments and observe interactions and experiences manifested through digital communications (see Kozinets, 1998).

1.3.4 The politics and aesthetics of visual imagery

A crucial part of the digital ethnography featured in this thesis was concerned with exploring, analysing and contextualising various images of the hijab and hijabis which are circulated online. In addition, I also collated visual representations of the hijab in offline settings, by attending exhibitions and museums during my fieldwork and tracing various images mentioned during the interviews and referenced by respondents online. Following Mookherjee's advice (2015: 178), my aim was to "track the circulatory transmission of these images and to trace their intertextual links with other depictions." In other words, I was interested in exploring the images of the hijab(is) at the triangulation of the processes of production, representation and perception of images.

In that sense, I did not perceive the meanings of various photographs, illustrations, drawings, paintings, street art murals, cartoons and Internet memes as intrinsic or representative of 'reality'. Instead, I treated them as ethnographic texts that are written in specific visual grammar codes which are unavoidably decoded differently by different recipients. When read anthropologically, these cultural texts assisted me in uncovering their wider cultural and social

significance and the ideological messages which they help to communicate, naturalise and maintain (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004: 6). At the same time I also acknowledged that analysing visual material is not limited to its semiotic side exclusively. Equally important for anthropological inquiry is the relational aspect of visibility. Images, just like any material objects, have agency (Gell, 1998) and a social life of their own (Appadurai, 1986). As such, they have the capacity to create their own socialities which can forge and maintain relationships. Taking this into account, I did not just 'read' visual texts but paid special attention to the ways in which people interact and 'socialise' with them.

In that respect, I echo the methodological guidelines outlined by Sarah Pink (2006). She points to an interdisciplinary body of literature, which highlights the importance of researching both the internal meaning of an image as well as examining how a certain image is made meaningful by those viewing it. Drawing from the work of Banks (2001), Lister and Wells (2001) and Rose (2001), Pink critiques a positivist approach to the visual which focuses on heavily observational practices and instead proposes a more contemporary methodology for interpreting visual images grounded in a multidisciplinary approach. She insists that researching visual imagery should be located at the intersection of four key areas, namely (I) the context of production, (II) the content of the image, (III) the contexts in which images are viewed and (IV) the materiality and agency of images (Pink, 2006: 29-32).

To sum up, I was interested in how and why visual texts are produced. By interviewing the artists and the creators of various internet images, I analysed the context in which such content came to life and the intended messages behind their inception. Furthermore, I observed how these messages were manifested visually and what aesthetic codes were deployed for their representation. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, I paid special attention to exploring how visual

imagery is shared, circulated and consumed by my respondents and how it is perceived through their own subjectivities. The visuals indeed evolve their “own life through the context of display” (Tolia-Kelly, 2004: 682), thus making them particularly important when attempting to track “circulation through different contexts of a manifestly material object of study” (Marcus 1995:106).

1.3.5 Unveiling power relations in the media and politics

To explore British public discourses on veiling, I also analysed selected media and policy reports by following the principles of ‘critical discourse analysis’ (CDA). CDA is an interdisciplinary method of scrutinising the discourses by focusing on the ways in which social and political dominations are reproduced within the texts (Fairclough, 1993, 1995; Wodak, 1996). The CDA draws upon the poststructuralist textual paradigms which define discourse as a social practice, implying “a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997: 258).

As it is particularly concerned with the rhetoric of racism and the ways in which the discourses of difference and exclusion sustain society and its phenomena (Kolstø, 2009: 18; Hammond and Wellington, 2012: 53), CDA was able to illuminate the racist sentiments of British society towards the practice of Islamic veiling. With the majority audience having merely obscured interpersonal contacts with fully veiled Muslim women, media and political messages serve as the sole transmitters of public knowledge (see Ameli et al, 2007: 8). Hence, the investigation of social identities among Islamic women could not be undertaken without taking into account the power of the media and political discourses that are shaping the public perception of sartorial practices in question.

The attention of anthropological inquiry was particularly concerned with the construction of difference (Peterson, 2005: 56) and unmasking ideologically imbued structures of power, dominance and strategic exclusion" (Wodak, 1999: 8). Following Fairclough's method, my approach to CDA combined micro, meso and macro-level interpretations (Fairclough 2013: 352). At a micro level, I examined the choice of words as well as and visual and rhetorical devices that were deployed for depicting Muslim women. I scrutinised the production and consumption of the text at a meso level by focusing on the placement of the articles and choice and positioning of imagery in a media outlet, for example. At a macro level, I focused on the intertextuality by mapping broader contextual and social currents – for example various terror events in the UK and elsewhere – that affected the production of a text (see Fairclough, 2013: 352; Mahadevan and Mayer, 2017)

Whilst I conducted a longer and more in-depth analysis of political and media discourses on veiled women in the British media and in British politics in the period from 2001 to 2014 (see Sadar, 2014), the second chapter of this thesis includes only a short snippet of it. However, the findings were crucial to furthering my own understanding of the existing unbalanced power relations prevalent in the dominant narratives.

In summary, to manage and maximise the potential of multiple sites and a diverse body of respondents, I pursued a multi-method approach. Ethnographic interviewing presented the pivotal research technique as it enabled me to capture women's narratives on the veil and their experiences with it. Combining it with participant observation, digital and visual ethnography and critical discourse analysis furthermore helped me to frame those ethnographic accounts into the broader context of their families, communities and societies.

1.4 Negotiating positionality in the field

Fieldwork is always “a dialogical process which is structured by the researcher and participants” (England, 1994: 80). Whilst the respondents are placed on the central stage in this thesis, it is simultaneously instrumental to acknowledge the existence and the role of an embodied and situated researcher. Although, as an ethnographer, I occupy a less conspicuous place in the final ethnographic output, my identity and biography inevitably have a great impact on my fieldwork, as well as on the collection and presentation of data (see Šikić-Mićanović, 2013: 47). As affirmed by Lila Abu-Lughod (1991: 141), it is “clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere.” Indeed, my own identity, alongside that of the social groups I occupy, and the context(s) from which I speak, plays an instrumental role in the way I have been perceived by the community and, equally, in the way I have myself seen and engaged with the community which I researched. Hence, reflecting on my own positionality in the field has represented a pivotal and iterative praxis in all stages of the research process.

As a researcher I inhabit a multitude of social categories, which encompass my gender (woman), race (white), religion (agnostic), age (late 20s), ethnic background (Slovenian), class (middle-class) and occupation (student), amongst various other identities. Some of these categories might correspond to similarities with at least some respondents and consequently assist with forging a stronger rapport. My gender identity in particular proved to be crucial, not only in gaining access to certain spaces and securing interviews with some women who would not agree to social interactions with unrelated men, but also in helping to abandon “the mystified role of researcher” (Riddell 1989: 94). It also helped me to present myself as another woman with many similar concerns and experiences

(*ibid.*, Finch, 1984). Similarly, being a foreigner, being a student and being involved in various activist movements, for example, constituted further overlaps and consequently opened new spaces of familiarity, mutual understanding and instant empathy.

At the same time, however, generalising and romanticising the universal women's experience is a dangerous avenue, as posited equality with research subjects can conceal profounder and more damaging forms of inequality and exploitation (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Stacey, 1988: 22). Acknowledging and reflecting upon certain fragments of my identity, mostly notably my race, ethnicity and religious background, was thus unavoidable, for they undeniably located me towards the privileged end of the spectrum of existing hierarchies of power. Uneasy questions, both spoken and unspoken, about my ethnographic license to conduct this particular research preoccupied my mind in the earlier stages of my research, and continued to linger throughout the writing process. However uncomfortable, the constant presence and continuous interrogation of these doubts have been crucial in informing my overall approach to this project, and were particularly important when producing – what Kim England (1994: 89) would call – more inclusive and fluid methodologies that are observant of and sensitive to the inherent power relations that are unavoidably present in the field.

Reflecting on her experience of seeking such inclusive methodologies, Kaye F. Haw (1996) writes about her own exploration of feminist ethnography and positionality in the field. Acknowledging the role that her secularism and whiteness performed during her research on educational experiences of Muslim girls at a private Muslim girls' school and at single-sex state schools, Haw, too, continued to reflect on her entitlement to research and represent women who can make themselves heard, and can do so with more authenticity and conviction (1996: 321). She claims that her role as a feminist ethnographer was not to

represent or speak for these women, but rather to create and map yet another new space for the voices that have been historically marginalised in academia and beyond.

Especially when researching the veil, as well as some other topics which are a frequent subject of controversy within Muslim communities, having outsider status can be occasionally advantageous, as it can elicit different types of conversation, and different types of response. As concluded by Haw (1996: 321), her own positionality, and resultant interactions with her respondents, offered another perspective on those analysed by other ethnographers, differing in age, ethnic background, religion or sexuality, for example. In that sense, this research does not pretend to speak on behalf of the researched communities, but rather to add another perspective into the compendium of existing perspectives, and to open a new anthropological space where the voices of veiled Muslim women are listened to and heard. The actions of listening and hearing have been particularly important in avoiding the trap of offering condescending emancipatory readings of the hijab by non-Muslim white women. Instead, I turned to Muslim female activists – either through ethnographic engagement, or through their creative output – such as art and literature – and listened to their feminist voices.

1.5 Ethical considerations and dilemmas

Ethnographic inquiry is premised on establishing unique relationships with a plurality of people and often invading their intimate zones which inevitably triggers a set of moral dilemmas (Haviland et al, 2008: 18). Such dilemmas hold the potential to arise at any stage of the research process and knowledge production, from planning to conducting the research, to analysing the data,

writing up and publishing (Candea 2007: 27; Fine, 1993) and therefore need to be “accounted for in all research paradigms” (Fine in Deji, 2012: 316). Whilst I had assessed potential complications in the course of my research in order to minimise the likelihood that they would occur prior to my fieldwork, some occasional dilemmas did nevertheless present themselves. To address them, I generally followed the Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice proposed by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (2011) and sought advice from my supervisors.

Ethnographic work is based upon a mutual rapport with the participants (Caplan and Silverman, 2003: 117). As researchers, we are thus first and foremost responsible for the individuals involved in our project – not only for ensuring the quality of the research, but also fulfilling our obligations as responsible humans. Therefore, it is vital to establish and sustain participants’ trust by approaching them carefully, with consideration for their personal and community mores (ibid.). One common way of formalising this trust is to obtain informed consent (Fluehr-Lobban, 2003: 228; van Willigen, 2002: 52-54). Before conducting any research, I made sure to obtain written or, when not possible or appropriate, verbal consent from every individual involved in the study. The consent negotiated the limits of the relationship between the respondents and myself as a researcher, and ensured that respondents would benefit from maximum protection, and would be free to withdraw from the project at any time. One interviewed artist, for example, withdrew her participation after I had sent her the requested write-up.

In terms of minimising potential disturbances to participants and their relationships with society, I provided anonymity for most of the subjects involved. However, securing anonymity proved to be challenging for various reasons. Some of the women represented in this research appear frequently in the

media and in political debates, and it might not be difficult to trace them using an online search engine. Also, due to copyright restrictions, I had to title artwork with the names of real authors. Taking this into account, I decided to anonymise the names of all respondents whom I interviewed about personal matters, whilst keeping the real names of certain fashion designers, artists and journalists who feature in the thesis.

Further issues regarding anonymity and consent arose whilst pursuing digital ethnography. Although the majority of the websites which I used in my research are public and as such free to access and use, I acknowledged the interplay of public/private that is inevitably embedded in the various online fora, such as social media sites and blogs. Though publicly accessible, utilising some forms of content for the purposes of research might present an unwanted intrusion into privacy. As posited by the ASA guidelines, “the very notion of public domain is an evolving, shifting phenomena and hence so is cyberethnography and its ethical applications” (2001). In order to move within those shifting and evolving public spaces ethically, I sought guidance from my supervisors and other senior anthropologists who kindly agreed to advise me via Skype and email correspondence.

Subsequently, I took a number of steps to keep my practices as ethical as possible. I decided to delete the majority of screenshots that were originally placed into the thesis, thus protecting users' privacy. I sought bloggers' consent for using certain blog images, and referenced them if appropriate. When participating in online discussions, or otherwise prompting responses from online users, I made sure I was always upfront about my intentions. When this was not possible, I decided to use the information I had gathered for my knowledge exclusively, and did not include it in the write up. The process of negotiating the ethics of this research was most challenging in an online setting, as the existing guidelines, and the lack

of them, colour many areas of research grey.

Considering the culturally sensitive nature of my research focusing on intimate sentiments of identity, otherness, racism and ethnicity, I made sure to avoid ethnocentric biases towards any group, either ethnic, gender or religious. Since I was dealing with minority groups, I was extremely careful to avoid any form of racist and discriminatory discourse or patronising behaviour that may affect the self-perception of, or negative responses from, respondents. Although not a representative of the British majority myself, I however needed to question my potentially privileged position within British society, and acknowledged this whilst conducting my research.

When needed, I materialised cultural sensitivity by appropriating my dress. When attending events, interviews and other activities, I wore loose clothes and tunics, to ensure that I did not attract unneeded attention or hostility towards not only myself, but also my respondents. Whilst making careful decisions about my own sartorial presentation, I was cautious about not appropriating my dress too much. For example, apart from the aforementioned experiments of wearing the hijab and niqab for a day, I only ever covered my hair when in mosques. In that sense, I was careful about navigating between appropriating my dress to foster acceptance and positive first impressions on the one hand, and transcending my authentic self on the other (see Mookherjee, 2001).

Finally, I acknowledged the influence of my writing for the perception of minorities in the focus of the research. I was particularly cognisant about eluding stereotyping, and essentialising and generalising in written and visual representations. I regularly sought feedback from respondents during the process of writing up in order to negotiate any contentious issues. For example, I had to follow up to clarify certain points from the interviews, or to ask about the

appropriateness of certain expressions.

Throughout my research I tried my best to act as a personally engaged and committed anthropologist who exercises great cultural sensitivity, and acts in accordance with its discipline politics and the moral self, and is accountable for the political and ethical consequences of her actions (Denzin, 1997: 277) in order to maintain collaborative, reciprocal, trusting and friendly relations with respondents and other people involved in the research process.

1.6 Structuring the thesis

In addition to an introductory section which accounts for the first chapter, this thesis consists of six further chapters, with five of them being of ethnographic nature. Before I offer a brief summary of the chapters, it is important to add a note on the design of my ethnographic chapters. In order to manage a plurality of field sites and methods, and to discuss the data in a logical and comprehensible manner, each ethnographic chapter opens with two distinctive features, a selected artwork and an ethnographic vignette of a respondent whose story takes us through the chapter. The decision to embrace such design comes with multiple motivations.

There are two main reasons for choosing to include artwork at the beginning of each chapter. Firstly, it underscores the aesthetic element of the hijab and the importance of its representations, alongside their transmission and the way they are perceived. As argued by Gell in his seminal work *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998), art is not only (or not at all) about the semiotics or what it means but is about what its effect is on those observing it, or interacting

with it in other ways. In that sense, the artistic works which open each chapter can be seen not only as yet another form through which women express their intimate perceptions of and experiences with veiling but can be also seen as a platform for dialogic engagements that travel beyond the textual. Secondly, the chosen works situate the research into a broader global network of aesthetics, knowledge and meanings. Whilst all respondents reside in the UK and mostly speak about their experiences from a particular local vantage point, the artworks remind us about the importance of transnational influences which inform how local practices are developed and animated.

The selected works come from Yemen, France, United Kingdom, Lebanon and Afghanistan respectively, but share a strong link to the respondents and the geographical scope of this research. For example, I first encountered Boushra Almutawakel's artwork *True Self* as part of an exhibition at the British Museum during my fieldwork, after being pointed to it by a Facebook page I followed for the purpose of my research. The work of Princess Hijab from the second chapter was widely discussed in the British media and I only found out about it through my respondents, and whilst conducting a media analysis. Lebanese artist Georgina Choueiri, who authored the opening image of Chapter VII, works and lives in London. The distance from her home country and experiences which is a result of her living in the UK inform her artistic practice. Lastly, Shamsia Hassani's photo of her mural is partially a consequence of her attending a guest workshop by the British artist CHU, who first introduced her to the artistic technique and medium of street art. The dynamism of transnational exchange, expedited by migration, media, international visits, exhibitions and collaborations, all play an important role in respondents' processes of creating meanings and identities.

Juxtaposing these global artistic accounts, I open each chapter with an

ethnographic vignette – a short but rich ethnographic account (see Balka et al, 2007: 238; Hess, 2013: 162). Each vignette focuses on one respondent, and captures her in a particular moment of time which we shared during the fieldwork. These insights aim to offer a close-up account of a particular respondent who is mentioned during a particular chapter. Having a single woman manoeuvring the dominant narrative through a specific topic helps to frame the fragmented stories, analyses and observations into a coherent textual outlet, and assists with constructing a stronger argument throughout each chapter.

As previously referred to, each chapter focuses on one particular topic and illuminates it from various perspectives. More specifically, the central topics of the upcoming chapter revolve around the following topics: the hijab in complex historical, political and media discourses; the diversity of practices of veiling and various ways of becoming a hijabi; the hijab and its complex relationship with fashion; hijab feminism and gender identities; the otherness of the hijab and its wearers; and the changing meanings and resistance centring on the hijab. I shall shortly outline each chapter and state how they approach central research aims of this thesis, namely locating the Islamic veil within the social milieu of contemporary Britain and exploring the personal dimension of veiling in the UK. Playing with the title of Lila Abu-Lughod's seminal work *Do Muslim women need saving?* (2002), the second, and only remaining non-ethnographic chapter, theorises the disconnect generated by lived realities and Western myths by analysing and deconstructing historical, political and media discourses. In addition to exploring the orientalist historiographies of the veil, Chapter II pays special attention to scrutinising media narratives in the British press over the past decade as well as the local and global politics of Islamophobia, and observes how they have affected Muslims women's lives and laws.

The third chapter argues that the hijab can never be a static, determined and an ever-present part of women's lives, identities and societies. The chapter looks into diversified and highly individual forms of veiling practices. It also explores the plethora of reasons and motivations for women to take up the veil, and explores the journey women embark on when taking this decision, alongside its inevitable practical, emotional and social challenges.

The fourth chapter explores the relationship between fashion and Islam, and discusses how women negotiate fashionable aesthetics and religious ethics in their everyday clothing practices. The chapter looks into the notion of veiling as being an expression of 'anti-fashion', discusses the hijab as part of a luxurious high-fashion industry, analyses the growing trend of online blogs and other digital platforms for promoting hijab fashion, and documents various urban fashion scenes that feature alternative ways of wearing the veil. Lastly, Chapter IV also discusses how Islamic headscarves are utilised by various public personas as an enigmatic costume whose colonial flashback stirs media controversies.

The following chapter focuses on subverting techniques and meanings deployed by Muslim feminists in order to resist and rethink male hegemony and narrowly-defined gender identities as dictated by Islamic communities, various feminist groups and dominant British public discourses. Chapter V reflects on colonial feminist crusades against the veil and the notion that the hijab symbolises sexual apartheid. It furthermore explores how women take up the veil to resist capitalist beauty games and objectification. One of the sections scrutinises emerging online Islamic feminist movements, whilst special attention is also paid to exploring the relationship between LGBT+ communities and the hijab.

Toying with Du Bois' concept of the invisible veil, Chapter VI centres on veiling, citizenship and otherness. The chapter looks at how race studies can provide a

useful analytical tool for exploring the otherness experienced by hijabis. The chapter also explores racialisation of the veil and discusses poignant Islamophobic accounts of veiled women's experiences in the UK. Discussions on citizenship and Britishness are theorised as well, and one of the sub-sections focuses on discussing the strategies for making hijabs 'more British'.

The final chapter corresponds to the opening chapter on historical, political and media discourses by exploring how hijab wearers challenge the prevailing public perception of veiled women as oppressed victims of dangerous regimes. Chapter VII explores different forms and motivations of resisting sentiments and acts that are expressed, and also questioned, by British hijabis, whilst avoiding over-romanticising and fetishising resistance and the subjects central to its implementation. It also takes into consideration both organised and more subtle, everyday forms of resistance, and all modalities in-between, and explores a sense of choices, creative approaches and aspirations experienced by British hijabis.

Chapter II: Do veiled women need saving?

'Ban it' (Daily Express, 2006), *'Make every woman wear a burkha'*⁵ (The Express, 2010) and *'How to avoid airport security: Wear a burka'* (Daily Mail, 2012) are just some of the populist headlines, appearing in tabloid media outlets in recent years. They highlight how Muslim women's appearance – alongside their apparent 'victimhood' and, ironically, the supposed threat they represent to 'Western values' – continue to generate fascination and controversies with the Western audience (Ahmad, 2010: 245; Al-Saji, 2010; Bilge, 2010: 10).

The controversy is far from being limited to the tabloid press, but is similarly contentious in the broadsheet press and political arena, both in the UK and abroad. Both the wearing of headscarves and their more conservative counterparts, such as the niqab or the burqa, have elicited burning polemics in several European countries. Following national bans on face veils in some western European countries and a general rise of right-wing extremism around the continent, a political hysteria has migrated across the Channel as well. In September 2013, the Liberal Democrat Home Office minister Jeremy Browne called for a national debate regarding the face veil in the UK. Many other prominent political figures have joined the discussion, predominantly with antagonistic attitudes towards headscarves, and especially face veiling.

Apart from pragmatic security reasons, the pro-ban arguments are mostly backed by a moral reasoning. Among others, the niqab and the burqa are believed to convey fundamentalist sentiments and a political ideology associated with radical Islamist regimes. They are moreover proclaimed marks of difference or

⁵ I use the term 'burqa' throughout the thesis. However, I will keep alternative spellings (e.g. burka, burkha) in direct quotes.

even segregation and are deemed harmful to the modernist ideas of secularism, personal freedom and, above all, gender equality. Since the Quran is vague about the notion of veiling and simply urges women to dress modestly, such attire is perceived as a socio-cultural product rather than a religious obligation. The headscarf, too, is subjected to similar criticism. While not as provocative as its full face counterpart, many believe that it has no space in public places, such as schools, universities or political institutions.

Moderate Muslims and non-Muslims alike hence frequently agree that attire loaded with such problematic political affiliations and a supposed anti-women agenda has no place in liberal Western societies (e.g. Baran, 2011: 145; Kolling, 2012). Whilst these arguments might indeed be introduced through the lens of sensibility and rationality, they are seriously flawed. Rather than reflecting lived realities of British Muslim women, they cling to partial and often dangerously distorted historical and political fragments and generalise them onto an entire female Muslim population. By ignoring eclectic lives and life-styles of headscarf and niqab wearers in the UK, women in question become compressed as exotic and foreign victims of oppressive regimes who need to be saved. Such discourses echo the colonial rhetoric of what Spivak (1988: 296) has described as the need of “white men saving brown women from brown men”.

With a majority audience having limited interpersonal contact with veiled Muslim women, historical, political and media narratives remain the sole transmitter of public knowledge regarding the topic (see Ameli et al, 2007: 8). To understand the disconnect generated by lived realities and Western myths, it is essential to analyse and deconstruct these discourses and observe how the legacy of Orientalism and a politics of Islamophobia have influenced Muslim women’s lives and policy-making. To provide the much needed context for understanding the complex historico-political and social genesis of the veil in British society and

in a Euro-American environment more broadly, this chapter will examine the history of the veil, contemporary British discourses on veiling and the tone of the political debate in the United Kingdom and abroad.

2.1 The chronicles of the veil

2.1.1 The genesis of the veil

A headscarf is nowadays commonly associated with Islam. However, contrary to prevailing 'Western' equalisations of the veil and Islam, the sartorial practice of female head covering emerged outside the Islamic context. In ancient Mesopotamia the veil was imposed on female representatives of higher socio-economical strata as a visual signifier that was delineating the borders between classes (Hoodfar, 1993: 251). On one hand it was signifying that a woman from a privileged background did not need to do manual work and on the other hand a veil blocked lustful gazes from potential suitors who would not pass as suitable heirs of the family wealth. From its initial use of marking borders between social strata, the veil has been deployed ever since in a number of different cultural contexts for establishing social boundaries, with the definition and the usage of these boundaries changing in different milieux (Ahmed, 1992: 523, El Guindi, 1999: 13-22).

The concept of veiling was transmitted from its Assyrian origins to the wider Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region and via ancient Roman and Greek cultures to the European space. Although social functions of veiling in pre-modern Europe are nowadays eclipsed by mythologised discourses of the culturally alien Islamic veil, headscarves indeed occupied a visible role across

European societies. For example, the importance of the veil is reflected in the Bible in both Old and New Testaments (e.g. Genesis 24: 65), whereby wearing the veil is introduced as a sign of propriety for unmarried women and the removal of the veil is depicted as a Biblical punishment for adultery (Douglas King, 2003: 111).

Influenced by Biblical interpretations, veiling presented a widespread element of European tradition in pre-modernity that was especially commonly worn by privileged urban female population throughout Europe, including Britain (Owen-Crocker, 2010: 148, 222). The most common female attire in Anglo-Saxon England consisted of a headdress concealing the ears that was secured to the shoulders of a dress. Similar to its earlier Mediterranean forms, veiling was associated with higher social strata and a distinctive veil was regularly worn by female royalty. The queens portrayed on the Lady Gunhild's Cross⁶ and in the Stuttgart Psalter,⁷ for instance, wear the veil in conjunction with the crown (ibid.: 222). The veil was, however, gradually abandoned with the rise of modernity and its novel set of values, which were aspired to in order to maintain distance from medieval Christian morality. As will be demonstrated later on in this chapter, it is hence not uncommon for contemporary European criticism of the veil to feature its connection to the medieval past.

Although veiling is currently not a commonly practised manifestation of reverence and purity, the elements of Biblical imagery can be identified in contemporary Christian discourses. 'Taking the veil' is a commonly used expression for commencing a religious profession in the Roman Catholic Church. Stemming from the liturgical rite of 'consecration of virgins', it symbolises woman's eternal communion with Christ as the ultimate emblem of purity. In her

⁶ Lady Gunhil's Cross is an ivory associated with the niece of King Cnut dating to 1075.

⁷ The Stuttgart Psalter is a richly illuminated 9th-century psalter, considered one of the most significant of the Carolingian period.

study of a ceremony for taking the veil, Danielle Rives (2005) beautifully describes the significance that the headscarf plays in the rite of passage in which a novice becomes a nun. Covering the novice's head with a veil symbolises the novice leaving behind former appearance as she leaves the secular world, with the veiling completing the ritual of retreat from the world. The veil in that sense is not just a uniform but an emblem of the transformation of her identity (ibid.: 473).

In contrast to taking the veil, the act of the removal of the veil remains a common practice at Christian weddings. The symbolic act of removing the bride's veil suggests the endpoint of woman's purity; the new status of a wife would terminate her virginity. More distant parallels can also be recognised in hats and other forms of headwear that are commonly worn by Christian women during religious congregations (Celefato, 2004: 65; Hunter, 1999: 143; Radford Ruether, 2010: 149).

A similar practice of veiling, originating from the very same Mediterranean cradle, has been dispersed to different locations and consequently adopted by numerous cultures and religions, including Judaism, Hinduism and Confucianism. The cross-religious and cross-cultural perspective on veiling, especially its comparison with Christian Europe, is essential when encountering the argumentation against the veil in terms of being incompatible with European/Christian tradition or being an Islamic invention produced exclusively for the oppression of Muslim women.

2.1.2 Islamic adoption of the veil

In the spirit of the time and corresponding fashion trends, it is thus not surprising that the practice was adopted by some women from an early umma, despite not presenting a sartorial standard (Stillman and Stillman, 2003: 142). Among women who embraced the veil was also Mohamed's wife Aisha who allegedly took up the niqab with her marriage around the year 622 AD. It was not until almost two centuries later, with the rise of Abbasid Caliphate, that the veil became a prevalent vestimentary practice among Muslim women. With additional promotion from the side of the Ottoman Empire and the Safavids, the veil spread to a wider Muslim population cross-regionally (ibid.; Hoodfar, 1997: 251).

In Islam, the veil is a part of a significant social institution of *purdah*, literally translating as a curtain. However, its symbolic meaning is complex, multifaceted and loaded. The central characteristic of the concept lies in hampering the interaction between women and men outside certain social categories in order to protect female modesty, purity and piety (Shehabuddin, 2008: 4). More pragmatically, it maintains social order by ensuring that women – and consequently the family wealth that is transferred through dowry – are not distributed outside the same social class. As an omnipresent concept in the life of a woman, *purdah* is expected to be respected on a symbolic as well as a physical level. The latter is articulated through the complex set of various social norms regulating body gesticulation and gazing, the figure of speech, silence and also the choice of clothing (Fedorak, 2007: 167; Kent, 2004: 135; Papanek, 1973: 289).

As will be illustrated in the upcoming ethnographic chapters, such divisions are not to be observed through a rigid Eurocentric lens. The late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Muslim feminist thinker Qasim Amin emphasises a radically

different conception of womanhood in Islam. He suggests that the rationale behind gender segregation is rooted in the idea of men being seen as the ones who need protection from women rather than the other way around. Women, then, are perceived as dominant figures in possession of power. They are able to manipulate men's reason through *fitna* or sexual temptation, as they have a potential to divert men's devotion from Allah (Armajani 2004: 30; Brydon, 1989: 26; Mernissi, 1987: 30-32).

That is not to ignore the discriminatory nature of *purdah*. Alongside physical restrictions, *purdah* — and veiling as the means of maintaining it — potentially limits female symbolic control of essential resources in society (Jacobson in Raheja and Gold, 1994: 168; Sunder Rajan, 2004: 66), such as having the same job opportunities as men, establishing social relationships freely or having full social as well as physical mobility (Wilkinson-Weber, 1999: 76). This becomes especially problematic when the social institution of *purdah*, alongside its social boundaries, becomes institutionalised in political regimes and their legal codes. The latter has been observed in a number of recent political contexts.

As explained earlier, such impositions have no grounding in earlier religious practice; the described origins and social functions of the veil introduce the practice as a cross-cultural phenomenon rather than a strictly Islamic one. Interestingly enough for further discussions on veiling as a subject of Islamic doctrine, it was not until the nineteenth century and the colonial representations of the veil as the symbol of Islam that Muslims began to introduce it as an Islamic phenomenon rather than a general Middle Eastern attire (Esposito, 2011). In that sense it was European colonialism that strongly facilitated the embedding of the veil into Islamic religious doctrine.

2.1.3 Orientalising the veil

With part of the colonial agenda being the subjugation of colonised people, Western colonial powers generated a political discourse based upon the classic case of 'the Other' (e.g. Scott, 2006: 8). The colonial construction of otherness was premised on a simplified system of ontological and epistemological duality between the superior West and inferior East – the idea that is summarised in Said's (1979) seminal theoretical paradigm of Orientalism, which became an important tool for explaining the distribution of power in unbalanced global politics not only in colonial times but also in the postcolonial period. Western supremacy is fabricated in the opposition to the 'Orient', which is seen as undeveloped, irrational, static, barbaric, exotic, erotic and oppressive. The latter represent characteristics with strikingly negative connotations, thus the West justifies its superiority. By reinforcing such discourses throughout history, Western forces have not only intensified its dominant position but have also legitimised various foreign interventions in the times of colonialism and beyond.

The Orientalist matrix of conceptualising power has been placed also – or particularly – upon oriental women and their veiled bodies. As an obvious physical indicator of difference, the veil attracted the attention of early colonialists working in predominantly Muslims areas. Rather than seeing it as a social institution which secures modesty and represses sexuality, the Orientalist colonial vision of the veil was ironically the complete opposite; the veil as a conspicuous indicator of difference was embodying exoticism, eroticism and sensuality of oriental subjects (e.g. Heath, 2008: 14).

The reasoning behind the quest to see the face of the Other could be explained in a Levinasian light. Levinas (1969) perceives the human face as "a condition of humanisation" (Butler, 2006: 141). Building on this notion, face-to-face encounters

are deemed to be privileged phenomena in which the Other is revealed in her alterity and exposed in her vulnerability. When the contact with the face is hampered by a cloth, the face of the Other is left entirely to the imagination of the spectator (Levinas, 1969). It is precisely this element of obscured contact with the face and the subsequent mysticism that evoked voyeuristic inquiries among almost exclusively male colonialists.



Images 2 and 3: Outside and inside harem: harem walls and the veil are protecting female privacy and sexuality in colonial Orientalist imagery ('Harem Women Feeding Pigeons in a Courtyard' by Jean-Léon Gerome and 'The Harem Dance' by Giulio Rosati)

The colonial construction of veiling is often seen in connection to the counter-image of the harem. Taking into account that the harem, the women's quarters in a house, was embedded in a private domain – and a female private domain for

that matter – it was highly inaccessible for European colonialists and it thus became the object of erotic imagination. Following this vein of thought, veiling could be seen as an “extension of the walls of the harem” (Bullock, 2002: 19; see Image 2) which obscures the access to women, their privacy and their sexuality (see Image 3) and is as such subjected to Western male fantasy.

Highlighting the unprivileged position of women in Islam is just one of the numerous strategies for creating discourses that “indirectly or openly exploit the theme of ‘civilisation’ versus ‘barbarism’” (Kirtsoglou, 2010: 6). Such “attacks on morality” (ibid.) based upon the premise of Western cultures being superior represent a convenient ploy for demeaning Islam and justifying Western colonial interventions in the global ‘East’ (e.g. Ahmed, 1992: 152; Neuburger, 2004: 117).

This matrix was not deployed exclusively in a colonial setting but has been mimicked in a number of contemporary political contexts, most notoriously by George W. Bush’s administration for justifying the US military invasion of Afghanistan (Ghosh, 2010: 74). Launched by the White House public relations department, news packages promoting the image of fully-veiled Afghani women as oppressed victims who need to be liberated circulated around the audience not only in the USA but also beyond American borders. Ghosh believes that it was these “racially charged” images that secured the American public’s support for the war (ibid.). Butler (2006: 148) goes even further by claiming that such “aesthetic dimension to war”⁸ with overused images of burqa-clad women presented a vital part of the war strategy itself. As such, the alleged quest to liberate Afghan women that has been so vocally promoted by Western pro-war

⁸ In her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2014), Judith Butler discusses the campaign of the war against Iraq as “an overwhelming visual phenomenon” (ibid.: 148). She analyses the coverage of various media outlets and observes how they turned the war into a visual spectacle, which numbed the viewers’ senses and thus minimised their capacity to think. From CNN to Fox and New Yorks Times, an exploitation of the visual aesthetics, such as reproducing romanticised images of military served as an important element of the war strategy.

propaganda remains the domain of “gluttonous nationalism” (ibid.), and conveniently conceals the fact that the rise of the Taliban had been initially facilitated by the U.S. as an effort to undermine the Soviet Union. As such, the ‘liberation rhetoric’ fails to pass as an efficient — and morally acceptable — instrument for manifesting the humanity of the Afghan women (McLarney, 2009), or any Muslim woman.

This, however, is not to deny the fact that the burqa was indeed one of the repressive methods deployed by the Taliban regime during its rule in Afghanistan and was imposed on the female population, with any infringement being sanctioned by punitive measures. However, it is important to note that the burqa represented only one element of a continuum of female oppression sponsored by the Taliban (Smith, 2008: 245). What was less visible, but considerably more alarming, is that fact that Afghan women were given limited access to schools, politics, employment and health care services.

While Orientalist imagery has continued to portray veiled women as passive and oppressed victims since colonial times, not all historical texts introduce the veil as an exclusive manifestation of male oppression. The colonial rhetoric on veiled women ignited academic responses from postcolonial theorists. Perhaps the most prominent example is Franz Fanon (1967), who famously talks about historic dynamisms of the veil. Rather than perceiving it as a mere symbol of female oppression, he reads it as an unstable symbolic concept. He illustrates this notion with the example of the Algerian revolution during colonialism and France's mission to unveil Algeria. At that time, the full body veil became a “mechanism of resistance”, as Algerian female revolutionists toyed with their expected status of passive apolitical figures for smuggling the weapons dressed as either French girls or concealing weapons underneath their niqabs (Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, 2005: 68). Subsequently, an item that was supposedly repressing female freedom

and obscuring their access to public political life became exploited for literally gaining access to public political sphere and fighting for freedom.

The historical overview of the development of veiling practices illustrates an important notion for further discussions regarding the place of the veil in Europe. Veiling cannot be seen as an inherently and exclusively Islamic practice. Not only did it come into existence outside Islam, it is actively practised elsewhere around the world, including in Europe. Moreover, its meanings and manifestations have been transforming in connection with European colonial politics.

2.2 The politics of the veil

2.2.1 The veil of controversy

Political discourses featuring the veil vary between extremes: the one of choice and compulsion, expression and repression, reward and punishment (Linh Nguyen Ti, 2011: 192). These dichotomies resonate in equally extreme legal codes of either banning the practice of veiling or banning the practice of not veiling.

On one side of the spectrum of political regulation of veiling, the moral concept of *pardah* has been subjected to radical and often dangerous interpretations by specific political regimes. They are dubbed as decency laws and are thus postulated on similar principles as laws prohibiting public nudity (Sunderland, 2012: 299). As opposed to the latter, the imposition of the niqab often comes with a set of dire forfeits. Recently, the public limelight has been occupied by the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which has been enforcing its own orthodox dress code, with beheadings and other brutal punishments for violations.

However, such punitive measures for failing to uphold the prescribed dressing requirements are not limited to ISIS. The cases of imprisonment, executions or physical punishments for not covering according to the laws are reported from Saudi Arabia, Chechnya and Iran to Somalia and Afghanistan among others (e.g. Amer, 2014: 113; Ghanim, 2009: 62).

The matter of forced veiling, and chastisements corresponding to it, should definitely be treated as a serious offence against women and a severe violation of human rights in general. The problem with such laws is not limited to the issue of hampering women's physical integrity and movement. Above all, they hold a strong moral dimension linked to the lack of opportunities and rights for women more broadly. Redirecting the gaze back to an earlier discussion on Afghan women, it is clear that forced veiling cannot be observed in a social vacuum but should be contemplated in the wider context of female oppression. This argument could be pushed further towards the idea of forced veiling being a consequence of female oppression rather than its cause. In other words, women do not have limited economic, political and social opportunities due to their attire. Instead, their dress code is a reflection of their repressed position in certain political systems.

This thought is essential when addressing legal interdictions of Islamic headgear in the context of Europe. Whilst attention should indeed be focused on combating the oppression of women by certain political regimes and the workings of patriarchy in general, legal and political discourses are often based upon flawed epistemological premises. They are not addressing the problem of female oppression analytically but deploy the practice of veiling to promote Islamophobic sentiments and racist stereotypes through a highly essentialist vision of religion, culture and gender roles (Fernandez, 2013: 63). The fact that media reporting on mandated veiling focuses on countries that are in military

conflict with Western countries, and ignores equally problematic cases in Western-allied states is yet another illustration of this notion.

Such narratives do not address the problem effectively, let alone contribute to its resolution. Instead, they broaden and deepen the abyss between the Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority population. Above all, they efficiently demonise an essentialised category of Muslim men, and victimise a similarly generalised category of Muslim women. Subsequently, they reproduce aforementioned Orientalist agendas that are justified by less civilised and more barbaric Muslim culture (Crosby, 2014: 46). Such simplified way of perceiving Islam and Muslims is equally recognisable in political discourses on halal slaughtering, Islamic schools or building minarets, for example. The issues are represented in an exaggerated manner with a focus on reinforcing the image of Islamic danger.

Nevertheless, no issue from the pool of Islamic polemics has created more controversy than the Islamic veil. Whilst the dress affects women's lives in a significantly less powerful manner than, for instance, genital mutilation or stoning, public attention allocated to it is far greater than to other related matters.

2.2.2 The never-ending *affaire du foulard*

The hijab is a particularly controversial visual identifier since it materialises the Muslim presence in Europe in the most evident manner: it is regularly worn by a large proportion of believers and is present in the public sphere. Aykaç (2012: 94-95) sees the reason for that in its visual dimension. He argues that Islamophobic discourses are especially likely to emerge when Islamic aesthetic and symbolic forms begin to transform the European public sphere. The veil is explicitly visual;

as it is worn by a relatively large proportion of Muslim women, it visibly shapes and alters public landscapes. Hence, it is not surprising that the hijab and other forms of Islamic coverings provoke vocal responses by those who currently hold power over the public sphere.

In the context of Western Europe, the polemics surrounding the Islamic dress emerged in late 1980s in France. An almost two-decade-long *l'affaire du foulard*⁹ was eventually addressed at a juridical level in 2004 with the French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols that prohibited the wearing of religious insignia in public schools with the purpose of reinforcing the principle of *laïcité* (secularism)¹⁰ in practice. Although the bill did not specify a particular religious visual identifier, it was largely believed that it was targeted at Muslims and at the hijab in particular (Eller, 2009: 22; Elver, 2012: 121; Wolny, 2009: 33). A hotly disputed issue crossed national borders and ignited similarly polemical discussions elsewhere in (Western) Europe. The controversy was particularly virulent in Germany, Belgium, Turkey and the Netherlands (Silvestri, 2009: 6). As a result, four German states prohibited the wearing of the hijab for teachers and, in some states, civil servants in general. The Netherlands, too, proposed a French-style law but it eventually failed to pass in the parliament.

The polemics surrounding Islamic veiling practices have been in recent years expanded onto the topic of the face veil. Such attire is far from prevalent in Europe and is embraced by an almost statistically insignificant proportion of European Muslims. Data continues to be largely missing. However, it is believed

⁹ *L'affaire du foulard*, translating as the scarf affair, is a common expression for the ongoing Islamic scarf controversy that arose in 1989, when the ban on the hijab in French public school was initially discussed. The French expression is commonly reproduced in the British media.

¹⁰ *Laïcité* is France's principle of secularism in public affairs, aimed at fostering a post-religious society. It is a core concept in the French constitution, Article 1 of which formally states that France is a secular republic.

that there are no more than 2000 fully-veiled Muslim women in France (Elver, 2012: 108) and only a few dozen in Belgium and the Netherlands respectively (Shirazi, 2013: 165; Thompson, 2012: 218).

Despite these diminutive numbers, the face veil has become the ultimate signifier representing all negative aspects of Islam in Europe – female oppression, the threat to security, the fail of integration and the increasing Islamisation of Europe (Aykaç, 2012: 95; Jones, 2011: 166) – and as such legitimised for legal interdiction. This notion was seized upon by French president Nicholas Sarkozy in the summer of 2009. He stated that the burqa was not welcome in France. According to Mr. Sarkozy, in a democratic European country it cannot be allowed “that women are prisoners behind a screen, cut off from all social life, deprived of all identity” (Sarkozy cited in Schattle, 2012: 111). He called for legislation that would prohibit the wearing of the burqa in public.

In a span of only seven months, a freshly-assembled Parliamentary Commission to Study the Wearing of the Full Veil in France produced a report for the President of the National Assembly. The report continuously emphasises the elements of enforcement and conformation, for example:

“[I]n a good number of cases [the wearing of the niqab is] the result of the influence of Salafist groups working in France and abroad for the re-Islamization of the populations of Muslim origin and the recognition” (Library of Congress, 2014)

Although the length of the 658-page report gives an impression of thoroughness, its findings are dubious. In fact, the findings have been contradicted by several follow-up studies carried out independently from the state, with Open Society’s report *Unveiling the Truth* (2011) being a prime example of that. Nevertheless, the

French Parliamentary Commission study was used as the grounding for new legislation that was eventually passed and enacted in France in April 2011.

Apart from a fine of up to €150 for a woman who violates the ban, the law specifies an additional and substantially harsher punishment for men who force their wives or daughters to wear the niqab or the burqa. In addition, violators of the law may be asked to attend a citizenship course. These penalties raise various issues. Apart from criminalising women's dress, they additionally presuppose the veil as almost necessarily a result of male coercion. Moreover, by proposing citizenship education for the violators of the law, the legislation suggests that the concept of veiling is incompatible with French citizenship. Whilst the law has motivated and forced some women to migrate abroad, some other women have decided to consciously and repeatedly violate it. The law that was supposedly introduced to promote "equal rights" and female "dignity" has left many women with little dignity and with questionable rights.

The polemics surrounding the contentious ban have still not settled. In July 2014, the issue of legal interdiction of the face veil came under close scrutiny. An anonymous French niqabi appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), arguing that the outlawing of the full-face veil was contrary to six articles of the European Convention on Human Rights. She stated that the law is "inhumane and degrading, against the right of respect for family and private life, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of speech and discriminatory" (quoted in Hoffman and Graham, 2015). Despite these arguments, the court upheld France's ban, claiming that it encourages citizens to "live together." One can suggest that the language of the decision is once again highly problematic. Forcing women to choose between staying at home or going outside without the veil hardly facilitates the concept of living together. Moreover, the idea of integration proposed in this judgement postulates that

there is only one correct way of being a French citizen and that in order to 'live together' everyone should conform to it.

Five years after the niqab ban, the country saw further hijab-related controversies with the series of burkini bans in resorts across France, including Cannes and Corsica. Rehashing well-rehearsed arguments from the previous anti-veiling campaigns, supporters of the burkini ban have backed the decision by calling the garment a symbol of threatening fundamentalist sentiments. Valérie Boyer, a member of the National Assembly of France, who was among those who welcomed the ban, proclaimed the burkini a "gender prison" (Willsher, 2016). The socialist government's minister for women's rights, Laurence Rossignol, echoed these sentiments by claiming that the burkini "is the beach version of the burqa and it has the same logic: hide women's bodies in order to better control them" (De Clercq, 2016). Both politicians enunciate that all wearers are adherents of radical Islamist ideas. They also suppose that burkini-clad women are necessarily the victims of these political systems, which force them into complying with their patriarchal laws.

Analogous to the hijab debate six years earlier, the burqa and burkini bans in France provoked considerable public discussion within Europe. Subsequent to the rising moral panic about the Islamic threat, similar bills were passed in Belgium (2011), the Netherlands (2013), Italy (2015), Switzerland (2016) and Bulgaria (2016). Although Spain has not introduced a national ban, the city of Barcelona and two smaller municipalities in Catalonia imposed a ban on the full Islamic veil in public spaces. Germany, too, passed the burqa ban in certain cantons (Joppke, 2009). In the light of the ongoing refugee crisis, some other European countries have discussed banning the veil in the future, for example Slovenia (2015) and Germany (2016). German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, infamously claimed that banning the face veil would be for the good of

Germany (Smale, 2016).

2.2.3 Political tensions in the UK

On the other side of the Channel, Britain remained initially reserved about the headscarf controversies. Representing itself as an archetypical multicultural state, it has long responded to the headscarf debates by emphasising the notions of cultural diversity, equal opportunities, mutual tolerance and anti-racism. Islamic headscarves have been hence fully accepted in public spaces and are worn by pupils in teaching institutions (bin Ahmad, 2011: 166), and also as part of official school uniforms. When issues have occasionally occurred, accommodations have been generally found without extensive public controversy or the involvement of the courts (*ibid.*). It was the face veil that initiated wider public controversies.

The initial British veiling affair that required legal intervention emerged in 2002 with the case of a 16-year old pupil who sued her school for not allowing her to wear a jilbab instead of a prescribed school uniform. The appeal went all the way to the House of Lords but was eventually dismissed. Similarly, two other cases with wide public attention — the one of a teaching assistant wearing the niqab in the classroom and a 12-year old school girl covering her face when in school — were lost at the court as well. Another legal case was moreover produced in the court setting itself with a judge asking a Muslim lawyer to remove her face veil during a hearing. The case ended with new rulings for British judges and magistrates proposing a negotiated balance between the interests of justice and the rights of Muslim women who wish to be veiled in the presence of men (Nachmani, 2010: 74). Placing justice and the rights of Muslim women onto opposite poles is a problematic notion, as it suggests that they are two contrasting and mutually excluding entities.

Its questionable message is further demonstrated in yet another contentious case in September 2013 with a media-flamed affair at Blackfriars Crown Court. The burning issue started with Judge Peter Murphy deciding that a defendant could not appear in the dock wearing the niqab. Whilst the judge in question claimed he respected the right to dress in any way people wish while outside the court, he affirmed that “the interests of justice are paramount” (Bowcott, 2012). Such rhetoric has once again reinforced the juxtaposition between the interests of justice on one hand and Muslim women on the other. When persistently talking about Muslim women versus the legal system, these two entities appear as incompatible. In its essence, justice represents a universal concept that should be equally applicable and accessible for all citizens. In language exhibited by the judge and aforementioned guidelines, Muslim women were not presented as part of a supposedly universal concept of justice but were instead introduced as a potential threat to it.

These cases travelled beyond the courtroom and expanded into the parliament. Initial political debates commenced with the comments by politician Jack Straw. He publicly disagreed with women wearing the full Islamic veil, as this type of attire is “a visible statement of separation and difference” (quoted in Krieger, 2008: 99). Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, agreed with Straw, commenting infamously that the niqab is “a mark of separation” that makes “other people from outside the community feel uncomfortable” (quoted in Beaman, 2012: 77). Several other political figures, such as David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage, joined the debate with similar comments. Meanwhile, the women in question have been conspicuously absent from this discussion.

However, on rare occasions the voices of Muslim women do attract public attention. An illustrative example is offered by the 2013 affair at Birmingham Metropolitan College. The institution banned students from wearing religious

veils in order to ensure security on campus. The decision from the college administration was contested by the female Muslim population and supported vocally by their fellow students and a number of organisations. These included the National Union of Students (NUS) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), with the latter known for the progressive feminist stand of its members. After a Twitter outcry, over 8,000 people signed a petition against the ban in less than a day and local students assembled for an impromptu protest on the college ground. The decision of the college administration was eventually reversed.

Despite an extensive and ongoing public debate, legal interdiction of the hijab or niqab in the UK has not been seriously considered. The Conservative MP Philip Hollobone however expressed sympathy with those calling for the burqa ban and in June 2010 proposed a similar bill himself. The Private Members' Bill entitled *Face Coverings (Regulation) Bill* aimed to restrict Islamic facial covering in public. The bill lacked government's support and did not come to force. The debate on the veil in Britain has therefore so far remained rather speculative and without an (institutionalised) epilogue (Silvestri, 2013).

However, the Islamic female dress continues to be embedded in British politics and policies, even though it is often less conspicuous than its continental neighbours. One of the most controversial examples is the government's counter-terrorism strategy, such as 'Section 44' and 'Schedule 7', which was described by Liberty (2016) as "a breathtakingly broad and intrusive power to stop, search and hold individuals at ports, airports and international rail stations." Both 'Section 44', which refers to stop and search in public spaces, and 'Schedule 7' can be used against anyone without any reasonable grounds of suspecting the person to be involved in terrorism (Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011). In the light of terrorist attacks in Europe and elsewhere, it is often claimed that such counter-terrorism strategies are aimed at Muslims, with visible Muslims being targeted

most frequently (ibid; O'Toole, DeHanas and Modood 2012: 5). In the ethnographic part of this thesis, I will describe how various counter-terrorism strategies have been deployed in a discriminatory fashion against veiled Muslim women.

Equally contentious is the Prevent strategy which refers to the government's flagship programme for preventing violent extremism at its root. This strategy is grounded in the ambition of preventing vulnerable individuals from being radicalised into violent extremist. Prevent takes a softer approach to counter-terrorism; rather than relying on repressive forces, it recruits community representatives and trains them to identify and report potential radicalisation. Although the strategy covers all strands of terrorism, Muslim communities tend to be the main 'suspect community' (Kundnani 2009). As such, both training and practice focus massively on monitoring "religious interaction and Islamic symbolism to assess radicalisation" (Verkeik, 2015), with veiling playing a visible role in this.

The contentious, opposing and extreme cases of political regulation of Islamic headgear pose a question about the extent to which the state can or should interfere in religious and cultural practices. Whilst the state indeed has the power to impose limitations and regulations in order to ensure public safety and order, it is simultaneously also obliged to protect personal rights, including the freedom to choose what to wear (Sunderland, 2012: 302). With veiling debates being placed at the intersection of these two areas, the role of the state is not clear-cut, and is easily manipulated.

2.3 Exotic beauties, victims and terrorists

The aforementioned cases regarding the Islamic veil have been permanently dominating the headlines of mainstream media outlets in the UK. They incited expansive media reporting by all major British mainstream media, with the coverage extending far beyond plain journalistic reports about the events. As it will be observed in this section, a large proportion of media articles focused on applying the veil cases onto broader discussions of a failed multiculturalism project, questionable Islamic gender equality, the rise of fundamentalism and the supposed Islamisation of Britain, and introduced the veiled women as either exotic beauties, voiceless victims or dangerous terrorists.

2.3.1 Behind the burqa of otherness

Especially in the case of tabloid newspapers – such as The Sun, The Daily Mirror or The Daily Express – the discourses on the variety of distinct Islamic veils and other Islamic dresses, such as an abaya, are erroneously and negligently summarised with a general term *burqa*, *burkha* or *burka*. The media is thus reducing different degrees of covering as well as the plurality of Islamic veils with different historical, geographical and political traditions into one general category – a veiled woman. This is establishing a rigid opposition with non-veiled, non-Muslim and White Britons.

The absence of acknowledging the multiplicity of differences between and within different groups of veiled women is especially evident in British tabloid papers that often prioritise the accentuation of difference over journalistic accuracy. An

example from the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* features the story of Keeley Hazell, “Britain’s favourite Page 3 girl” (Hazell, 2007) deciding to wear the niqab for a day. She is excited to experience “such a different way of life” (ibid.) and her ‘investigative’ story does not disappoint her ambitions. She discovers that she cannot drive in loose clothes, she cannot smile to strangers and be polite, she feels thirsty and hungry throughout the day and cannot shop freely with the presence of judgemental looks and uncomfortable garments. The story, published in the news section of the digital version of the newspaper, does not possess any palpable news value whatsoever; the sole purpose of the article seems to be to sensationalise the difference the veil brings into the life, or rather the lifestyle, of a woman.

As argued Derrida (2011: 41), such language of difference usually generates and maintains existing asymmetric relations of power. Commonly, one of the binary pairs is perceived as dominant, pushing its diametrical pole into its own area of operation (ibid.; Hall, 1997: 235; Youdell, 2006: 98). Table 2 provides some further examples to support this claim, pointing out the positive/negative interplay, which is often utilised in the British press.

Article (newspaper)	Positive	Negative
'Euro rule we need' (Daily Star)	modern	backwards
'The burkha is an affront to women and a free society' (Daily Express)	basic liberties	theocratic totalitarianism
'Burka as the mark of female oppression' (Daily Mail)	civilised	medieval
'Some people will believe anything' (Guardian)	tolerance	oppressive darkness
'Keeley has less stares topless' (The Sun)	free	claustrophobic

Table 2: Examples of positive and negative dichotomies appearing in the published articles

The element of such emphasised difference, an inevitable component of Orientalist imagery, is highly evident in visual representations as well. Not only the tabloid media but also established broadsheets and the national broadcaster cling to the reproduction of close-up images depicting a woman in the niqab whose headgear exposes nothing but beautiful eyes with carefully-applied make up. Such pattern is for example replicated in the article 'Sarkozy U-turn on French burka ban over fears of terrorist reprisals' (Allen, 2010). Although the article talks about banning the veil in public spaces and on public transportation in France, the only image portrays a woman who is captured standing next to a bookshelf filled with books with golden inscriptions in Arabic (see Image 4). Rather than modern France, the picture suggests a traditional Orientalist setting with highly accentuated exotic semiotics. Such archaic exoticism reaffirms hijabis and niqabis as Others, thus serving as the basis for social segregation. By reproducing Orientalist modes of representation, the ideological abyss between

'us' and 'them' widens further.



Burka ban: French MPs are expected to recommend that Islamic veils, as seen on a woman in Paris, are not welcome on public transport or in civic buildings

Image 4: Orientalist imagery in The Daily Mail (Allen, 2010)

The discourse of dichotomies between the West and Islam is not only erroneous but it compresses diverse identities of veiled women into one single monolithic category and labels it as different, exotic and negative. As such, veiled women are not only marginalised but often naturalised in the field of abnormality and unnatural (see Youdell, 2006: 39). “Covering your face is **NOT**¹¹ normal,” the Sun’s article ‘Ban veils the real issue—of freedom’ (Baig, 2009) confirms this theory. The article, analogous to numerous other media reports in British press, establishes narrow Western normativity as the universal standard and classifies any deviances as unacceptable.

Often, the polarisation between barbaric Islam and civilised Britain is more direct.

¹¹ The graphic emphasis was made by The Sun.

Capitalising on the image of oppressed Muslim victims, the media reinforce the prevailing notion about the veil being dangerous for women. Paternalistic reporting following this notion can be monitored in the narrations of *The Daily Telegraph*, a daily broadsheet conservative-leaning newspaper. The columnist Toby Young (2010) criticises the supposedly liberal position of British people who are against the burqa ban in the country, saying that “the burka is both a symbol and a source of the oppression of Muslim women.” He concludes stating that he agrees that women should wear what they want but adds that “for most Muslim women it is not a free choice but something they're forced to do by their fathers or brothers or husbands – and the consequences of disobeying can be a beating or worse” (ibid).

Media manipulation can be further on illuminated by the selection of topics. The tabloid press specifically tends to report on the issue of veiling when encountering sensational examples of extreme victim-oppressor situations. *The Daily Mirror* (2007) for example, reports about a Muslim father getting a legal aid for fighting the school which has banned his 12-year-old daughter wearing the niqab, commenting that “another young girl is being used as a political pawn” by “Islamic fundamentalists” (ibid.). *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sunday Telegraph* – among others – utilise child subjects as well by extensive reporting on British girls being forced to wear full Islamic veil as part of the official school uniform in three independent educational institutions in London, Lancaster and Leicester (see Barrett, 2010; Clark, 2010; Dixon, 2010).

The aforementioned strategies of media reporting implement what critical discourse analyst Van Dijk describes as “ideological square” (Van Dijk, 1998). The ideological square is based upon the idea of a discursive group polarisation that emphasises ‘our’ good characteristics and deeds whilst suppressing ‘our’ flaws. On the other side of the square, repetitive ideological matrixes for portraying the

Other de-emphasise 'their' good features and refocus the attention onto negative dimensions of 'their' practices (ibid.: 267). The ideological square is often applied to post-September 11 representation of Muslims (Nnabugwu, 2011: 14; Richardson, 2004: 161) and can be as well deployed in the case of reporting on Islamic headgear.

2.3.2 The terror of black widows

The media-fuelled image of Islamic oppression is additionally reinforced by the discourse of terrorism which presents a nascent reporting trend over the past decade in the British press. As already noted earlier in this chapter, the media promotes the image of the hijab, as well as the niqab and the burqa, as conspicuous symbols of terrorist regimes.

In the article 'Islamic extremism creating 'no-go' areas for non-Muslims in Britain, says Bishop of Rochester' (Doughty, 2008), there is no mention of the veil; however, the article, focusing on the danger of increasing Islamic extremism in Britain is accompanied with two graphic elements: a photograph of Bishop of Rochester standing next to the Queen and an image of four women in niqabs. The latter one is entitled: "Bishop of Rochester warns there are now 'no-go areas' in Britain for non-Muslims because of Islamic extremists" (ibid.). The women hereby denote Islamic extremists who jeopardise the British population's safety. By juxtaposing the image of the niqab wearers with the religious senior portrayed with the Queen, "the strategic placement of images furthermore conjures binary representations of [...] England versus extremism" (Bhimji, 2012: 47).

Following a similar vein of negative reporting, the press is repeatedly exploiting sensational cases of male terrorists camouflaging in the niqab in order to execute

a criminal act, with tabloids being especially keen on such stories. The much-feted cases featured a murderer of a British policewoman supposedly fleeing the country wearing the niqab, a suspect of terrorist crimes being believed to escape the police hiding behind the veil and a male terrorist responsible for 2005 London bombings exiting the country disguised in the niqab. Even though two of these cases have not been confirmed and remain only alleged, all the events were reported on extensively, thus triggering the fear among Brits about terrorists hiding behind the niqab frequently.

The Daily Star additionally expressed the concern about the burgeoning number of female terrorists with an article 'World exclusive: Spooks unmask burka death squads' (Sherwood, 2011). The only photograph accompanying the news story depicts a woman in the niqab casually checking her phone. Her face is blurred, making the portrayed person appear more suspicious. "BRIT spooks have stopped SIXTY terror plots involving Black Widow bombers. Many of the Muslim women who were pulled in were carrying explosives, we can reveal," (ibid.) claims the writer, who goes on to explain that the intelligence agencies believe that the actual number of female terrorists being recruited by their male relatives is much higher.

2.3.3 Moral panic about the Islamisation of Britain

Apart from concerns regarding the 'physical' safety of the British nation, the full Islamic veil furthermore triggers media discussions regarding the perceived threat it constitutes to the British national identity. Especially with France's burqa ban and corresponding discussions on national identity, similar debates are facilitated in Britain by expansive media reporting on the matter (Shorne, 2011: 158). Although the national identity of Britain is indeed constructed upon the

notion of multiculturalism and a subsequent coexistence of multiple faiths, the increasingly multicultural population of Britain leverages moral panic about the Islamisation of the Island. Moral panic can be hereby perceived as the condition created by public concern about ideologically imagined threat to societal values and interests, generated by sensational reporting of the mass media. Entities threatening the social equilibrium become established as folk devils (Cohen, 1972),¹² with veiled women fitting into this role in the context of contemporary moral panic on Islamisation of Britain.

The seeds of veil-related moral panic can be observed in an investigative story 'Why banning the veil would only cover up the real problems of British Muslims' published in the Sunday Telegraph (Gilligan, 2011). The journalist conducts vox pops with niqab wearers on the streets of the London borough of Tower Hamlets. He reports that all the interviewees claimed that "nobody had forced them to wear the veil" (ibid.). However, the author interprets his discoveries by saying that Tower Hamlets is "the headquarters to a particularly pernicious form of Islamic radicalism" (ibid.) and is "controlled by the hardline Islamic Forum of Europe, accused by the local Labour MP of infiltrating his party to further its declared goal of a Sharia state in Europe" (ibid.). Although the author believes his interviewees indeed decided to wear the niqab by themselves, he claims that the Islamised area puts "strong pressure to conform" (ibid.).

Considerably more exaggerated reporting on the issue can be observed in the satirical social commentary 'A very British Royal Wedding... and the bride wore a burka' published in Daily Mail (Littlejohn, 2010). The commentator describes the

¹² Sociologist Stanley Cohen initially coined the term 'folk devil' in his work *Folk Devils and Morals Panics*, in which he observes and analyses media controversies surrounding British Mods and Rockers in the 1960s. Cohen notes a reappearing pattern of reporting on the subject, which frames the mentioned subcultures as violent and deviant by deploying simplistic and negative depictions based on continuous exaggeration.

anticipated royal wedding through – what he believes to be – the social climate of the time. Hence, the imaginary wedding is completely Islamised and saturated with Islamist and terroristic elements. The cartoon published alongside the article depicts the princess wearing the niqab. The article reinforces the negative image of Islam, visually manifested through the Islamic veil, which is threatening Britishness – expressed through the metaphor of monarchy. Humour is a convenient tool for justifying the use of dangerously racist language and imagery.

Apart from threatening British values, niqab wearers moreover appear as a threat to the survival of the British nation. This notion can be analysed in the Daily Express' cover story 'One in 5 Britons will be ethnics' (Hall, 2010). The article that is describing immigration trends, demographic changes and Britain becoming too populous is comes with the picture of two fully veiled Muslim women walking with a stroller. Although Muslims, let alone veils, are not mentioned in the article, this imagery augments negative connotations associated with the veil and the Muslim population in the United Kingdom – the ones of changing demographic landscape leading to Islamisation of Britain and consequently to the extinction of the 'pure' British nation.

2.3.4 Semiotic resistance

However, the media does not only follow the hegemonic portrayals of veiled women as a monolithic, oppressed and threatening social group but occasionally opens the field “for semiotic resistance that not only refuses the dominant meanings but constructs oppositional ones that serve the interests of the subordinate” (Fiske, 2010: 8). In recent years, the media has begun to increasingly communicate the perspectives of Muslim women themselves.

One of the earliest reports humanising a niqab-wearer was published in *The Guardian* with a personal story of Rahmanara Chowdhury (2006), a sports and education development worker from Loughborough University. In her article, Chowdhury describes her decisions for wearing the niqab and mostly positive responses she has received from British society. She claims her decision for wearing the veil is a religious and a personal one, “not coerced by any other factor” (ibid.). The story of a successful British woman with sophisticated English articulation, respected employment and a higher education degree does not only give the voice to the subaltern but also generates an alternative image of a niqab wearer. She is not seen as an exclusively religious figure alienated from mainstream society but is portrayed as a social actor who actively engaged in the British public sphere.

This article is not an isolated example of, what seems to be a slowly increasing reporting trend that concentrates on the perspective of Muslim women. Some other media, such as *Huffington Post* (Elgot, 2013), *the Guardian* and *Vice* (Shahid and Ali, 2013), have given voices to veiled women as well, either in a form of columns or interviews. They have acknowledged that “by-and-large, it's white, secular, middle-aged politicians and journalists doing the talking, not the so-called 'niqabis'” (Elgot, 2013) and that the burqa-ban polemics come in a form of “a debate that hasn't had a lot of input from the women who actually wear the veil” (Shahid and Ali, 2013).

Counter-hegemonic discourses are not limited to giving voices to Muslim women but can also come in a form of alternative visual representations. An example of this is *The Guardian* article ‘Copying French ban on burqa would be un-British, says minister’ (Stratton, 2010). The article, focused on Immigration minister Damian Green’s criticism on the burqa ban, is accompanied with the image of a woman in the niqab who is strolling hand-in-hand with a man next to the Eiffel

tower. The pose she is captured in does not anyhow suggest that she is a victim of a male oppressor or that she does not have an opportunity to enjoy life; the photograph embeds her into a casual context of leisure time activities and portrays her in a romantic situation with her male partner. Such resistance towards grand narrative of monolithic Muslim women empowers the readership with alternative voices and thus encourages society to move closer “towards a heterogeneous social order in which a wide range of forms of consent are given to its people” (Fiske in Laughey, 2007: 173).

Despite these positive examples, the Huntington’s problematic notion of clash of civilisations (1993) still represents the prevailing Western rhetoric deployed for media narrations about the veiled Muslim women. As observed by Modood (2006: 107), many in the West believe that the underlying issue is not terrorism or even Islamic fundamentalism but Islam as a rival and inferior civilisation. According to such understanding, Islam is culturally too different from European culture; hence these two civilisations cannot coexist peacefully in a shared geographical space (Huntington, 1993: 22). Such approaches to handling the cultural difference continue to emphasise the negative dimensions of this difference for justifying British superiority and its (neo-imperialist sounding) “need” for keeping “the external Other out and culturally colonising the Other within” (Sunier & van Ginkel, 2006: 118).

Rare semiotic resistances towards such postcolonial discourses, initiated mostly by the left-wing and alternative press, however, voice the alternative meanings that reflect the plurality of identities, voices and meanings surrounding the topic. At the same time, they champion the break of the clash of civilisations theory. They acknowledge that there is no such concept as a distinctively different Muslim civilisation, but point out that the Muslim civilisation per se is not incompatible with the West – until the hegemonic ideology, expressed through

the mass media, signifies it as such.

2.4 Conclusion

An overwhelming proportion of recent political and media discussions about Islamic headgear promote and reinforce the Orientalist concept of oppressed and voiceless Muslim women. Burdened with colonial legacies, such discourses are further reinforced with perpetually emerging stories about forced veiling and related atrocities against women in Muslim countries. They only rarely discuss the coerced veil in the wider context of female oppression and radical Islamist politics but instead introduce it as a pivotal problem of Muslim women. This is politically convenient, especially in times of political crisis. The veil can easily be transformed into a powerful propaganda visual. And the simple act of removing it is seen as a visible liberation of women. According to such problematic conceptions of female oppression, helping women to unveil thus equates to rescuing them.

Whether talking about beheading women in war-torn Syria, a limited access to education experienced by girls in rural Pakistan or voluntary veiling in urban France, the narratives of female liberation appear to be curiously static and uniform. Experiences of Muslim women are generalised and compressed into a monolithic identity of a 'Muslimwoman'. Miriam Cooke (2009: 91) invents this neologism following Sherman Jackson's and Joan Martin's use of the term Blackamerican and blackwoman respectively. She wants to accentuate the omni-importance of this "new singular and gendered identification" (ibid.) that prevails over ethnic, generational, cultural, social and historical differences. As demonstrated in analysing the legal, political and media language earlier in this

chapter, this distinct character of a 'Muslimwoman' inserts a strong polarisation between us and her. Her identity is introduced not only as an inherently different but also subordinated, what justifies the moral crusades of liberating her.

Such narratives fail to address a title question: do veiled women need liberating at all? The question is a variation of Lila Abu-Lughod's monograph (2013) and an earlier paper (2002) entitled *Do Muslim women need saving?* Her question is an especially important one and requires further reflections. As stressed by the author herself (2013: 47), the very idea of saving implies that women are being saved from something or someone, or alternatively, saved to something. When it comes to the question of veiling, the answers remain often ignored, assumed or postulated upon simplistic Eurocentric myths presented earlier in this section.

The real answers, however, are never straightforward and simple, neither with the mandated nor with the voluntary veil. Apart from the aforementioned idea of its entrenchment into a complex set of socio-political meanings, the concept of freedom is not materialised in the same type of dress cross-culturally. It exists outside the Euro-American paradigm and cannot be generalised either globally, or within the eclectic category of Muslim women. As emphasised by Crosby (2014: 46), a Eurocentric view of the veil as "a rhetorically universal symbol of oppression" misses the opportunity to acknowledge the diversity of female and feminist agency that comes in various shapes and forms. Headscarves, abayas and niqabs are commonly part of them.

This idea is especially apparent in the case of European political and legal discourses. Burqa bans, burkini bans and related interdictions fail to acknowledge a woman's autonomy in deciding about her dress, and modelling its meanings. Instead, they limit her agency by demanding that she conform to narrowly-defined Western norms and values. Such generalisations nonchalantly

dismiss the importance of the title question and ignore the fact that without addressing it, the aim of improving women's lives cannot be fulfilled successfully.

The following chapter will expand on the notion of veiling being a voluntary and diverse practice, and will illustrate this theme using ethnographic examples of various British Muslims explaining their multiple motivations for taking on the hijab, and different ways of practising it.

Chapter III: Becoming a hijabi



Image 5: Boushra Almutawakel: True Self (2010)

It is early in the afternoon when Reema returns from running her errands in Birmingham city centre. Fellow passengers, adults and children alike, turn their heads as she boards the bus. But she is accustomed to constant attention on the streets of her home city. Whilst she is normally subjected to curious glances, she has occasionally received some harsher and more hurtful remarks. She appreciates that the curiosity is just a reaction to her attire, which is far from a common sight. Though Birmingham is one of Britain's most multicultural cities, the city centre only rarely witnesses women wearing the full face veil.

The bus turns onto a roundabout and follows the green sign indicating city's well known Muslim area. The setting changes progressively with every bus stop. A bus window now frames signs of halal restaurants, Islamic centres and shops with Arabic names. The bus stops again and Reema alights, turning towards an empty shopping window right next to the bus stop. The banner above the window suggests that the building is a home to a Muslim community centre. It is owned and run by Reema herself and is a result of her hard work over the past two years, and extreme life experiences of over four decades.

Her faith, too, is the result of the struggles, challenges and experiences she has undergone throughout her life – as a young singer trying to succeed in the entertainment industry, as a single and unemployed mother and as a victim of domestic abuse. Before devoting herself to Islam, she experimented with numerous religions but eventually realised that her parents' religion was closest to her heart and intellect. Her spirituality is a journey and her clothes are its material reflection, she summarises.

Reema donned the niqab five years ago, only a couple of months after fully embracing the Islamic faith. The niqab is not an obligatory item of clothing, she asserts, but brings her closer to her God. According to Reema, wearing it is a deeply spiritual experience and one that cannot be translated into words. She compares the experience to the taste of an apple; it is easy to acknowledge the taste when biting into a fruit, but challenging to describe to

someone who has never eaten it before.

Although the face veil is an important part of her religious devotion, she doesn't wear it at all times. She mostly puts it on in public but occasionally decides to leave the house without it. Sometimes she decides to remove it for purely practical reasons, such as the weather, but mostly she would go out without it in order to protect herself and her religion. In some parts of Britain people would not understand it and it would only generate unnecessary problems, she claims. She also takes it off when working with children. Not only it is not necessary to veil in front of youngsters; years of experience in early childhood education and a corresponding degree have taught her the importance of one's facial communication as a didactical tool.

Fast forward a couple of hours, I sit with Reema in her spacious and tastefully decorated office. She is sitting straight at a robust L-shaped desk on a leather office chair and is wearing a long skirt, a jacket and a light brown headscarf. Her male assistant brings her coffee in a small cup, and Reema starts sipping it slowly while getting on with her daily tasks. She has recently launched a new blog for Muslim female role models, which is yet another project in a series of her activities, which encompass coordinating numerous campaigns, engaging in public speaking and school outreach and recording her own radio show.

We are occasionally interrupted by her youngest daughter Fatima who curiously checks on her mum during her play breaks. Being only five, she wears her short hair loose. Reema would be pleased to see Fatima embrace the niqab, but only should she herself decide so. Free will is crucial, she states. Reema admits to having practised a lot of things in her life which she now deems negative – from smoking to harmful relationships – but veiling, she affirms, is not one of them. On the contrary, Reema finds it liberating, claiming that it prevents people from judging you on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity and age. You can impress someone with your personality. But the religious aspect

remains the most significant one, she emphasises; if it was not for pleasing her god, she would not wear it.

By being frequently reproduced in public discourses over the past decade, the Islamic veil, and the words niqab, burqa and hijab, have established themselves as part of the English vocabulary. These words not only come with a whole set of assumptions and connotations attached to them, but are at their most fundamental level almost unquestionably associated with a simple definition: they stand for a piece of fabric worn by a Muslim woman for religious purposes. When a discussion involves one or more of the aforementioned words, the mental canvas of the vast majority of Western non-Muslims becomes filled with reproductions of images, as portrayed by the media. These suggest that the person in question is a Muslim woman who wears some sort of headgear for religious purposes.

However similar the definitions might appear from an everyday linguistic perspective, the signifier of an Islamic veil is in reality far more dynamic, antagonised and contested. Strolling on the streets of Birmingham with Reema, a single Muslim woman from the West Midlands, demonstrates the numerous forms, contexts and nuances, in which the Islamic veil enters and exits the lives of Muslim women, not only throughout the span of their lifetime, but also on a daily basis. A brief snapshot of Reema suggests that the veil, just as any other piece of clothing or accessory, is not something that is an organic part of a person's body or is present in her (or even his) life at all times. It is, instead, an item that is donned to fulfil a specific purpose, and inevitably comes with a set of conscious decisions that inform who, when, where, how and why the woman will wear it, or not wear it.

The answers to these questions are far from uniform, but are the result of numerous historical, social, political, geographical and personal contingencies. Each of the estimated 800 million Muslim women in the world – not to mention non-Muslim hijabis¹³ – will have a different set of answers, with many of them contesting the common conceptualisations of the Islamic veil. Revisiting the aforementioned folk definition, the previous chapter demonstrated that the hijab was not necessarily always worn by Muslims, it was not always embraced exclusively by women, and it did not unavoidably reflect religious sentiments. It is not even ineludibly connected to the headgear or an item of material culture. Thus, many hijabis do not talk about wearing the hijab, but rather practising it, highlighting that the concept of the hijab is grander than a simple act of wrapping a scarf around one's head (Bennoune, 2011: 24; Ruby, 2006).

It is to illustrate this idea of the hijab not just equating a headscarf that I chose Boushra Almutawakel's photographic experiment *True Self* as the title image of this chapter (see Image 5). The exhibition of photographs, which was on display at the British Museum at the beginning of my fieldwork offered a lucid introduction into my research and opened up various engaging streams of thinking, which will be leading us through this chapter. Dress indeed reflects the Self, and its growth, development and changes. However, no matter the outfit, the "true Self", as the author puts it, cannot be hidden or altered simply by adopting a certain type of dress. Clothing can change in a matter of seconds without changing the true Self. Reema puts on and takes off her face veil and adapts her clothing to different social contexts without challenging her religious devotion and her Self.

Following up on these ideas, this chapter will argue that the hijab can never be a

¹³ I expand on non-Muslim hijabis in Chapter IV, section 6, where I observe the phenomenon of non-Muslim women deciding to don the hijab to protect their modesty or attract media attention.

static, determined and ever-present part of women's lives and identities. Echoing the words of Reema, it is a constant journey. Sometimes, this journey might be as short as the distance from a bed to a mirror and no longer than approximately three minutes – the minimum time the morning routine of wrapping the hijab might take. More significantly, though, the journey alludes to the decisions, changes and consequences that women undergo by putting on or taking off the hijab at some point in their lives.

3.1 A plurality of veils

Returning to the house in central Birmingham, Reema talks about the criticism she commonly receives for her dressing habits. Non-Muslims and fellow niqabis alike question her decision to wear a face veil only sporadically. Although she would normally put it on when outside her home, she does not have a problem with showing her face in public or posting face-revealing photographs on her social media channels. She dismisses calumnious commentators: "I wear it for my lord and not for them. I'm no less of a Muslim when I don't have my face covered."

Her face veil brings her closer to her god, therefore she wears it whenever she can. However, she is aware that veiling is an additional deed that she performs for advancing her spirituality, rather than an obligation in Islam that every woman has to comply with. "Having hair covered is the only obligation," she sums up her beliefs and claims her own right to choose her garment according to her interpretation of Quranic verses.

The Quran remain the basis for believers' understanding of Islamic religion,

including the matter of veiling. The latter – and the controversies surrounding the interpretations – is directly evoked only in two verses, Sura XXXIII: 59 and Sura XXIV: 31.

“O prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and the womenfolk of the Believers to draw their ‘jalabib’ close about them. That is most appropriate so that they can be recognised and not be molested. God is forgiving and merciful” (Sura XXXIII: 59).

“Tell the female Believers that they should lower their gaze, guard their chastity, to reveal of their adornments only that which is apparent, and to cast their veils over their bosom” (Sura XXIV: 31).

Due to the ever-evolving Arabic language and a poetic style prone to multiple interpretations, it is impossible to have a single and functional reading of these verses (El Guindi, 1999: xiii; Hussain, 1984: 149). Subsequently, some people decode the words as a requirement to wear the veil, while some perceive them to be a mere recommendation to dress modestly in order to avoid harassment or potentially lascivious gazes, and to protect their modesty.

Whereas the Quran remains brief and vague about female attire, the hadith literature gives more substantial accounts on female veiling. The hadith, a post-Quranic collection of sayings and customs of the prophets and the early Islamic community, features a record of his daily practices which some Muslims believe should be mimicked consistently. Since Mohamed’s wives purportedly wore the niqab – arguably due to the prevailing fashion trends of the time – and the behaviour of the wives is to be emulated, it is rationalised that Muslim women should adhere to the same dress code (Hoodfar, 1997: 6). The hadith literature moreover includes several indications as to what is an appropriate form and age for women’s veiling. However, even in the hadith there is no universal consensus

on veiling, and with different Islamic denominations following different sets of hadiths, the outlooks on female attire vary accordingly (Roald, 2003: 264-267; Vakulenko, 2012: 4). It can be argued that different interpretations of the Quranic verses and its consequent texts are to a certain extent responsible for an eclectic plurality of Islamic head dresses and Muslim female attire more generally.

Moreover, different veiling trends also vary culturally, as Islamic dressing codes merge with traditional attire of certain cultural spaces. I find a good illustration of this varied breadth of Islamic fashion cross-culturally as I attend a fashion show organised by a Newcastle-based Muslim organisation and a local university on a late winter afternoon. The women walking on an improvised runway in front of us exhibit a diverse array of traditional Islamic garments from different geographical regions. A Malaysian entrant features a silk headscarf in a pale pink colour, wrapped tightly around the model's head. It is combined with a matching *baju kurung*, a traditional, enclosed dress. The first outing is succeeded by a Sudanese model who exhibits a traditional *tob*, a 15-foot long, multi-coloured piece of cloth, loosely wrapped around the whole body, including the head. A Gulf outfit which dominates the catwalk next, comes in the form of a black abaya with golden decoration combined with a headscarf and a face veil of same colour and the same material. These examples evidently show not only different approaches to the interpretation of the Quran, but the role of cultural influence on the appearance of Islamic dress. On its journey through time and space, the Islamic veil has undergone tremendous modifications and 'crossbreeding'. Conforming to local taste and the spirit of the time, it has adopted various forms, patterns, materials and shapes (see Demovic, 2009: 111; Jaschok and Jingjun Shui, 2013: 219; Osella and Osella, 2007).

However, although British Muslim women come from various different cultural traditions and religious denominations, their headgear is not a mere sum of

different traditional garments from the countries of their ancestors' origin, but rather a dynamic fusion of different styles and cultural elements. An example of eclectic headgear fashion in the UK is encapsulated in an ongoing project 'London Veil' implemented by visual artist Sara Shamsavari. Born in Tehran in the midst of the Iranian revolution, Sara was raised in London. Just like Boushra Almutawakel, who authored the title image, Sara is interested in exploring the complex dialogues between dressing, and veiling in particular, and identity.

Initiated in 2014, Shamsavari's project – an ongoing photographic experiment that up to today features over 100 hijabis – aims to document the vibrancy and beauty of the Islamic community in Britain's capital. The portraits depict women with violet leopard patterns, big colourful flowers, matching earrings and complex knots that all emphasise women's individuality and highlight the diverse options for wearing head coverings (see Image 6). Whilst the objective of the project lies in highlighting the individuality of the hijab wearers, the artist cannot ignore the repeating patterns in fashion landscapes of the metropolis: "In Marble Arch, there is this fashion for looking as expensive as you can, whereas in Whitechapel it was all about creativity – the young women may not have been wearing designer clothes but they had an attitude of 'we know how to put it together'" (Khaleeli, 2013).

A photographic lens of Sara Shamsavari captures an important notion: the type of headgear adopted by an individual is never simply the result of her environment or her personality, but is always a result of interactions between both. Whilst a woman's attire might be influenced by her ethnic background, place of residence, or by trends in her immediate social circle, it simultaneously also reflects her own individual traits and preferences.



Image 6: A photograph featured in Sara Shamsavari's photographic project London veil (2014)

Nevertheless, not all Muslim women join Shamsavari in her celebration of individuality. Instead, some believe that the Islamic veil is in its essence designed to mask differences among individuals. Among them is Hawa, a second-generation Somali student who currently resides in West London. Hawa wears a long black abaya – a loose robe-like garment that is especially prevalent in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. She combines it with a headscarf in black or dark blue colours and always ensures that her clothes are concealing everything but her face and her hands. Whilst she is avoiding any make up, she wears a small piercing in her nose – an accessory that was criticised by her family members caustically – and plastic colourful bracelets with political messages, such as calling for peace in Syria.

Although Hawa is quick to criticise individual alterations of a modest Islamic outfit, her accessories contradict her words. She, too, deploys her dress for

manifesting parts of her persona that are not necessarily linked to religious sentiments. Although the messages she conveys with her dress are not the ones of beauty and attraction, her dress shows the resistance towards her family's restrictions and her strong and passionate fight against the wars in the Islamic world, for example.

Moving to the other side of London, to the North Eastern side of the city, we meet Khadija, an 18-year old student, who wears similar attire to Hawa but combines her abaya with a black headscarf, black gloves and a black face veil. Although nobody in her family follows a similar dress code, she feels a strong connection with such attire. With her parents being born in Algeria, the niqab – she believes – can be indirectly seen as part of her tradition. As a self-proclaimed Orthodox Muslim she tries to keep her clothing free of any decorative or fashionable additions. She also refuses to wear make-up or jewellery when outside her house. Inevitably, she combines her outfit with a purse and a pair of shoes that demonstrate her own individual style and personal preferences.

Even among niqabis, there is no shared 'uniform' or a common view on how the niqab should be worn. Despite the prevailing belief about the niqab being disassociated from fashion, an idea that is supported by Khadija, numerous women continue to challenge this view. Sumaiyah, a niqabi from the South of England, embodies her excess of energy by wearing bright colours and dynamic patterns instead of combining her niqab with a classic abaya and a single-coloured scarf in dark shades. "I live in the UK not in a desert somewhere in the Gulf or in I don't know what century," she states in a determined voice and with a discrete smile. "I choose to dress modestly and to cover my beauty and that's not anyhow connected to wearing clothes that are part of a distant culture's tradition." She normally chooses a loose sweater and a long skirt and occasionally adds a long jacket that also camouflages the shape of her body. Whilst her face

veil is black, her scarves vary in colours and patterns but are always carefully coordinated with the rest of her attire.

Hawa, Khadija, Sumaiyah and the anonymous Londoners from Shamsavari's visuals would all fall into the category of a 'veiled woman'. They would also all claim that they wear the hijab in an appropriate, *halal* manner. However, their approaches to veiling vary greatly and can often be conflicting.

3.2 *Halal* hijab

Many illuminating examples of the aforementioned idea of diverse interpretations and legacies of the hijab do not appear only on British streets but expand into the digital world. From Twitter to Facebook to Instagram, heated discussions around 'proper' or *halal* hijabs continue to engage individuals who utilise social media channels to voice their strong opinions on the often controversial and divisive subject. While I will explore and expand on some of these cases in the subsequent chapters in connection to fashion and feminism, one case study is particularly interesting for highlighting the existing plurality of hijabs. In the last months of 2013, thousands of social media users posted, tweeted, pinned and shared an illustration depicting 28 different ways of wearing the hijab (see Image 7). A picture combined some traditional styles of veiling with contemporary variations, for instance wearing a colourful headscarf under an urban, hip-hop style cap. Accompanied with titles and hashtags that were celebrating Islamic diversity, "hijab chic" and the beauty of Islam, the photograph quickly started evoking critiques within the Muslim community. Many Muslim users, both male and female, felt that not all 28 heuristics could pass as the hijab.



Image 7: 28 ways of wearing the hijab?

When discussing this image with British Muslim women following the online backlash, many of them, too, agreed that some of the examples featured on the illustration were erroneous. In fact, a majority of women who wear headgear of some sort dismissed at least some versions, with urban attire featuring a cap being the most commonly singled out. Hawa, for instance, mentioned as few as six, emphasising the importance of modest colour and the amount of body that is covered by a cloth.

If I showed the same image to Mahfana, a middle-aged British woman of Iranian origin, she would probably point out yet another version of the hijab that is missing on the photograph: practising hijab without the hijab. Months earlier, our conversation on the hijab started with her angry monologue on the very definition of the term that – according to her belief – should be based on the interior expressions of a woman’s faith rather than its external manifestations. “This is modesty for me, this is my hijab,” she stated whilst pointing her hand to her face without any make up and then guided my gaze to her loose sweater and

dark trousers with a simple cut. She believes she is a good Muslim and is a firm believer that a simple act of covering her head would not bring her closer to Allah.

Many women who do not veil echo her words, claiming that the concept of hijab is relational and up to individual to define. Quoting the Quran, they state that veiling is prone to contestations, as the holy book does not offer any direct advice other than a recommendation to dress modestly. A college girl from London who participates in an online discussion on the subject comments:

“The hijab was meant to be worn by women to respect their privacy, where I live, if you wear a hijab, everyone’s eyes will be on you and you get comments and stares. If I go out in normal, loose fitting, modest clothing without the hijab no one notices. [...] When I went to Saudi Arabia, I was fully covered and wearing a burqa and the men over there would keep staring at us girls anyway. But in the UK, the men on the streets can see women wearing a lot worse than me on a daily basis and they really don’t care what I’m wearing and people don’t notice me.”

The testimony of an anonymous girl emphasises an important paradox of veiling. As already discussed, observing the hijab corresponds to the concept of purdah, which centres on the idea of seclusion for the purpose of protecting one's privacy and modesty. What the girl in question emphasises is how donning certain type of clothes that are meant to protect individual's modesty and privacy can result in the reverse happening. In certain parts of Britain, where the hijab or the niqab is not a common sight, wearing them might attract more unwanted attention than not wearing them at all.

Similar views have been additionally promoted by some British Muslim public personalities. In a piece for The Financial Times (2013), BBC Radio 4 *Today's* first

Asian and second ever female presenter Mishal Husain writes about her decisions for not wearing the headscarf. Her choice was formulated on the basis of the rigid Saudi policies on female attire that she had experienced whilst living there as a child. Quoting the Quran's verse 7:26 ("O children of Adam, we have provided you with garments to cover your bodies, as well as for luxury. But the best garment is the garment of righteousness."), she emphasises that the holy book places "emphasis on actions over appearances" (ibid.). Taking this verse as her principal mantra, she is saddened to see how the vision of Islamic dress varies to the extent that "one part of the Muslim world's concept of Islamic dress may be unacceptable in another" (ibid.).

As is evident in the case of British Muslim women, these Muslim worlds do not necessarily refer to distant countries with radically different political regimes. They are ultimately symbolic spaces that are shaped by person-specific status and group conformity as well as by collective cultural aesthetics that are reflecting norms, values and standards within a certain cultural circle, age group or a social setting (see Barthes, 1990 [1967]; Delaney, 2011; Svensson, 1992: 62). They are sets of values, traditions, norms and sentiments that are dependent upon various factors which women accumulate on their 'journey'.

The monolithic signifier of a 'veiled woman' is hence a flawed one. It is rather a category that contains endless subcategories, or more correctly: individuals with different headgear which varies in design, pattern, colour, length, material, wrapping style and trend, and perhaps more importantly: motive, intention and practice. Every one of the approximately 1.4 million Muslim women in the UK would thus embrace slightly or radically different attire that will reflect all of the aforementioned factors.

3.3 “I wasn’t born with the hijab”

The veil does not only come in a variety of physical materialisations; the choice of wearing certain attire reflects a compendium of decisions, considerations and sentimentalities that are in a continuous process of evolution and change. To return to Reema, the simple, sartorial act of covering her head was a life-changing one: it was a physical manifestation of a fresh start that left behind struggles of domestic abuse, of superficial music industry and what she calls a damaging lifestyle. “My decision to finally free myself from the oppression of others meant I would revisit the way I talk, walk, act and dress caring little for the consequences previously instilled in me,” Reema once wrote in her online diary. The decision to don the hijab, and a few months later the niqab, was significant in Reema's quest to commence working on herself internally. In her case, the veil was part of a continuum of change that came with her decision to replace a negative past with what she hoped would be a brighter future guided by her lord.

A similar idea of the hijab being the result of an ongoing spiritual journey is additionally entertained by Roshan. Whilst she is a born Muslim, she started wearing the hijab only in her late college years. Before delving into Islam independently and “properly” at the age of seventeen, she was uneasy with the idea of wearing a headscarf, even when trying it on in a group of girlfriends. The more she learnt about Islam, the more she wanted to practise everything: from praying salah to eventually also wearing the hijab. She recalls her beginnings as shy and experimental. As a very first step, she would simply wear a pashmina around her neck.

“In that summer I had the scarf covering my hair with my neck still showing, but then after that I started practising the scarf the way you see now, and now the abaya awaits,

Inshallah."

Roshan believes that even though one may be born into a Muslim family, the process of becoming a Muslim inevitably starts from zero and progresses gradually, in different forms and at a different pace for each individual. The hijab can be perceived as an external documentation of this journey.

The two women demonstrate different approaches towards utilising the veil in their respective religious journeys. For Reema, on the one hand, the decision to return to Islam and subsequently adopt the veil was sudden and all-encompassing. It materialised as a fresh beginning and the altered lifestyle that came with it. Taking on the veil for Roshan, on the other hand was a shy, cautious and gradual exploration at a slower pace. Her progressive development of religious sentiments was reflected externally with a changing dressing style. The cases of Reema and Roshan demonstrate the importance of faith that should definitely not be diminished. However, the veil cannot be observed in a social vacuum, isolated from various influences that inevitably inform the ways in which people choose their attire. Its physical location on the border between an intimate body (the self) and an environment (culture) introduces the veil, just like any other form of dress, as a particularly informative social institution. While it is indeed motivated religiously, the decision to wear certain headgear is constituted by and constitutive of various other (cultural) categories as well as of one's very intimate identity (Cordwell and Schwarz, 1973; Hansel, 2004; Polhemus and Procter, 1978; Tarlo: 1996, 2010).

For a better comprehension of this notion, I should reconstruct the dinner conversations that took place after a seminar with Muslim scholars which I attended during my fieldwork. The scene features a big round table, generously loaded with halal food, and a group of about ten women, including myself. After

making small talk about the event, Nadeem, a Yemeni lady of about 40 years, turns to the only niqabi at the table and asks whether her female relatives wear such attire as well. "I'm the only one, my family's not very happy about it. They keep poking me about it, trying to change my mind," is the answer that comes from across the table from Zainab, a young niqabi from Wales. She furthermore explains how the hijab simply didn't feel enough for her and she found the niqab effective in facilitating the spiritual progression she was hoping for. Her answer is not a surprising one. Most of the British niqabis I spoke to responded to similar questions with an answer akin to Zainab's.

"What about others, why did you start wearing the hijab?", Nadeem asks the ladies assembled at the table, and apologises for her nosiness about such a private matter by jokingly adding that she is assisting me in organising a little impromptu focus group. Almost all women respond to her question with curiously different replies.

Nouran, who was born into a first-generation Egyptian Muslim family, recalls: "Some of the girls in my class wore it already and I couldn't wait to get it myself. I was so excited when I eventually got it, I felt like an adult." In families, where the majority of older female relatives practise the hijab themselves, taking up the hijab might be expected with the arrival of puberty. Despite taking the hijab as an obligation, she acknowledges the importance of following her god's commandments. Submitting to them is in itself worship which assists an individual to develop religiously.

"For me, I started wearing it only later, it was purely political and it happened after 9/11," it is now Nassra's turn. With the nascent demonisation of Muslims in the media, the Oman-born sociologist felt a strong need to identify herself as a Muslim at a visible level and combat the prevailing negative stereotyping that

was suddenly coming from all directions. She was working for the government then and was travelling a lot, therefore the need to confront prejudice was even stronger. Now, when she lives in the United Kingdom, her mission continues. As observed by Lazreg (2009: 54), “experimenting” with the hijab in Nassra’s fashion emerged as an increasingly attractive method for Muslim women in Europe and North America for demonstrating pride in their culture as a reaction to the war on terror. The hijab in that sense became a platform for announcing that they were not “afraid of diffuse hostility towards Muslims” and that they would oppose it head on by proudly exhibiting their identity (ibid.). As will be observed in greater detail later in this thesis, such ‘hijab activism’ (Tarlo, 201) now constitutes an established practice of political campaigning in contemporary Britain that is not only linked to combating Islamophobia, but is also deployed for peace actions, resisting racist policies or even for environmental causes.

Returning to the dinner table, we now turn our heads towards Shanaya, who shares her story. Living in a predominantly white neighbourhood, and growing up in a moderate Muslim family, she did not wear the hijab at first. She remembers:

“People in the neighbourhood were so racist, you’d get a lot of negative comments just for being a bit darker, when going to the shops or walking in the street for instance. I thought: why not take up the hijab, it won’t make any difference. I get all that negative attention anyway, so why not embrace my religion and practise it the way I want.”

For Shanaya, identifying with Islam visibly could be seen almost as a defence mechanism. Rather than being ostracised from the community, she announced her belonging to a different group. She made herself visibly Muslim and visibly Other. As argued by Pnina Werbner (2012: 113), the veil can become a medium for an individual’s articulation of her participation in “a deterritorialised global

movement of Islamic culture and religion" (ibid.), especially when it is worn in a country that is not predominantly Muslim. As such, the veil is not only an expression of religious beliefs but also a visual statement of belonging – not ineludibly solely to Islam but to, for instance, Middle Eastern, Arabic culture, or to a specific country or ethnicity based upon Islamic values.

Whilst the hijab can be a symbol of belonging, it can simultaneously also build social barriers, as demonstrated by Laila, the youngest girl at the table. A university student from London, she recalls how she waited impatiently to finally become old enough to wear the hijab. She would wrap random cloths around her head and observe herself in the mirror, admiring the adult-looking image that was reflected back to her. Attending a mixed sixth form college, she experienced that the way she saw herself in the mirror did not necessarily coincide with the ways in which she was seen by her classmates.

"All hijabis always sat together and hung out with each other. I didn't want to be only with them. I am Muslim and I'm proud of it but I want to mix. I want to have friends who are not Muslim, I don't want to limit my social life to one group only."

Social conventions in her interfaith school motivated Laila to take off her hijab in order to create more space for social flexibility and mobility. According to her, this decision did not diminish other aspects of practising religion. She would still wear modest clothes covering most of the body and hiding the body shape. Rather than buying only high street clothes, she is loyal to what she calls, "desi fashion." She is normally seen in a *salwar kameez*, a dress that is common in her parents' native Pakistan, but would occasionally replace the bottom part with skinny jeans to create a more contemporary look.

The dinner conversations introduce just some of the numerous scenarios in which

the veil enters – or in the case of Laila leaves – the lives of Muslim women. Each of these Muslim women, gathered at a shared dinner table, has her own set of reasons that motivated her to put on or take off a certain type of head covering at one stage of her life. Whilst their reasons are above all spiritual, their decisions were informed by various other factors: their life experiences, families, neighbourhoods, schools or global politics.

As seen throughout this section, these dynamics are pivotal in determining the degree to which a woman will veil. It is especially interesting to observe how the same type of a headgear is perceived differently by different Muslim women. For Roshan, wearing a scarf on her head was a major advancement on her spiritual journey, informed by years of studying religion and months of contemplating the decision. For Reema, on the other hand, a headscarf was the first step in her quest of getting closer to her god in hope to escape the turmoil in her life. The veil, in a sense, served as a reminder of a new beginning for herself and for society more broadly.

What needs to be highlighted when discussing socio-cultural factors in regards to a woman's dress is to not seek ways for constant rationalisation of Islamic practices and fall into the trap of the Eurocentric obsession with identity politics. The reason for veiling is, with some exceptions, first and foremost religious. It is important to acknowledge the significance that attire performs in the process of enhancing women's spirituality and establishing stronger relations and trust with their god.

The experiences of British Muslim women thus resonate with the findings of Saba Mahmood's ethnographic research among Muslims in Cairo (2005). Mahmood describes how her female respondents refused to acknowledge the possibility of their dresses representing parts of their identities, and insisted on a solely

religious dimension to their attire. In her academic discussion, Mahmood accommodates these different perspectives by concluding that dressing in a certain way is definitely a practice that creates and reflects the self, but is always guided and in line with commandments of their god. The divine dimensions of the hijab therefore need to be highlighted when speaking about the motivations for donning the veil, be it in the context of Egypt or Great Britain.

3.4 Learning to live with the hijab

Reema recalls the abrupt changes her life and her lifestyle went through when taking up the hijab. Smoking, drinking, friendships with unmarried men – they all needed to go. What she misses the most out of all things is singing. Before she became a devoted Muslim, singing was not only her career but also her biggest passion. As she was seeking to transform her lifestyle radically and immerse herself fully into Islam, she believed the change needed to be drastic and sudden, otherwise she would have not achieved the desired result. The headscarf, and later the niqab, was only one of the elements in the mosaic of changes that constituted her full submission to god.

Other women report similarly dramatic changes that came with donning the hijab. These changes are especially evident in the case of converts, whereby the hijab is often perceived as an official announcement of their new religion. Whilst wearing the hijab for the first time is an important moment in a woman's spiritual journey, it is almost equally significant for her relatives and other people who form their social environment. When a woman starts wearing the hijab, religion transcends the field of the private and becomes displayed publicly. Parents, siblings, neighbours, colleagues and classmates are now fully aware of a convert's

new religious identity.

Not only converts but also 'born Muslims' acknowledge the change in their social interactions. Whereas in the case of converts, the transformed relations might be more visible in their immediate social circle, other Muslim women often perceive it more strongly outside their close kin and friends. Apart from receiving negative comments from strangers, they would simultaneously get warmer attitudes from unknown Muslims. They often describe experiences of being randomly greeted on the street with 'as salamu alaykum' by fellow Muslims, and being offered support and help when outside in public, for instance when encountering difficulties in school or when needing help carrying bags at a shop. Their religion is not only more visible; it consequently becomes a more significant part of their daily lives outside of the spiritual realm.

This notion accentuates an important point: the adoption of the veil inevitably alters parts of one's identity. Not only will a woman advance her spirituality. The way in which she is perceived by her surroundings – by her family or strangers – will in return unavoidably require her to reflect on her own identity. Although the veil might often be donned in order to ensure a woman's modesty or even invisibility in public, the effect of veiling is to a certain extent paradoxically the opposite. In the United Kingdom where the hijab is not common attire, veiling is a socially visible fact that shapes a woman's interactions especially prominently. Recalling the anecdotes from the dinner table, the memories of Shanaya and Laila additionally illustrate this notion. While Shanaya found the veil helpful for disappearing from racism into a safe zone of a new social category, Laila found her new visibility in class problematic for establishing and maintaining the social relationships she was seeking.

This paradox of visibility and invisibility that is strongly experienced by British

Muslim women is a reappearing motif not only in the testimonies of my respondents, but also in literary accounts of veiling by English Muslim writers. The discussed paradox is beautifully documented in Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret* (2005). The book narrates the fictional story of Sudanese-born Najwa who seeks political exile in London. The hijab is an omnipresent leitmotif of the story and is employed as a clever metaphor for encapsulating Najwa's dynamic interplay of social exclusion and inclusion. Having immigrated not only to another continent but also to a lower social class, Najwa is struggling to fit into her new environment. Her headscarf both assists her in becoming invisible and "undetectable" from London culture, and simultaneously helps her to become visibly Muslim, thus embracing a new identity and self-determined persona (Santesso, 2013: 95).

"When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought 'not bad, not so bad'. Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me anymore. I was invisible and they were quiet. (Aboulela, 2005: 247).

The passage focuses on Najwa's feeling of liberation as her hijab assisted her to establish a new social order, where she was content with her own image as well as with the reactions – or the lack of reactions, in this case – from the people in her proximity. However, a few pages earlier Najwa is not so pleased with the image of herself in the mirror. She describes the inability to curb her resisting and springing curls and push them into a scarf. Her struggles with wrapping the scarf around her hair are deployed as an allegory for manifesting the difficulties Najwa is experiencing when she tries to embrace and accept her new identity.

Both passages evoke yet another important metaphor that is consistently brought

forth when discussing the first memories of veiling among British Muslim women – the reflection in the mirror. Recalling the first instance of seeing their own head covered with a scarf is mentioned and described by numerous women who found this moment to be an important mark of the change. It is not the act of buying the hijab, pinning the headscarf or even leaving the house for the first time. Observing their own image in the mirror seems to be remembered as particularly momentous by many.

Noora, a Qatari graduate student residing in the North East of England, whom we will meet more closely in the next chapter, recalls this moment very clearly. She comments: “I felt so proud at that moment. I felt like 'I'm a big girl now', it [the hijab] felt like a crown.” This notion seems to be an obvious re-enactment of Lacanian mirror stage (1949) that is referring to the recognition of children in a mirror for the first time. Analogous to an infant’s recognition of their reflection, the first sight of oneself in the hijab, too, functions as the interface between image identity and identification (see Brancroft, 2012: 24; Hook, 2009: 269). Just like Lacan’s infant, a woman recognises not only that her image now appears different, but instantaneously grasps that this new image has an important, in fact transformative, implication.

However, the process of making oneself accustomed to the veil does not only occur at a psychological level, but is necessarily bound in the series of practical initiation challenges. All respondents report an initial nervousness which is not necessarily linked to existential questions, but is often triggered by the most trivial things, for instance struggling with the pins which fasten the garment. The notion that you are not a true hijabi until you have inflicted injury upon yourself with a hijab pin can be heard frequently.

Many new hijabis take their anxieties to Reddit, currently one of the largest and

most popular online messaging boards. In addition to exploring their spirituality, hijabi users turn to the forum in the hope of finding practical advice for their worries. One discussion thread, entitled 'Started wearing hijab now, [m]y hairline is receding' brings together new hijabis who continue to find gobs of hair when untying their headscarves after a long day. In response, experienced hijab-wearers provide reassurance and inform them about the commonality of such concerns; they explain that humans normally shed up to a hundred individual hairs per day and when wearing a scarf, these hairs would not fall off but remain compressed into a headscarf, thus creating an illusion of a receding hairline. Another discussion centres on the question of preventing headaches which might be accelerated by the wrong choice of materials and tying the hair underneath the hijab too tightly. Yet another lively online message exchange has evolved around defined facial tan lines which teach new hijabis about the importance of appropriate sun protection, whilst another discussion centres on advice for new hijabis when it comes to surviving their first summer wearing headscarves and modest outfits.

In the case of the niqab, too, there are several minor challenges which women mention repeatedly. For instance, women speak about the question of appropriate clothes that can be worn together with the niqab, or getting accustomed to breathing under the cloth... and learning the hard way the importance of buying a cotton niqab as opposed to a polyester one. Niqabis who wear glasses furthermore complain about endless difficulties with eyewear constantly steaming up as it is tightly framed behind the fabric. These examples illustrate just some of the initiation rites – from observing her reflection in the mirror to getting stabbed with a pin – that a woman is exposed to on her path towards becoming a hijabi.

The process of adjusting to the headgear is indeed an ongoing one. Varied

lifestyles and specific situations demand constant negotiations and practical readjustments to and of the veil. The latter once again underscores that the veil is not fixed and determined in either its meaning or in its form. Just as every woman is changing, her veil is similarly exposed to continuous alterations. Whilst she might decide to take on another form of a headgear altogether, she can just as well adjust her existing veil to fit the needs of her daily life.

Creative responses to everyday challenges posed by living with the hijab in contemporary Britain can be observed both in a work and a school setting. As discussed in the previous chapter, the place of the hijab in educational and work spheres has been under intense scrutiny in Britain (Neumann Nathan, 2006) as well as the subject of similar discussions in other European countries (Craig, 2012; Siim, 2013). As the polemics regarding the headscarf at work and in the classroom continue to enter political and media discussions and subsequently influence corresponding policies, British women need to seek solutions for accommodating their headgear to their work conditions.

For some working women, especially for those who reside in bigger cities, the hijab is an accepted part of the corporate dress code, or even part of a uniform. For instance, Hawa was pleased to get a part-time job at a major British chain-store, where she received a company uniform that adhered to her preferred Islamic dressing conventions. Although she was asked to replace her usual abaya with loose trousers and a jacket, she was allowed to wear a headscarf. "It's important for me to stay modest at work. But also, I want to feel I'm part of a team," she comments. Similarly, many other bigger employers offer an optional Islamic variation of the prescribed uniform, as do various educational institutions around the country. One of the most famous and widely-covered examples is the uniform of the Metropolitan Police. Its official policy has allowed the wearing of the hijab as part of the uniform since 2001. Although no official statistic is

available, allowing women to veil on duty holds symbolic significance. With the hijab being incorporated into a prescribed uniform, such attire then becomes not only standardised but subsequently also normalised in the context of British society as a whole (Lewis, 2013; Mirza and Meeto, 2013: 134).

However, in most cases Muslim women need to manoeuvre creatively around policies and regulations in order to find a solution for their work outfit. Emma, a White British convert from London, is training to become a chef and works as a part-time assistant cook in a restaurant in east London. When applying for the position, she was chosen without an interview, as her CV demonstrated her experience and the needed skills for undertaking the required tasks. “When I got in with my hijab, the boss seemed quite surprised, clearly not expecting a Muslim lady,” she recalls her first day.

“The boss immediately brought up the hijab. She asked if I’d be willing to remove it and replace it with a hat, you know the kind of a chef’s hat, like the rest of the staff. I said that I won’t take it off and she agreed with that, not too happily, but asked me to keep it within ‘health and safety’.”

In order to follow health and safety requirements of the restaurant adequately, Emma needed to get hold of a fire-proof headscarf. With the help of the Internet, she found a laminated non-flammable headscarf. It allowed her to achieve a compromise between the strict health and safety policy of the restaurant and Emma’s need to veil whilst at work.

Outside work, the hijab requires analogous negotiations. Although leisure time activities tend to be less harshly defined and limited by rigid legislation, hijabis are required to seek practical solutions to make their free time activities easier. For example, the issue of an Islamic dress code is among the main reasons for the

low participation rate of Muslim women in sport, according to the Women Sports Foundation UK's short report 'Fact file: Muslim Women in Sport – A Minority within a Minority' (2007). Although modest dress presents an obstacle for many Muslim women, numerous hijabis practise an active lifestyle and partake in various sports activities. Most commonly, Muslim women seek gender-segregated gyms or attend special classes that are exclusive for women. Especially in larger cities, there are various different forms of sport activities for female Muslims, ranging from martial arts to Zumba classes. In smaller cities or non-Muslim areas, there are perceptibly fewer opportunities for gender-exclusive recreational activities. In these cases, women try to find alternative attire that replaces their usual outfit. Nowadays, Internet shops offer a range of modest sports clothing that comes in stretching and breathable materials. The head cover is often attached to the shirt in a hood style and is occasionally accompanied with a sports hat, thus ensuring that it is not falling down and not disturbing the wearer.

In the sports clothes department, one attire has been especially popular with British Muslim women – the burkini, an Islamic version of a swimming suit. Aisha, a college student from East London, shares her enthusiasm: "My aunt who is a niqabi told me about it. I immediately ordered it online. It is very convenient as I can now use public swimming pools whenever I wish." Before owning the burkini, she was limited to swimming recreationally during 'sisters only' time slots, which were hard to find in the area of Manchester where she lived as a child. Many women point out that an Islamic clothing solution such as the burkini might be good in theory, but is not always financially accessible. As they are often not available in high street sports shops, the prices tend to be much higher than in the case of other sports clothes.

The problem of availability is especially linked to places outside major urban

areas in the UK, not only in the case of sport but also when it comes to various other activities. Apart from better opportunities for clothes shopping, larger cities, in particular London, offer more events, activities and places catered especially for hijab-wearing women. One such service is hairdressing salons designed for hijabis. As typical hairdressing salons tend to have a large shopping window and mixed-gender staff members, veiled women are often unable to find an appropriate place where they can unveil comfortably. In such cases, women would need to hire a hairdresser to come to their homes, whereas in areas with a more substantial Muslim population, there are numerous beauty parlours and hairdressing salons that have a special back room reserved for veiled women. Similarly, Muslim districts of bigger cities offer a wide range of restaurants with so-called family places that are especially convenient for women with the niqab. These family areas usually come with a special curtain around the tables that can be screened in order to ensure privacy. A woman can remove her face veil and enjoy the meal even when sitting in a busy restaurant.

These examples demonstrate the dynamic process of learning to live with the hijab. Rather than simply donning the headscarf, adopting the hijab requires a long and often challenging initiation period. As described above, these adjusting processes necessarily revolve around three major areas. Firstly and probably most importantly, women need to get accustomed to their hijab – not only as a new item of clothing but as a whole new identity. Secondly, they have to adapt to a new set of relations that are forged by their headgear, both within their immediate social circle as well as in public. On a more practical level, they need to negotiate the hijab and their lifestyle by seeking inventive solutions for accommodating their work and hobbies as well as their Islamic dress code and its corresponding values. These processes of adjusting to the veil and adjusting the veil itself once again highlight how the hijab is not merely an item which is donned at one point in a woman's life, but is indeed, to draw on Reema's

metaphor, a life-long journey.

At the same time, these examples also remind us that hijabs cannot be perceived as simple material objects which exist merely as an outward expression of immaterial inner thoughts (see Keane, 1997). Ethnographic illustrations of women appropriating, adapting, altering and adorning their headscarves crystallise the notion that the hijab cannot be reduced only to its prescribed role of communicating and embodying religious morals and meanings. Instead, they can be seen as, what Webb Keanne (2008: 124) calls, “objects of experience.” As objects of experience they are inevitably “enmeshed in causality, registered in and induced by their form,” they “persist across contexts and beyond any particular intentions and projects,” and are, as material things, “prone to enter into next contexts” (ibid.). Women respond to and interact with these objects in different ways, which transcend their bare moral dimensions. They incorporate their hijabs into their lifestyles, appropriate them according to specific fashion trends or alter them in order to respond to weather conditions and various health factors, to mention just a few examples. As objects of experience, the hijabs cannot be seen merely as a material extension of the immaterial, but must be viewed as material objects with a social life of their own.

3.5 Conclusion

The veil is shortly defined as “a length of cloth worn by women as a covering for the head and shoulder and often especially in Eastern countries for the face” (Loue, Sajatovic and Armitage, 2004: 675). As shown in the previous chapter, such lexicographical descriptions of a veil are loyally reinforced and disseminated by

the mainstream media that persistently introduce it as a monolithic category with a determined form and a fixed set of cultural meanings. Experiences of British Muslim women, however, show how these entrenched conceptions of the veil fail to reflect the plurality of forms and meanings that stretch far beyond the pragmatic equation of the veil with a simple piece of cloth. As observed by Moors and Tarlo (2013: 1), such conceptions of the veil are completely “out of tune with actual developments in Muslim dress practices which have, over the past decade, been undergoing rapid transformation.”

As a result of these metamorphoses, this particular cloth does not only come in a variety of lengths, forms, materials, colours and patterns in different cultural, geographical, social, political and historical contexts, but is moreover imbued with nuanced semiotic meanings. It transmits various and often contradictory cultural messages – messages of modesty, fashion, political beliefs, gender roles, anti-racism, revolt, tradition or conformity. Various women introduced in this chapter all demonstrate their own sub-reasons for donning, or not donning, a certain type of hijab. Whilst for Nassra, for instance, the decision was fuelled by global political events, Shanaya deployed it to find shelter from everyday racism.

Such varied understandings emphasise an important notion: just like in the case of any other symbol, the connection between the veil and its meaning is in the causal sense always arbitrary” (Parsons, 1968: 484; Pierce, 1998: 5), an idea that will be reappearing throughout this thesis. It is hence impossible to insist on a single interpretation of the hijab according to the dominant definitions and expectations. Instead, it is essential to acknowledge the subjective nature of the hijab that continues to leave it open for social manipulations by individuals and different socio-cultural contexts (see Firth, 1973: 75). Thus, the veil is constantly reflecting norms and values within a certain cultural circle, including their omnipresent transformations, and is simultaneously giving space for a woman’s

own individual expressions. As observed in a discussion at the dinner table, the women sharing a meal did not share either their reasons for veiling, or the forms of headgear they chose. Similarly, their set of decisions did not necessarily mimic those of their immediate social circle, entailing family members and friends.

The latter point should be emphasised further. With dominant media and political discourses underscoring the significance of social pressure when it comes to the matter of veiling, experiences suggest differently. The cases of Reema, Zainab and Laila, to mention just a few, all support the idea that British Muslim women's decisions connected to veiling are commonly based on an individual choice, and reflect women's varied life experiences and preferences.

Especially in the case of the niqab, this finding holds a particular significance. Contrary to public assumptions about women covering their face as a result of a commandment issued by their male relative or a partner, the testimonies of British women reveal that such assumptions are a result of semantic wars rather than real practices. In the case of Britain, the adoption of the niqab is usually a result of an adherent's connection with her god, and an expression of her personal religious devotion. Perhaps surprising is also the fact that the majority of women are the first members of their immediate social circle to don the niqab, with their decision not always supported by the family. All three niqabis from this chapter confirm these claims. This debunks several stereotypes about the social pressure in Islamic families as well as about the effect of various Orthodox organisations influencing or even limiting the decision of individuals.

The often overlooked factor of individuality is hence incredibly important. The

sartorial manifestations of 'veiled sentiments',¹⁴ to use the term coined by Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), are not only expressing women's individual decisions for adopting the hijab. They moreover narrate profound sentimentality, emotions and passion that are often hidden from the eye of an observer, and not always easily recognised by adherents themselves. Although many perceive the hijab almost as a uniform in terms of hiding social, racial, class or age differences among women, the outfits necessarily express a woman's individuality. The selection of shoes or a bag, at the very least, conveys a woman's preferences and taste, whereas various accessories, patterns, cuts and combinations support the fact that every outfit is inevitably a result of choices that are informative about a woman's identity.

What is perhaps equally significant is the fact that these sentiments not only vary from individual to individual, but also within an individual herself. This notion is illustratively epitomised in the title image (see Image 5). Six photographs explore various different outfits that the same woman, in this case photographer Boushra Almutawakel, takes on during her artistic quest to find her true self. In most cases, explorations will not be as drastic and as quick, but the central idea remains the same: one never adopts only one type of clothing. Her outfits will vary in different eras of her life as well as at different times of day. These variations are not uniformed but are largely dependent upon each individual. As demonstrated earlier, the same type of headgear can mark different meanings for different women. While for some women wearing the hijab might appear as 'veiling more' than normally, for others wearing the same type of headdress can mean that they are 'veiling less' than usual.

¹⁴ The mentioned term is the title of Lila Abu-Lughod's seminal ethnographic work (1986). In the book, based on her fieldwork among the Bedouins in Egypt, Abu-Lughod studies gender relations through analysis of their oral lyric poetry. In her poetic accounts, she details how certain emotions were concealed, veiled in public but were expressed indirectly, for example through poetry.

In the opening ethnographic passage, Reema neatly describes this personal exploration as a journey. The motif of a journey has been following us through the chapter from the beginning onwards, and for a good reason. The metaphor of a journey emphasises transformations that are unavoidable for an individual as well as for the headgear itself. Just like any other item of clothing, the hijabs do not exist in social isolation, but are prone to influences of time and space. Sports hijabs, or women from the photographic project 'London Veil', exemplify how Islamic veils are consistently subjected to dynamic alternations. This comprehension once again highlights the fluidity of the veil, and the vast field of its semiotic operation that "may be held to indicate virtually anything informants and the analysts want," as claimed by Lindisfarne and Ingham (1997: 16) in their discussion of the languages of dress in the Middle East and the importance of contextualising the veil in a myriad of nuanced interpretations.

There is no single style of dress, nor any single woman who chooses to dress as she does for any single reason, and "generalisations about the veil and a category of women or men partake of the absurd" (ibid.). The idea of a dress reflecting various parts of one's identity and one's individuality will extend into the next chapter, which will expand on – what Lindisfarne and Ingham (ibid.) would call – the languages of the dress.

Chapter IV: Styling religion



Image 8: Princess Hijab's anti-fashion in the Paris metro (Photo: unknown)

It is Sunday morning, the busiest day on Brick Lane. As always, the iconic weekly flea market in east London attracts hordes of curious visitors. Among carefully dressed regulars, enthusiastic tourists and entrepreneurial restaurant owners who are inviting passers-by to taste their curries is Hannah. She is wearing baggy dark trousers, the latest Nike trainers, a sporty jacket, a black-and-white scarf around her neck and a fluorescent woollen hat. Not many could tell that she is Muslim, and even fewer would guess she is one of the leading Islamic fashion designers in the UK.

Hannah enters one of the red brick buildings, following a sign that advertises a vintage market. Manoeuvring among numerous stalls adorned with clothes and accessories, she is browsing the designs on display. Her gaze becomes fixated onto a stall with colourful hats. "I have too many already," she sighs but decides to buy an additional one anyway. "Eight pounds, not too bad," she assesses, with her hands testing the quality of the material and stitching. Choosing between a hat in a dark green colour and a strong orange one, she finally selects the latter. She likes fashion pieces that stand out, with her hijab no exception.

On a different day she would replace a striking hat with a more 'conventional' hijab – a headscarf accompanied with an undercap covering her hair. "I decide depending on my outfit," explains Hannah whose fashion is never on the safe side. "I've got a lot of T-shirts with nice graphics, and if I wear the hijab, the image gets all covered up." As long as her clothes remain modest and not haram, forbidden, her styling has no limits. Intense colours, unusual cuts, strong patterns and funky prints all find their place in her outfits. She is, however, only rarely donning – what she considers – traditional Islamic dress. More often she chooses and designs pieces that could be worn by any modern urban British woman, Muslim or not.

With her new hat in a bag, Hannah heads back onto the bustling street and continues her Sunday walk in side alleys sprayed with graffiti. Those, alongside Nike Town and the

Victoria and Albert Museum, are some of her strongest sources of inspiration. "Did you see the one with a niqabi girl, it's amazing!" she enthusiastically recommends one of numerous graffiti murals that encourage her to make Brick Lane a destination for her inspirational weekend strolls.

Accompanying Hannah on her Sunday walk creates an illustrative preface for a discussion surrounding the dynamic arena of Islamic fashion in Britain, which will be a focus of this chapter. Hannah is daring and fresh in her stylistic expressions, situated at the intersection of Islamic dressing guidelines and contemporary British trends. Her creative approaches towards combining the religious ethics of Islam and the aesthetics of contemporary fashion trends formulate various appealing departure points for observing the hijab in the realm of fashion.

Hannah is loyal to the art of 'layering', an approach that is commonly spoken about and practised by the majority of British hijabis. By combining different high street sports clothes, for example a neon hat from the opening vignette, into Islamically acceptable outfits, for instance covering her head, she is following the concept of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1996; Hebdige, 1979).¹⁵ She is appropriating existing commodities by placing them in a symbolic ensemble which serves to alter their original straight meanings (ibid.: 104). The example of Hannah builds upon some of the ideas presented in the previous chapter, especially those focusing on the diversity and eclectic nature of Islamic fashion. Islamic fashion is not limited to the presumed traditional Middle Eastern or Gulf attire in the form

¹⁵ Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1996) introduced the term bricolage for describing the processes of combining symbolic elements into a new cultural form. Drawing from Levi-Strauss, Dick Hebdige (1979) adapted the term to describe how subcultural styles are constructed. In that sense, bricolage refers to people thinking about the world in their own way by improvising and appropriating different material objects (ibid.)

of simple black abayas and accompanying headgears that may commonly find representation in the British media. Instead, it is equally inspired by urban youth culture and contemporary fashion trends. By collecting, combining and assembling different clothing items from the high street, international sports brands and second hand shops, Hannah creates outfits that are deemed *halal* or Islamically acceptable.

Hannah also defines further veins for conceptualising the fashionable hijab. As she is an Islamic clothing designer herself, she is not simply borrowing and combining clothes to create outfits that comply with Islamic notions of modesty. She also creates clothes which transcend both conservative Islamic garments and popular Western attires by proposing a hybrid style. It can be claimed that her creations are an example of, what Homi Bhabha would call, a third space (Bhabha, 1994; Chow, 1995), as they exist inbetween or outside the established (and superficial) binaries of Islam vs. the West, traditional vs. modern or institutional and individuals. This creative space enables Hannah to “experiment and combine these different elements and create a new Islamic aesthetic style” (Peterson, 2013), which defies myths about the Islamic dress as a monolithic category.

Building upon the ideas and concepts evoked by Hannah – from bricolage to third spaces – this chapters aims to explore various semiotic tensions, intersections and, above all, unavoidable dialogues between fashion and Islam and dressing as a British Muslim woman. More precisely, this section will address various strategies for materialising something as abstract and intangible as faith while situating oneself in the context of contemporary British consumer society.

Offering ethnographic peeks into closets and catwalks, I will examine various degrees of balancing faith and fashion as expressed in a personal style. On one

side of the spectrum, I will look at a view that completely denies fashionable dimensions of the hijab, whilst, at the other extreme, I will engage the position of those who prioritise the fashionable aspect of their style over adhering to Islamic sartorial codes. Most of the discussions, however, will be situated in a vibrant middle-ground between the two that has been outlined in the opening ethnographic vignette. I will hence place a special emphasis on the hybridisation of style that “engenders the opportunity to create new style formations that are British and Muslim at the same time” (Suterwalla, 2013: 167).

Expanding on the ideas of individuality, transformation and negotiation introduced in the previous chapter, this chapter will develop this discussion further by placing an additional emphasis on nonconforming subjectivities that are contesting the normative discourses surrounding fashion, Islam and Britishness. In other words, I will explore the potentials of fashion to resist, reform and revolutionise the ways in which identities are produced and consumed. It is precisely this idea that has motivated the selection of the opening image of this chapter (see Image 8): a work of street art by Princess Hijab, a Paris-based street artist whom I got to know through Muslim blogs, and later interviewed for a conference paper on the hijab in street art. Just like other art works in this thesis, her creative outputs travels from her native France and resonates globally. Her artistic method, commonly dubbed ‘hijabising’, offers an effective illustration of Islamic fashion’s resisting potentials. It replaces dominant Eurocentric beauty conventions with alternative ‘body images’ which are covered, modest, non-sexualised, non-white and not for sale.

Hannah and Princess Hijab will sew a metaphorical – and sometimes even a literal – red thread through the chapter on veiling and fashion, whilst being juxtaposed with numerous British Muslim women with diverse attitudes towards styling religion.

4.1 Between fashion to anti-fashion

We are still strolling around the streets of east London and discussing clothes. Do you use word fashion when talking about your work, I ask Hannah? She shakes her head and justifies her response:

“The fashion industry is fascist. It is body fascism, it is race fascism, it is fashion imposing an idealised version of women. It is telling girls to conform to Western standards of idealism, to have light skin, blond hair, be tall. There are so many races and ethnicities that stay completely unrepresented and not celebrated!”

So yeah, fashion industry is fascist. I said it!” says Hannah, with visible irritation. After getting to know the fashion industry from the inside over the past decade, Hannah holds a highly negative vision of mainstream fashion in the contemporary world – and rightly so. In her monograph *Stitched Up! The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion* (2014), Tansy E. Hoskins echoes Hannah’s sentiments by dedicating an entire ethnographic study to offences the fashion industry is complicit in. Sexism, racism, ageism, sizeism, exacerbating climate change and poverty, exploitation and unbalanced power relations are just some examples on the endless list of what Hannah would call fashion’s fascist politics.

Not only does this fashion fascism contradict certain core values Islam traditionally stands for, such as guarding one's modesty, moreover, Hoskins reveals how fashion has historically been far from accommodating towards Muslims, in particular towards visibly Muslim women who wish to cover their heads and bodies (ibid., 154-155). For example, the fashion industry's strong emphasis on the sexualisation of female bodies commonly prohibits women who wish to protect their modesty from entering mainstream fashion avenues, be it through advertisements, the catwalk, or general high street trends. Until very

recently, British mainstream brands have been consistently failing women who wanted their style to comply with Islamic morals. It is only in the last few years that various high street brands, such as H&M¹⁶ and Debenhams, have started featuring hijabi models, selling burkinis and introducing modest clothing lines.

It is precisely for that reason that Hannah is conscious about using the very term fashion and prefers to use alternatives that are not heavily burdened with offensive Western legacies – for example clothes, dressing and clothing. Hannah is not alone in avoiding fashion in connection to the Islamic dress. Numerous Muslim women are equally aware of the legacy that is embedded into this seven-letter word, and consequently follow Hannah's decision to rethink the very terminology they use on a daily basis.

During my fieldwork, an interesting project took place in the Museum of London. A group of young Muslim Londoners decided to challenge and change an outdated display featuring Muslim dress in the museum's fashion collection. They were shocked after seeing that the only representation of Muslim Londoners was compressed into a single display: a black abaya and a black niqab covering a faceless plastic mannequin. The idea behind the project was to rethink what Islamic dress means to Muslim Londoners and update the display accordingly.

The group of activists approached the project thoroughly and holistically through various workshops and studies. When attending an interim presentation of their outcomes in the summer of 2014, I was interested to engage in further discussions on the problematic lexis surrounding Islamic dress that was brought forth by Halima, the curator of the project. During their workshops, she reported, young

¹⁶ In 2015, a H&M campaign featured its first Muslim model with the hijab. Mariah Idrissi, who is of Pakistani and Moroccan heritage and lives in London, appears in the high street brand's videos and photos wearing stylish hijab, loose clothes and sunglasses.

Muslims were united in agreeing that fashion did not sit comfortably with them. As a result, the organisers of the exhibition completely avoided using the term and, similarly to Hannah, replaced it with a less loaded term 'dress'. Therefore, there was not a single mention of the word 'fashion' in either the exhibition booklet or in any other material produced in connection with the exhibition.

These polemics are further addressed by anthropologists Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors who theorise the concept of anti-fashion. Drawing on Polhemus and Proctor (1978), they introduce the term in relation to "all styles of adornment which fall outside the organised system [...] of fashion change" (ibid.:16). The concept of anti-fashion has been since its first introduction commonly deployed in anthropological writings on dress. Whilst it has been commonly utilised as a general signifier for labelling "all types of dress assumed to be outside the Western fashion system" (Tarlo and Moors, 2013: 14), the term anti-fashion is frequently adopted for describing clothing styles and forms that are simply deemed "unfashionable" or "outside of fashion" (ibid.). Tarlo and Moors understand the term in the broadest sense, with their definition of anti-fashion including everything from critiquing the fashion industry to refusing the idea of fashion and styling altogether.

The latter extreme on the spectrum of perceiving fashion requires some further attention. As already discussed in the previous chapter when introducing Hawa and Khadija, numerous British Muslim women manifest the notion of Islam and fashion not being compatible by donning black, untailed clothes without any adornments. They perceive their outfit as a tool for diminishing the importance of one's appearance, physical bodies and external beauty. One of these women tweets: "[It's] not hard to stick on an abaya and scarf/jilbab. We don't need these fancy folds and layers etc." She adds: "You really don't need 'hijab tutorials' to learn how to cover yourself, seriously." For her and like-minded women, the only

aim of the outfit is to cover the body, with any additional intervention into the dress being deemed unwanted or even forbidden.

This idea is also promoted by some conservative Islamic groups. In their essay *The Attack on the Veil*, the Egyptian religious group Hizb ut-Tahrir claims veiling is “in complete contradiction with the desire to attain a specific appearance based on trends set by the fashion industry” (quoted in Bucar, 2012: 129). This tension is not an uncommon one. Some respondents, too, mention the oxymoron that is brought forth by two symbolic systems that can be observed as discordant. Veiling, on the one hand, can be seen as traditional, sacred, static and modest, whilst fashion commonly manifests the ideas of change, consumerism, pomposity and modernity (see *ibid.*, Niessen, 2008: 7).

This idea is both captured and contested by the aforementioned French street artist Princess Hijab (see Image 8). Princess Hijab, whose identity remains carefully concealed, works alone and during the night, wearing a fake wig and a hoodie which cover her face. On the one hand, Princess Hijab illustrates the idea of anti-fashion quite literally. By daubing black veils onto the bodies of fashion models, she covers the outfits that they are modelling with uniformed black attire. Her veils are not carefully drawn. Instead, they appear to be made without special attention to the stylistic outcome. Her interventions not only work against the designs themselves, but also against what the billboards represent: consumerism, racism, sexualisation and sexism, amongst others. On the other hand, Princess Hijab is an artist whose work is largely based upon the visual. Although she is strongly refusing a certain set of visual aesthetics, her artistic interventions emphasise the power and the unavoidability of the visual.

This lucubrates an important point. Even if and when women decide to adopt certain attire as an anti-fashion statement, they inescapably propose an

alternative style and a different set of aesthetics. Nayanika Mookherjee (2011: 3-4) expands on the Greek origin of the word (*aisthetikos* – of sense perception) to propose a working definition of aesthetics as any visual and auditory experiences and imaginations which are not necessarily pleasant and enjoyable. Thus, all attire, which inescapably forms a visual experience, possesses an aesthetic dimension. Linking this notion to the ideas from the previous chapter (see Chapter II), all attire is essentially styled. It is about the style of dress a person chooses, its fabrics and inevitable accessories that supplement the attire. Furthermore, even though many women refuse to focus on the aesthetic aspect of dress and emphasise its ethical implications, the complete isolation of one of them is not possible. By wearing a certain outfit in the public space, women inexorably exhibit certain styles and – consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally – propose fashion alternatives.

What Mookherjee further maintains is that any aesthetics are intrinsically connected to particular ideologies and as such “generate politics by all means (ibid.: 4). As observed in my ethnographic examples, aesthetics of attire necessarily communicate and animate certain political ideas. As seen in the cases of Princess Hijab and Hannah, or even an anonymous Twitter user quoted earlier in this chapter, any clothed body unavoidably turns into a semiotic field of political contestation. It is a place where values are performed, power wielded and myths challenged. This is equally true for a simple black abaya or a creative urban exploration of Islamic fashion.

4.2 Hijab couture

Although many Muslim women feel uncomfortable with the idea of co-creating

the industry that has been consistently antagonistic towards them, others negotiate a complex relationship with the fashion industry more freely. The following two sections will focus on women who incorporate Islamic values into the very core of the fashion industry, be it in the form of everyday high street fashion or by embracing exclusive high fashion.

From London Fashion Week to Vogue, recent decades have witnessed the visible presence of the hijab in high fashion. Following numerous portrayals in popular media outlets – with the *Sex and the City 2* film set in Abu Dhabi being a prime example – the image of an Arab woman in high couture dresses with high heels, all concealed with black abayas has become a common stereotype of Muslim women. Whilst Orientalist media portrayals of wealthy Muslim women who aspire to be fashionable but are oppressed by a highly patriarchal culture are extremely problematic, they contain some seeds of truth. The affluent strata of Muslim women is indeed increasing and their fashion style often reflects their privileged socio-economic status.

A graduate student Noora, who was briefly introduced in the previous chapter, is a UK-based Qatari woman in her late thirties who wears, lives and breathes high fashion. She comes from an affluent and conservative family, where dressing modestly was encouraged throughout her childhood. When in Doha, she normally wears an abaya and shayla, a black robe and a scarf, which are common among Qatari women. The abaya is as much a religious practice as it a part of customary social practice and culture in Qatar, and socially it would be noticed if a Qatari woman chose not to wear such attire (Guillotte, 2011; Hajar, 2011: 51).

When I ask about her reasons for veiling and wearing the abaya, Noora tells me that she sees the role of an Islamic dress as “keeping Muslim women far away from being seductive.” She understands both opponents and supporters of novel

transformations of Islamic clothing. While she appreciates how fashionising Islamic dress could “contradict the main goal of not making the outfit appealing to men” and thus ensuring the protection of women, she also understands how encouraging fashionable Islamic outfits can convince some women, especially youngsters, “to adopt and follow the trend and still cover their head.” Noora tells me that she always veils when in Muslim countries but not when she is “in the West,” as she puts it. When she moved to the US with her daughter in order to study shortly after 9/11, she opted for a Western style of clothes in the hope of protecting both herself and her daughter. Amidst omnipresent Islamophobia, she felt that wearing clothes that are explicitly Islamic would attract unneeded attention and potential confrontation. With her husband being much more relaxed about her clothing than her slightly more conservative brothers, who had “watched over her before the marriage”, she decided to carry on going around unveiled when eventually moving into the United Kingdom.

Veiled or not, Noora personifies high fashion from head to toe and beyond. She purchases her abayas from a well-known store in Dubai, famous for quality custom-tailored Islamic dresses with prices which reflect its prestigious reputation. A simple abaya can be bought from roughly £1400 onwards, but there is practically no monetary limit. In addition to one of these high-class black abayas with carefully stitched and rich embroilments, Noora complements her outfit with designer handbags and, inevitably, with heavily applied make-up and the scent of one her numerous expensive perfumes. Although she does not wear either the hijab or the abaya when in England, she dresses modestly and respects the etiquette of hijab in a looser sense. She usually wears either long skirts or trousers and long-sleeved blouses or sweaters that do not expose her cleavage, and which obscure her body shape.

Her collection of clothes is almost infinite. During one of my visits to her house,

she shows me her walk-in closet, placed in a spacious bedroom with two king-size beds, a private bathroom and a separate make-up room. The interior of the closet reveals dozens of shoes, all high heels. "I keep other shoes elsewhere," she clarifies. Manolo Blahnik, Jimmy Choo and Christian Dior read beautifully crafted labels on the inside of the shoes. She points out a couple of pairs that she is particularly proud of. Dior's limited edition red pair with a golden sole is one of them. "When I'm in Qatar, this is my normal everyday footwear," she explains, adding that her outfits in England are in general "more toned down." As a graduate student, she does not feel appropriate walking around the university halls in designer high heels, just as she does not feel comfortable with her veil on.

The example of Noora evokes numerous interesting ideas relevant to the discussion of the hijab and fashion. Firstly, it shows that fashion and the veil can go hand in hand. Secondly, it illuminates the ever-transforming and context-dependent nature of fashion. Clothes cannot exist in a geographical, political, social or historical vacuum. Moving around the world, experiencing historical events (such as 9/11), studying for a postgraduate degree and living a financially privileged life all influence the ways in which Noora embodies her subjectivity. Although these forms change dramatically when she migrates between different social categories, for example between being a graduate student in the north-east of England or being a wife of an influential real estate entrepreneur in Qatar, both Islamic ethics and high fashion aesthetics travel and stay with her at all times.

Returning to the connection between high fashion and the veil, another intriguing perspective is offered by Barjis Chohan, the creative mind behind the luxury modest fashion brand Barjis. Formely working for Vivienne Westwood and other high couture brands, the designer now specialises in, what her website calls, "the fusion of Eastern values with Western cuts." This fusion has been popular with consumers and fashion professionals alike, and Barjis has been one of the Islamic

fashion brands that has made it to London Fashion Week. When I ask her about the compatibility of the hijab and high fashion via an email interview, she replies: “Yes, hijab can be considered for high fashion because there are a lot of women who love high fashion and happen to be hijabis.” She has been asked the same question far too many times. The large volumes of articles, documentaries and public talks she has participated in offer an inaudible reply. Even though high fashion has been accommodating the veil for decades, Western public still struggles to comprehend their connection and continues to nurture fascination towards this little explored union.

For Barjis, the reason for the low participation of British Muslim women in high fashion is not at all an ideological one, but is determined almost exclusively by socio-economic restrictions. Since Muslim women are disproportionately worse-off socio-economically in the UK, for many, high fashion is only available through magazines and social media. “They follow me but do not buy because of the price point,” explains the designer who says that many of her fans attempt to imitate her original designs. “The British Muslim market are used to the high street and imitating trends from the catwalk and then taking it to the local tailors,” she adds.

Her clothes are, however, not dedicated solely to Muslim women by any means. Barjis’ client list includes women from various religious and non-religious backgrounds who wish to dress fashionably but modestly at the same time. Hannah reports a similarly diverse compendium of customers, with half of her buyers being non-Muslims. The diverse profile of Islamic fashion consumers once again explicates the notion that modest clothing is not – in Barjis’ words – “as niche as [she] thought it would be.” Rather, it is merely seeking a creative balance between modesty and an aesthetic appeal, with this combination not being exclusive for Muslim women.

This idea is reflected in comparative ethnographic studies of dress in interfaith settings. Caroline and Filippo Osella (2007), for example, note that despite the fact that popular and academic discussions on dress and decency tend to focus on Muslim women, the sense of performing modesty is equally important for many south Indian women from non-Muslim backgrounds. Their research, based on two years of fieldwork carried out in Kozhikode in northern Kerala, shows how different communities, Muslim and Hindu alike, display similar anxieties about decency, with their sartorial presentations of modesty relating to different idioms of this. Osella and Osella thus conclude that “[i]t is certainly not the case that only Muslim women are constrained in their choice of clothing or preoccupied by the issues of modesty and femininity” (Osella and Osella, 2007: 249).

Emma Tarlo (2013), takes this notion further and explores the category of modest dress as a vehicle for interfaith engagements between women from diverse religious backgrounds, ranging from Islam to Judaism and Christianity. In her anthropological reflections on the discussions on dress which are taking place in online fora, Tarlo claims that a mutually-shared quest to find an aesthetically appealing and religiously-appropriate dress opens a new space where the values, preoccupations and concerns of women from different religious backgrounds converge. Although Tarlo acknowledges the limitations of brief online encounters, which are unlikely to extend into real life situations, she highlights the potential of modest fashion to forge dialogues across faiths and encourage mutual empathy and recognition (Tarlo, 2013: 87).

In addition to emphasising the existence of modest fashion as an interfaith category that is not exclusively reserved for Muslim women, the example of Hannah’s outfit from the introductory vignette, shows that the hijab is far from restricted to traditional Arabic/Middle Eastern attire, and can be assembled from pieces that could be worn by any woman, Muslim or not. Equally, respecting the

hijab does not automatically render its adherents incompatible with high fashion trends. As shown by Noora and Barjis in this section, a love of high fashion does not need to be secular.

4.3 Everyday hijab: the art of layering

As pointed out by Barjis, high couture items with three – or more – zeros are outside the financial reach of the majority of the British population, including Muslim women. However, fashion does not necessarily have to come with an outrageous price tag. An emerging trend of Muslim fashion blogs, tutorials and social media channels are further evidence of everyday Islamic youth fashion that appropriates mainstream high street fashion trends to make them Islamically acceptable.

In the previous chapter, we were briefly introduced to Sumaiyah, a fashionable niqabi woman from the South West of England who emphasised that dressing modestly does not equal “dressing like you live in a desert.” When we discuss fashion in an interview at Cardiff University, she explains her fashion philosophy further:

“I know the stereotype or cultural misconception is that niqabi women would only wear black – but because I have chosen to wear the niqab it’s up to me how I implement it – so if I wear fashionable clothing or jewellery with it that’s entirely up to me – it’s not for anyone else to say. It’s just for myself really.”

Sumaiyah lives up to her fashion motto. Her outfits epitomise youthfulness and quirkiness, and possess a strong contemporary appeal. One day I see her with a

long, bright blue skirt, combined with a stylish black pullover and a flower-patterned black and blue scarf. On another day, she wears a striking purple cardigan and a multi-coloured headscarf with peculiar small tassels that are emerging from her head like tiny tentacles. She accessorises extensively and uniquely. Statement necklaces, oversize rings and colourful handbags regularly accompany her everyday attire. “People are always telling me that I’m very colour coordinated or they love my accessories – even my students say ‘awww, Miss, we love your jewellery’ or ‘where did you get this’! So, I do get a lot of comments about my fashion.”

She does not shop in places which cater specifically for Muslim women but instead frequents well-known high street franchises popular mostly with working class and middle class young British girls. Instead of going for tight-fitting tops and jeans, she selects skirts and sweaters in larger sizes. When carefully curated together in multiple layers, they create unique looks that are in sync with the latest trends but could not be found on any fashion billboard. Several other young Muslim women in Britain follow Sumaiyah’s example and prefer the high street to Islamic clothing stores. Whilst high street fashion is in line with the popular culture that they share with their Muslim and non-Muslim peers – ranging from movies to pop music and popular blogs and magazines – Islamic clothing stores are often considered old-fashioned; the type of places which typically cater to their mothers and aunts.

Returning to the Museum of London and the project *What Muslims Wear* introduced at the beginning of this chapter, the importance of the high street in contemporary Islamic fashion can be explored further. Following workshops and several interviews, young Muslim Londoners selected five outfits they felt best reflected their eclectic fashion identities. Out of these five, four were female attire, with all the items in these outfits belonging to real Muslim girls from London.

Interestingly enough, all four of the outfits were premised on the principle of layering and were assembled from mainstream pieces that would not traditionally be perceived as Islamic.



Image 9: Hiba's fashionable outfit based on the principle of layering high street items

For example, one of the outfits belongs to Hiba, a fashion student at the London College of Fashion (see Image 9). Struggling to fit in with her fashionable coursemates and synchronically express her Muslim identity, she practises – what she calls – the urban hijabi look, consisting of sparkling, high ankle boots, a long black dress, a cardigan, a sweater and a high street scarf in light grey – all carefully layered to create an edgy look. Another interesting outfit is put together by Fiona, a young white convert, in an attempt to combine “items that existed in the wardrobe, and newer items that reflect the journey to dress more modestly as she came into the fold of Islam” (What Muslims Wear, 2014). Similarly to Hiba, her outfit, too, combines several everyday high street pieces, such as a beige trench coat, skinny jeans, a summer dress, a woollen cardigan, some accessories and a scarf that used to protect her from the wind but now serves as headgear. Muneera, a Black Caribbean convert and a hip hop artist, similarly assembles

items that represent different periods of her life: a dress and a headscarf that reflect her Jamaican roots, statement earrings, a hoodie and Nike trainers that reinforce her hip hop identity and accessories that remind her of numerous journeys around the world.

The examples of Sumaiyah and the *What Muslims Wear* team evoke several intriguing notions for the discussion of Muslim dress and identity. In particular, they assert the idea that the Islamic veil cannot be observed in a geographical and historical void. British Muslim fashion is not an extension of Islamic fashion from other countries, and equally, it does not conform to high street fashion trends uncreatively and uncritically. Instead, contemporary British Islamic fashion generates a third space – a space that is reserved for a creative fashion solution that reflects current fashion guidelines, but simultaneously promotes distinctively Islamic elements of dressing. The hijab, in particular, plays an important role in female fashion, as it stands out as visibly Muslim. Through the art of layering and transforming originally non-Muslim objects into an Islamic dress, women embody a dissident subjectivity, “a disruptive performance that challenges the normative or stable structures of the fashion system” (Suterwalla, 2013: 167).

The hijab, moreover, captures metamorphoses that are taking place in British Islamic communities. Especially in the context of urban centres, such as Birmingham and London as well as British universities, these transformations outline an interesting trend that transcends the field of fashion. Islamic fashion, in particular the hijab, becomes a tool for expressing belonging to a broader transnational movement of Islamic culture and religion (Bubalo and Fealy, 2005: viii; Gellner, 2013: 14; Robinson, 2015: 112; Werbner, 2012).

Rather than following outdated conventions of Islamic clothing dictated by ethnic identity, Muslim women instead opt for hybrid Muslim identities that are visibly

located in a particular city in a particular time. For example, their outfits are less comparable to the attire of their older relatives from the same ethnic group, and resemble their peer group from the same city, the same borough or the same subculture. The hijab, in that regard, plays an important part in forming and performing this collective identification.

In his musings on postmodernism, reason and religion, the phenomena of embracing the hijab among educated and urban women is elaborated on by Ernest Gellner. When speaking about modern veiled women, enlightened with Islamic values, he comments that “contrary to what outsiders generally suppose, the typical Muslim women in a [...] city doesn’t wear the veil because her grandmother did so, but because her grandmother did *not*” (2013: 16). Her grandmother, he maintains, would be too busy working in the fields, and would frequent shrines with her head unveiled. However, her “betters” who are better educated and town-dwellers now have the privilege of experimenting with their dress, and deploying it in order to communicate their spirituality and ratifying their social ascension.

As we have already observed in the previous chapter, British Muslim women do not necessarily embrace the hijab or the niqab due to such attire being normalised and recommended within their ethnic, national or family circles. For example, Sumaiyah and Aysha, who we met earlier in this chapter, are both the first members of their families to choose to don the niqab. Their style is a manifestation of their own explorations of religion at a particular time and in a particular space, namely in 21st century Britain.

4.4 Hijab fashion 2.0

Nowhere is this global outlook more apparent and flourishing than in online spaces. As mentioned by a high proportion of young respondents – and as implied by an earlier ‘anti-fashion’ tweet – fashion blogs and tutorials are changing the ways in which the hijab is perceived and worn by Muslim women in Britain. There are almost countless hijab fashion blogs available in the United Kingdom and internationally, for example in the USA, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sweden and Germany.

Jana Kossaibati, whose blog *Hijab Style* claims to be the UK's first style guide for Muslim women, started her site because there wasn't another like it in the UK, "but since it began [in 2007] a lot of others have appeared," she explains in *The Guardian* (Khaleeli, 2008). Nowadays, British Muslim fashion bloggers write about a number of fashion-related topics. They post pictures of their own attire and paste links to the online shops selling it; they offer reviews of fashion shows as well as TV series and magazines that feature Muslim women; they give advice on combining and layering specific high street items; they react to political discussions and bans on Islamic fashion; they propose make-up styles and outfits for specific occasions and seasons; they share their struggles with self confidence, body image and racism, and search for fashion trends from around the world, both in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts (see also Kaiser, 2012; Lewis, 2013; Tarlo, 2010).

One of the popular blogs Muslim women commonly refer to is *Hijablicious* run by two London-based sisters. One of the co-founders, Samia, comments on the evolution of the site: "In 2010, we did it as a hobby and so we worked on it as and when we could but now it's updated 3-4 times a week with regular features on

fashion, food, lifestyle and inspiration” (Chic Muslimah, 2015). She remembers experimenting with hijab styles very early on and says that they “tended to go outside the norm at a time when wearing a hijab was still a very conservative concept” (ibid.). This generated an opportunity to document their journey for others. Although both sisters have active careers outside the fashion industry, their fashion involvement does not stop with the blog. They have been engaged in numerous partnerships with established magazines interested in exploring Muslim fashion. When I met Adviya, one of the two sisters, during my fieldwork in 2014, she was just establishing her own clothing brand carrying her forename that is now gaining popularity among Muslim and non-Muslim *fashionistas* alike.

Just like many other similar sites, *Hijablicious* exists as a multi-platform project. Apart from a regularly updated blog/website, the Khan sisters are actively present in various social media sites, ranging from Pinterest to Instagram to Twitter. Their posts vary from ‘Monday Musings’ on various different topics – from sisterhood to body image – to interviews with inspirational Muslim women and articles on fashion, dining, travelling and health advice. Rather than being solely focused on fashion and beauty, *Hijablicious* is a platform aiming to “influence and inspire women” (ibid.) more broadly. It is as much about lifestyle as it is about Islamic fashion per se. Although the blog comes from Britain and commonly includes location-specific advice and general interest articles, it is inspired by global fashion trends. The reader of the blog becomes acquainted with modest fashion trends from the far East to the far West, with many posts inspired by the bloggers’ numerous travels abroad. Equally, the fashion suggestions stretch far beyond Muslim designers, and build upon trends from the high street and high fashion alike.

This idea that mainstream fashion can be and is Islamic is illustratively demonstrated by the start-up *Evermodest*. Its creator Hannah was frustrated with

time-consuming online shopping and having to seek modest items amongst numerous other products. She thus created a website that functions as a 'modesty filter': it selects modest products from various retailers, from well-known mainstream brands to emerging boutiques.

Hijablicious, Evermodest and other Muslim fashion sites exemplify some common trends in British Muslim fashion. As already discussed in the previous section, Islamic fashion is becoming increasingly fluid and is thus transcending both religious and geographical boundaries. Subsequently, it locates itself within the mainstream fashion industry inspired by global brands, contemporary trends and Internet culture.

Another prominent online phenomenon connected to Islamic fashion comes in the form of online hijab tutorials. A majority of respondents admit watching online guides on how to wrap the hijab in inventive and creative ways. Even those women who do not consider themselves fashion-oriented, tend to occasionally experiment with different techniques of tying their headscarves. Among them is Aisha, a college schoolgirl from east London. As she is financially dependent on her parents, her wardrobe is limited to clothes that are bought by her mother and other relatives. She is not complaining as she firmly believes that Muslim girls should not be fashionable, and should dress as plainly and as modestly as possible. She avoids wearing striking colours, unusual cuts or any other pieces that would draw unwanted attention. However, she often consults YouTube videos in order to find ways of refreshing her hijab look and combining items that she already owns, particularly for special occasions.

Aisha is not alone in embracing advice from YouTube fashion vloggers. The latter category are by no means marginal personalities, but are establishing themselves as popular and prominent Muslim figures. For example, self-proclaimed

'YouTube guru' NabiilaBee, 21, from Birmingham has 250 thousand YouTube subscribers and 450k Facebook fans. Leicester-based Amena from Pearl Daisy, with nearly 380k Youtube subscribers, is the creator of the most popular Britain-produced hijab tutorial 'How to wear a Headscarf (Hijaab/ Hijab Tutorial): Pink Waterfall' with an impressive 2.7 million views. A 24-year old Dina Toki-O, real name Dina Torkia, has 60 thousand followers on Twitter, and almost 600,000 YouTube subscribers,¹⁷ and was in 2014 placed third among the top 30 young people in digital media by The Guardian.

Despite (or due to) their popularity, hijab tutorials continue to generate controversy in Muslim communities. Dina Toki-O's tutorials, for example, are the subject of continuous criticism by Muslim women and men who deem her way of wrapping the hijab *haram*. Some of her designs have been accused of falling into the category of 'camel hump', a headscarf style with an artificially created bun that sits high on the head. This style is forbidden by the hadith, and thus vocally criticised by many Muslims. Moreover, Dina's tutorials have popularised the turban hijab. A chic wrap that has been adopted by thousands of young Muslim women across the UK and abroad thanks to the vlogger, it has also attracted harsh critiques. As it leaves the woman's neck uncovered, it is considered inappropriate by many (see Muslimbuzz, 2012).

It is not only specific hijab styles which draw criticism online. The very idea of online Muslim fashion is a highly controversial concept in its own right. As pointed out by Prodanovic (2014), there is an obvious irony: "Posting imagery for the sole purpose of fashion could indicate that these women are exploiting their bodies for materialistic appeal." By publishing snaps of their styled bodies and close-up videos of their faces, women call into question the very ideas of the hijab. In such images, "the veil serves to entice and intrigue and not necessarily to

¹⁷ All figures were updated in February 2017.

hide” (ibid.). This idea brings us back to earlier discussions surrounding the aesthetics of Princess Hijab's art and the notion of anti-fashion; by spraying black veils onto the bodies of fashion models, the artist does not hide them but rather attracts more public attention.

4.5 From mipsters to hip hop hijabis

Muslim mash-ups with globalised fashion trends, facilitated by the Internet, result in yet another fascinating trend – the emergence of various subcultures and scenes. From Mipsters, also known as Muslim hipsters, to hip hop hijabis, a personal style of British Muslim youth actively negotiates their religious identity and various global subcultures. Such syntheses of different styles fulfil a crucial role in defining identities that are authentically and uniquely both British and Muslim at the same time.

A famous example of such fusion identities emerged in the United States in 2013. Triggered by the release of a video entitled ‘Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ’, the so-called Mipster culture began to gain traction within the global media space. A portmanteau of the words Muslim and hipster, the concept of Mipster refers to young Muslims – in particular women – who embrace their religious identity, but at the same time follow the latest hipster trends of urban aesthetics (see Shaikh and Sharma, 2015: 110; Uddin, 2015: 239). The phenomenon has spread from its American cradle around the globe, and has also been visibly present in the United Kingdom. This chapter's leading protagonist Hannah is just one of the representatives of a younger generation actively engaged with contemporary London hipster culture. Not only is she adjusting her outfit to fit the trends – for example by wearing a hat instead of a headscarf; she is

simultaneously co-creating the trends and thus changing hipster culture to fit her subjective forms of expression.

Similar creative interactions with hipster cultures are displayed by Wahida, a young poet and performer from Birmingham, who will lead us through the last chapter on activism and social change (see Chapter VII). “I’m not perfect, only Allah is. My job is to find a balanced middle way,” says the spoken word poet when we discuss the negotiation between hipster fashion and Islam. Moreover, she thinks that the hijab is not necessarily an expression of good faith, but that it is *her* expression of faith. In her own words, she doesn’t care if Muslim women wear the hijab or not, nor does she care about the ways in which they wrap it around their heads. Hers is definitely among the most inventive styles, and her turbans, wraps and hats are often considered unacceptable by older generations, and even by her peers.

Just like Hannah, Wahida, too, actively shapes the youth subculture scene in her city with her poems, activism, and with her fashion. Her signature garment is the bow tie, and she can rarely be seen without one around her neck. An item of clothing that is explicitly masculine, upper class and British is subverted in an inventive manner. Combined with the hijab and funky hipster clothes, and exhibited on a non-white female body, Wahida dislocates the bow tie from its original symbolic context and rearranges it into a novel stylistic assemblage. Her semiotic subversion has a strong message: being a British Muslim is a unique identity that can only exist in the synergy of different influences, rather than capitalising solely on one.

Subversions exhibited by Wahida and Hannah echo Dick Hebdige. In his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Hebdige analyses Britain’s post-war working-class youth cultures, and the ways in which they subvert and resist

hegemonic power through their choice of style. Taking into account various subcultures, from mods to skinheads and punks, the meanings of youth subcultures are “always in dispute, and style is arena in which opposing definitions clash with the most dramatic force” (Hedbigge, 1979: 3).

Hebdige writes extensively about the struggle between different discourses and different definitions and meanings within ideology, that is always “a struggle within a signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of life” (ibid: 17). As an example of these “humble objects”, he mentions safety pins utilised by punks that are “magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meaning” (ibid: 18). Safety pins could easily be replaced by bow ties – as exemplified by Wahida – or by the hijab. The subordinated reclaim an item of clothing, disassociate it from its traditional meanings and contextualise it through the lens of a particular subculture – with dramatic force.

A similar example can be found in the aforementioned example of Muneera’s outfit, which was presented as part of the Museum of London’s project *What Muslims Wear*. A well-known British rapper’s outfits incorporate strong elements of hip hop subculture, from the choice of hoodies to accessories and trainers. Whilst being a visible rapper, she equally emphasises her adopted Islamic identity. These two social categories are not mutually exclusive, but create a unique style that proclaims a subculture within a subculture. Just like her music, Muneera's clothing embodies the importance of faith, and embeds it in the context of rap music: channelling under-represented voices of Black working-class people and their struggles for justice and equality.

Just like subcultures subvert meanings at a connotative level, Muslim subcultures within subcultures adopt similar semiotic devices and simultaneously perform

them at different levels: they subvert dominant symbols of power, Islamic signifiers as well as objects and practices from their subculture of choice.

4.6 The enigmatic costume

Thus far, the discussion has been centred on external influences which affect the ways in which Muslim women interact with fashion. As already witnessed, Muslim fashion is not a bare receiver of mainstream trends but can equally function as a trend-setter that inspires mainstream culture. For example, Barjis and Hannah have told us about how their creations, designed with Muslim women in mind, have been popular among non-Muslim customers. "I can't know for sure how many non-Muslim women buy my clothes because I only see the names and countries of the people who order my clothes, but judging by that, I would say that it's 50 – 50," says Hannah about the demographics of her costumers. Barjis reports about similar trends. As she is showcasing her work at the leading global fashion events such as London Fashion Week, she is visibly establishing herself as a popular luxury brand across and beyond religious fashion markets. Apart from catering to non-Muslim women who wish to dress modestly, the nascent trend of Islamic fashion, moreover, popularises the hijab itself. A headscarf is thus donned purely for fashion or practical reasons, even by women who were not raised as Muslims, and are not planning to convert to Islam.

Whilst British non-Muslim women who would regularly wear a headscarf for purely fashionable reasons are rare, some cases can be found on the other side of the Atlantic. For example, a *Non-Muslim Hijab Network* unites American women who decide to wear the veil for reasons other than religion, whilst numerous

young girls have come forward to share their stories of taking up the veil because they “found the hijab to be beautiful” (Haute Hijab, 2013). What is more common, though, not only in the US but also in Britain, are various short-term fashion experiments conducted by celebrities and other public personalities.

An especially prominent example that has dominated British headlines is offered by the popular television chef Nigella Lawson, a white non-Muslim English woman. Whilst on holiday in Australia, Lawson was photographed wearing a burkini, a full head-to-toe black swimsuit with a hoodie. Commenting for *The Guardian* (Bunting, 2011), Kausar Sacranie who designed the all-encompassing swimsuit claimed that she was not surprised about the chef's choice of attire. Her company has been doing brisk business among non-Muslims, selling around 15% of their products to non-Muslims unwilling to strip off at the beach. Commenting on the celebrity's reasons to wear the burkini, Sacranie stated: "I knew they would be the same as many of my other customers – sun protection, modesty and freedom to wear whatever garment they choose" (ibid.)

While Nigella Lawson might have opted to wear the burkini for purely practical reasons, the majority of non-Muslim celebrities and other public personalities usually do not share this motivation. Corresponding to the hijab's increasing presence in the media, there has been a strong torrent of publicly exposed women taking up either the headscarf or the face veil. For instance, *The Sun* (Hazell, 2006: 16) published a story featuring Keeley Hazell – known for her work as a Page 3 topless model – wearing the niqab for a day (see Chapter II). Similarly, fashion editor Annette Lamothe-Ramos went about New York with a niqab taking numerous snaps and summarising her accounts as: “I thought I looked like a Batman” (Lamothe-Ramos, 2012). With the media deciding to publish stories about the niqab written by either fashion models or fashion editors, they have reduced a religious symbol with a plethora of implications to a simple

clothing/fashion item. Moreover, by accompanying such articles with highly beautified photographs of women who would be typically seen in significantly more revealing clothes, the hijab becomes reinforced as a mystical, fetishised and erotic garment.

A similar function is also fulfilled by the hijab on the heads and faces of various performers. During my fieldwork in 2013 and 2014, a series of cases was triggered by the popular singer Lady Gaga. After she dressed in a furry niqab, and walked on the runway in a transparent pink burqa at London Fashion Week in 2012, the artist released a song entitled *Burqa/Aura*, which leaked in August 2013. The explicitly sexual lyrics, in essence, invites her lover “to peak underneath the cover” and see her naked. In two lines of the song, Lady Gaga also sums up her attitude towards Islamic attire: “Enigma popstar is fun / She wears burqa for fashion.”

Lady Gaga’s fascination with a supposedly enigmatic fashion object has spread amongst her fans. Shortly after the leak, thousands of her followers, especially teenagers, started posting online pictures of themselves wrapped in towels, table clothes and other textiles under the Twitter/Facebook hashtag *#burqaswag*.¹⁸

Although Lady Gaga’s utilisation of the veil evoked some positive responses from veiled Muslim women who considered it empowering (see Francois Cerrah, 2013), most of my respondents were outraged. When I discuss those pictures with Reema, a niqabi from Birmingham, who was leading us through the previous chapter, she comments as follows: “It is appalling. The niqab is an expression of religion, it is not a costume or a fashion statement for making millions.” Salma, a niqabi from east London, agrees adding that her outfit clearly isn’t Islamic. “This

¹⁸ Hereby, swag refers to a popular slang word for a type of style or presence that exudes confidence.

would classify as *haram* by all means," she says with a reference to a transparent outfit in strong fluorescent colours. According to her, Islamic dress cannot be see-through and seductive in its cut and selection of material, and it cannot come in any bright colour, especially not in neon shades. Both the lyrics of the song and Lady Gaga's embodiment of Islamic dress reinforce neo-colonial notions of the fetishised veil; the veil is represented as a provoking costume, while its wearer is reduced to the exotic object of the male gaze.

The case of Lady Gaga is not an isolated one, with numerous other celebrities similarly appropriating niqabs and burqas. For example, in 2013 pop-star Rihanna staged a photoshoot in the hijab at the Sheik Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, and consequently flooded her social media with sexualised images of herself wearing the Muslim-inspired outfit and striking seductive poses. In the same year, reality television star Kim Kardashian followed Rihanna's example of deploying Instagram for experimenting with the hijab and sharing a beautified image of herself wearing it.

This above-described trend has a number of implications. On the one hand, it shows how Islamic headgear is still strongly embedded into an Orientalist phantasm; when adopted and appropriated by non-Muslim women, the veil radiates mysticism and inviting sexuality. On the other hand, it also displays how Muslim fashion is reinforcing its place in a mainstream pop culture. When adopted by celebrities, either for practical reasons such as in the case of Nigella Lawson, or to exhibit difference and otherness as with the examples of Lady Gaga and Rhianna, they ultimately popularise the garment in the public imagery, although not necessarily in a positive way.

4.7 Conclusion

Princess Hijab's image, displayed on the cover of this chapter (see Image 8), raises a vital point about inescapable intersectionality between ethics and aesthetics. The artist's black veils, sprayed onto the beautified bodies, may resist mainstream representational modes, but ultimately turn into a new aesthetic form that is equally – or sometimes even more – visible in the public space. For instance, Princess Hijab's artistic experiment, which began in the Paris metro, has turned into a widespread trend, with many other artists adopting the method of 'hijabising' and busting billboards across the world.

Princess Hijab's artistic message is an important one to consider when discussing the relationship between fashion and Islam, between an industry that is explicitly aesthetic and religion based upon intangible ethical guidelines. Any discussion about their incompatibility appears almost to be an irrelevant one, for ethics and aesthetics are forms that not only intersect but exist in synergy. Even the niqabis who persistently refuse fashion on the merit of Islamic ethics, propose a new clothing alternative that follows specific aesthetic codes – through their choice of cuts, colours, fabrics and accessories. Every dress, without a single exception, thus incorporates both dimensions, and reflects personal and social ethics and aesthetics, whatever these may be.

For some women, like Hannah, Barjis or Noora, the aesthetic dimension to their dresses is equally as important as the ethical one. They fully embrace fashion and seek dressing solutions that are both Islamically acceptable and fashionable. They do not perceive the two as mutually exclusive, but locate their styles at the intersection of the two. Other women, such as Wahida, acknowledge that their fashion styles might not be completely in accordance with Islamic teaching, but

believe they need to walk on the middle path, thus seeking balance between the various identities a British Muslim woman unavoidably possesses: being British, being Muslim, being a poet, being a hipster – amongst others.

Such negotiations once again suggest that clothing is an extension of the Self, as discussed in the previous chapter. It is a language that communicates identities, beliefs and values, and it mediates – quite literary – between the inner, private Self and an external, public persona. The Self of British Muslim subjects is necessarily eclectic and incorporates numerous, equally important dimensions. As observed throughout the chapter, most women – from Sumaiyah to Hannah – find it important to express their belonging to their country, their city and their youth culture. They are not hijabis from Egypt or Oman, but are hijabis from London or Birmingham.

Just like youth cultures in Britain more generally, urban hijab fashion, too, adheres to highly globalised and cosmopolitan trends embedded in neoliberal frames of production and consumption. Women from this chapter have only rarely decided to adopt the outfit of their parents or grandparents but have rather embraced the attires without an explicit ethnic label. Noora buys her abayas from Dubai and her shoes from New York; Sumaiyah and Wahida buy their headscarves in high street shops; Aisha wraps her hijab following the instructions of a distant US-based vlogger, whilst Muneera collects and combines her pieces anywhere from her native Jamaica to South Africa, where she has travelled. Picking and mixing is hence a common strategy of British Muslim women and their fluid stylistic expressions.

When talking about British Muslim fashion it is thus impossible to avoid British non-Muslim fashion. On the one hand, British Muslim fashion is much more about non-Muslim items sourced from high street retailers or high fashion

designers than it is about clothing objects traditionally seen as Islamic. On the other hand, the exchange between the two is not a one-way street. Just as mainstream fashion has had a considerable influence on Muslim styles, Islamic fashion, in return, shapes mainstream fashion in its own ways. The growing market of Muslim consumers affects the kind of products even the biggest retailers decide to stock in their stores. Moreover, increasingly visible and popular designers – including Hannah and Barjis – motivate non-Muslim women to don attire traditionally designed for Muslims. Even a step further, non-Muslim women – especially those who are actively seeking the media spotlight – incorporate traditionally Islamic fashion objects, such as the hijab, into their styles in pursuit of reinforcing their enigmatic sexuality and stirring controversy.

Islamic dress is hence not as much about particular items as it is about the context in which these items are deployed. For example, just like the face veil can be utilised purely as a fashion statement by Lady Gaga, a mass-produced high street scarf can be turned into a personal signifier of faith by Sumaiyah. What is considered *haram* or acceptable, fashionable or non-fashionable varies, depending on the context in which fashion objects are used, and on the person who adopts it.

The hijab, thus, “creates a double discourse, one that seems to resist the mainstream but at the same time is part of it” (Suterwalla, 2013: 167). Women like Hannah, Wahida, Sumaiyah, Barjis or Princess Hijab, deploy their veils to resist the hegemonic power of white and secular capitalism and its beauty games. They celebrate their Muslimness not only by following Quranic teachings but also by expressing their identity visibly. While they are, in a way, resisting the top-down power exhibited by the mainstream fashion industry, they at the same time conform to British consumerism. By supporting high street and online brands, or by publishing their beautified photos and tutorials on their blogs and social media sites, they are deeply submerged in the global net of consumerism. This is

not necessarily a critique of veiling styles among British Muslim women. As observed by Suterwalla, such complex and multi-layered strategies of styling religion produced through the interplay of cultural synergy and oppositionality give them “an opportunity to morph into new Muslim subjects where they can create hybrid identities beyond Orientalist tropes” (ibid.).

The idea of new hybrid identities and the semiotic potentials of the hijab to be interpreted in a subversive and emancipatory manner will follow us into the next chapter, where I will explore how British Muslim hijabis create their own versions of feminism and gender roles.

Chapter V: Veiled feminism



Image 10: Hannah Habibi's artistic take on Muslim feminism

It is a Saturday morning but Bristol City Academy is as bustling as on any given school day. For the day, the school has turned into the venue for a nationwide conference on female genital mutilation. It is not a coincidence that the event is hosted in this particular school, for one of the leading British organisations in the field of anti-FGM campaigning originates here. Started by a teacher who was consistently facing cases of FGM among her female pupils, the organisation has now transcended the context of one school and has turned into a nationwide, anti-gender-based violence campaign. Despite its national format, the core of the organisation is still formed by young local activists who are forging dialogues with individuals and entities which play a crucial part in eradicating gender-based violence.

Today is an especially important day for these young activists. Dressed to impress, with folders placed nervously in their hands and excited expressions daubed on their faces, they are about to address hundreds of representatives from educational institutions, the government, the police and the charity sector with a clear aim – to promote education about gender-based violence at all levels.

The first round of workshops is about to begin and Nawaal, a young trustee of the organisation, enters the classroom. She is wearing a long black abaya with a matching veil and simple black shoes. Despite the fact that she is at least half the age of the majority of her audience, she delivers her workshop on the abuse of girls in a knowledgeable and passionate manner. Not even difficult questions during a Q&A session seem to inhibit her confident performance. This is not surprising at all – Nawaal has been speaking about violence against girls for a number of years, and to the most select of audiences: as the official ambassador of The Guardian’s anti-FGM campaign, she has addressed members of the royal family, chatted about violence against women with the Secretary General of the United Nations, received compliments from Malala Yousafzai, and persuaded the then-Education Secretary Michael Gove to contact all schools around the country about FGM, and abuse directed towards girls more generally.

Nawaal is a practising Muslim, and a proud one. Although consistently challenged by elderly Muslims, especially from her own Somali community, she insists that feminism is her right. "I think anyone can be a Muslim and a feminist," she affirms when we speak a couple of weeks after the event in her old school. "People don't seem to like that word, the way this label is used. I'm standing for my own rights and if that makes me a feminist, I am a feminist!" She has also encountered antagonism from white Britons – particularly women – burdened with prejudice about Muslim women. Wearing a headscarf, being black and being young sometimes make her 'job' extremely difficult, she admits. Despite numerous obstacles, Nawaal is establishing herself as one of the leading feminist voices of the future generation, who is fighting for her rights and the rights of girls and women – head on, and while wearing the hijab.

Nawaal, a young feminist from Bristol featured in the opening vignette, is just one of many representatives of a young generation of British Muslim feminists who are promoting the voices and rights of Muslim women, and mobilising their public visibility. In recent years, Nawaal reports encountering countless stereotypes and a great deal of prejudice regarding the concepts of being a Muslim and being a feminist, from white feminists and conservative Muslims alike. Whilst the latter dismiss feminist engagement as a possible option for Muslim women, an overwhelming number of white feminist scholars and activists perceive the hijab as a symbol of centuries-long oppression, and as a tool of institutionalised patriarchy.

The intersection between feminism and Islam is, however, a particularly lively field in Britain at the moment, especially in light of the debates regarding the interdictions of Islamic veils. As already outlined in previous chapters, an increasing number of (self-identified) women, including Nawaal, feel a strong need to reclaim the meaning of the hijab imposed on them by selected historical,

political and social discourses, and introduce it as a symbol of both their own free choice and of profound spirituality. Rather than viewing it as a rigid structure that is imposed on an individual, these feminists recognise and build upon semiotic potentials of the veil for subverting dominant meanings, thus welcoming it as a conspicuous insignia for denouncing emancipation without conforming to Western gender normativity or refusing Islamic values.

This chapter will focus on these subverting techniques and meanings deployed by Muslim feminists in order to collapse rigid social structures that are suffocating their existence. Following the examples of Nawaal and her fellow Muslim feminists, this chapter will observe how women resist and rethink male hegemony and narrowly-defined gender identities as dictated by Islamic communities, various feminist groups and dominant British public discourses. I will investigate how these processes operate in various organised and unorganised movements, artistic experiments and in the media.

For that reason, the cover of this chapter displays a work by Hannah Habibi Hopkin (see Image 10), a prominent feminist artist and white Muslim convert based in South London. The chosen image of a famous 1943 feminist *We Can Do It* poster with a Muslim twist is just one of artist's numerous striking drawings that portray Muslim women in hijabs in ways that deconstruct their prevalent depictions. "Joining the dots between pop art and Islam" (Di Consiglio, 2013), Hannah Habibi's simple and playful images carry deeper socio-political implications, as they call for modern reinterpretations of Islam, feminism and their intersections.

Hannah and Nawaal offer a strong backbone for the chapter on hijabi feminism. They both challenge the junctures between Islam and feminism effectively and publicly. They also raise the question about how the hijab can alter and challenge

certain existing meanings – such as the hijab as a symbol of oppression or submission, for example – and how Muslim women can themselves become in charge of these creative processes.

5.1 Colonial feminist crusades against the veil

“No, of course I don’t consider myself a feminist. I don’t think a Muslim woman can be a feminist,” says Roshan during our long chat in a café in central Newcastle. She categorically dismisses feminism in all shapes and forms. For the purposes of her studies and personal interests, the recent social sciences graduate from the North East has read, written and thought about feminism and its connection to Islam, and drawn an educated conclusion: the two concepts are simply incompatible. When I probe her about her argumentation, she does not dismiss Islamic feminism uncritically, but offers a well-argued explanation without pausing for a second: “Islam is a religion that places women very highly, higher than men. Women are giving birth to children and managing homes – these are more sacred things than going to work and earning money, so yes, women are treated more highly than men.” For Roshan, Islam is in its essence favourable to women, and being a good Muslim automatically dictates respecting women. She is, thus, of a strong belief that feminism is not needed within the domain of Islam as women’s equality, or even superiority, is inherently engraved in its very dogma.

Roshan's explanation expresses a position shared by numerous other respondents. Several women – including Sumaiyah and Reema whom we met in previous chapters – refuse the feminist label, even though their activist engagements strive for asserting their rights, pushing for gender equality and

combating patriarchal hegemony. Reema is, for example, speaking up against domestic abuse, while Sumaiyah is vocally protesting against the idea of men making decisions about the wearing of the face veil on behalf of Muslim women. The reason a number of Muslim women reject feminism is not necessarily because they concur with Roshan's belief of Islam not requiring a systematic fight to achieve gender equality. As with the debates surrounding fashion from the previous chapter, many women feel that the concept of feminism, too, carries heavy colonial burdens. These legacies prompt some Muslim women to vigorously disassociate themselves from feminist ideologies altogether.

As already discussed (see Chapter I), the historiographies of Muslim-majority societies have been deeply affected by the colonial notions of women's liberation being employed to justify domination by imperial powers (Abu-Lughdod: 2002, 2013; Rostami-Povey, 2007: 139). Using the language of feminism, the rhetoric of saving Muslim women still represents a prevalent imperial strategy. In her influential study on women and gender in Islam, Leila Ahmed (1992: 151) investigates this concept and speaks about 'colonial feminism', introducing the terms as the feminist heuristics that is heavily co-opted into imperial ideology. She refers to the case of Lord Cromer who was in charge of indicting gender segregation, and subsequently the veil, during British colonial rule in Egypt by citing the noble cause of liberating Egyptian women. At the same time, he was the president and a founding member of the English male league established for opposing the women's suffrage movement (ibid.: 153), which was one of the main progressive feminist movements of the time. Lord Cromer's double morality clearly demonstrates his disconnect with the feminist agenda, and shows how putting on the mask of feminism helped him redirect the ideas of feminism, "in the service of colonialism, towards Other men and the cultures of Other men" (ibid.). Recalling this telling example of the anti-feminist feminism of colonial oppressors, Ahmed warns that the emergence of such a warped version of

feminism was essentially a deliberate product of the Victorian male establishment. The same discourses are still alive and are now inspiring contemporary anti-veiling debates.

These colonial connotations of feminism, however, often remain ignored by some feminist movements, especially those who mould their agendas according to the ideas of first and second wave feminism. To recall, the first wave of feminism, beginning in the mid 19th century, was focused on the fight to obtain the vote. The second wave of feminism, which emerged in the 1960s, expanded the definition of the political. Under the mantra 'the personal is political', it attacked inequalities from manifold perspectives, and sought to improve women's position in society (de Beauvoir, 1949; Burrell, 2004: 4). The shift from public to personal reflected the growing importance within feminist theory of what is known as radical feminism, which is based on demolishing the systematically oppressive and pervasive institution of patriarchy (Heywood, 2014: 416). Many contemporary feminists critique first- and second-wave feminism for reducing multiple female experiences into a single and whitewashed chronology of feminist history, without acknowledging the challenges, issues and contributions of women from minority backgrounds, of colour, faith, sexual orientation and socio-economic class, for example.

An example of anti-veiling feminist action capitalising on the imperialist idea of saving Muslim women occurred during the time of my fieldwork in connection to FEMEN, the international feminist group, whose political demonstrations involve bare-chested women with protesting slogans written across their bodies. The day of action entitled *Topless Jihad* was organised by FEMEN activists in April 2013, following a Muslim preacher's call to kill one of their Tunisian members for having shared nude pictures of herself online. As part of the protests taking place outside Tunisian embassies across Europe, some activists burned the Islamic flag

outside the Grand Mosque in Paris and merged the event with their long-standing campaign against the oppression of women in the Muslim world. Their campaign featured calling on Muslim women to take off their veils.

The combination of topless women, flag burning and a protest against the veil generated public controversy that was picked up by the majority of the mainstream media in Europe. The subsequent responses to their actions were particularly vocally condemned by Islamic communities, including British Muslim women. A group of British students, for example, plotted a counter-action in the form of *the Pride Muslimah Day*. In response to the call of FEMEN activists to protest topless in revolt against alleged Islamic immorality, the campaign was initiated by a self-organised female brigade called 'Muslim Women Against FEMEN' to publicly criticise the colonial feminism of FEMEN, and the idea that "Western feminism knows best for women all over the world" (Muslim Women Against FEMEN quoted in Bacchi, 2014).

Utilising various new technologies and the media, women started accumulating pictures with messages expressing their right to cover up and speak for themselves. "FEMEN stole our voice," read the posters of Birmingham Muslims against FEMEN. "Hey #Femen I don't need to be saved from my right and my choice," protested one Twitter user pictured with a headscarf, while another posted: "You talk about freedom?! Then let me be free to wear my HIJAB!!" The women taking part in the campaign were of the strong belief that their voices should not be represented, or even hijacked, by those feminists who fail to recognise the multiplicity of strategies to achieve and exhibit emancipation.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the legitimacy of naked protest within the spectrum of political campaigning. From Naked Bike Rides raising awareness about sustainable transportation to famous nude PETA

demonstrations against animal torture, deploying naked bodies in order to attract wider attention is a common and often effective method of protest. Also, it is important not to dismiss FEMEN's active feminist engagement throughout the last decade, which has shed light on the wrong-doings of “three principle manifestations of patriarchy: religion, the sex industry, and dictatorship” (Smiet, 2015) in their native Ukraine and in Russia. From advocating for the legalisation of abortion, to critiquing sex tourism in Ukraine, to opposing the politics of Russian president Vladimir Putin, FEMEN's naked bodies have indeed attracted global media attention and given a voice to the concerns of women in eastern Europe and beyond (ibid.).

What Muslim Women Against FEMEN pointed out rightly, however, is their problematic deployment of Islamophobic and Orientalist narratives. By decorating their naked bodies with messages such as ‘better naked than the burqa’, the ‘naked army’ reinforces the very idea exhibited in Leila Ahmed’s concept of colonial feminism. They reproduce and promote the notion that Muslim women are necessarily oppressed by their men, and can be liberated only by adhering to the Western idea of womanhood and emancipated bodies. It may therefore be argued that by doing so, FEMEN activists employ discourses patronise women who proudly represent their religion rather than express feminist solidarity for the struggles these women are leading as female representatives of a minority. Whilst the same protesting method might be successful in the case of opposing the politics of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, the analogous approach towards critiquing religion is not equally effective in Western Europe, where their campaigning approach feeds into existing anti-Islamic sentiments that have evident racist and colonial subtexts (Smiet, 2015: 16).

While the imperialist implications of the ‘naked equals free’ matrix might be

easily detected, a strand of feminists who maintain loyalty to some second wave ideas push the debates in a different direction. They claim that women should refuse any supposed remnants of patriarchal oppression, ranging from sexualised naked bodies to the Islamic veil. For instance, after I had published an online newspaper article on hijab feminism (Sadar, 2014), I received an avalanche of angry responses from self-declared feminists who refused to recognise the hijab's feminist potentials. One commentator, nicknamed 'radical feminist' complained: "Wearing the veil is like wearing high heels or lipstick – a sign that women's oppression by men has not ended. The claims of the veil as feminist are a complete misunderstanding of feminist politics rather than a demonstration of political resistance to illegitimate male power" (ibid.). Her comment concluded: "When women no longer find ourselves [...] as veiled chattel within men's religions, we might have taken some steps forward to our liberation" (ibid.).

Although it may be seen as dated, the argument has some fair, or at least well intended, points. The author of the post defends radical strategies for dismantling patriarchal orders, which entail the eradication of symbols and mechanisms of women's oppression from any given time in history. The female body can be liberated, implies the commentator, only when it is freed from being a slave to the male gaze. Just like red lipstick was invented to satisfy it, the Islamic veils ensure the male gaze is not provoked at times of inconvenience. The commentator, however, fails to acknowledge some elements crucial to understanding the significance of the veil to Muslim feminism, which cannot be easily translated into secular codes.

Firstly, as shown by an influential group of third wave feminists who reclaimed traditionally feminine emblems and consequently gained the popular nickname 'lipstick feminists', the act of reclaiming and subverting old symbols – from patriarchy or from colonial feminism – can be deemed more powerful than

simply refusing them (Leach, 2015: 244), an idea to which I will return later in this chapter.

Secondly, and probably most importantly from an emic perspective of Muslim women, it is vital not to diminish the factor of religiosity. The 'radical feminist' voice appears to perceive religion from a purely secular perspective: as a man-made product, an institution established with a specific socio-political agenda. Many of my Muslim respondents refuse to accept the idea of religion as an artificial creation. They believe their religiosity is not a simple personal decision but is something significantly more divine. Their religious identity is – as Asmaa, one of the respondents puts it – all-encompassing; it is not solely a domain of adherents' privacy but necessarily embraces all parts of their existence. Therefore, Muslim feminism cannot be explained by the language of secular feminists, especially when it comes to the discussions surrounding private-public divisions and consequent gender segregation and veiling.

5.2 Sexual apartheid

For a better understanding of the problematic historical, social and political relationship between the hijab and feminism, some issues raised in the previous section require further reflection. As exemplified by the politics of FEMEN and a 'radical feminist's' online comment, the veil continues to be perceived as a symbol of oppression – both for its literal implications, in terms of covering one's body and hence hampering its mobility, as well as symbolically, for it represents segregation of women and subsequent gender inequality.

The issue of gender segregation and its implications for gender inequality is

commonly thrust onto the agendas of the British media and of politicians. Islamic social segregation of men and women to gender-specific sites, with male places supposedly shaping the public realm and the female ones being located in the domain of the private, is subjected to harsh criticism premised on its equation with what Maryam Namazie, a prominent Britain-based Iranian advocate for human rights and a former Muslim, calls – sexual apartheid (2007).

Maryam Namazie's engagement with the veiling dilemmas was especially active after the publication of Universities UK's guidelines which legitimised gender segregation at university events. As well as writing extensively on the issue for various mainstream publications and starting an online petition, she was also one of the organisers of the rally against gender segregation at British universities. In her speech during a protest in front of the offices of Universities UK in London on a cold December day in 2013, she used the apartheid allegory: "We will continue the fine tradition of the anti-apartheid movement and Nelson Mandela but also the ongoing resistance of the people of Iran and elsewhere against gender apartheid by breaking up segregation wherever we can." By comparing gender segregation to racial segregation exercised in South Africa, Namazie suggested that Muslim women are subjected to analogous mechanisms of oppression to those that were imposed on black South Africans.

According to Namazie and her Muslim and non-Muslim sympathisers, then, any form of segregation of men and women – with the veil being a prime example, and a symbol of this concept – resembles any other segregation of minorities in any given historical and political context, and is as such a highly discriminatory practice. Many Muslim women attribute these comparisons, too, to the effect of colonial feminism and its one-size-fits-all mentality.

Among them is Salma, an Islamic scholar and activist from London. "It's

appalling... what these people are doing is just appalling," complains Salma with a worried voice when we discuss the aforementioned initiatives. A week after the rally, we are sitting in one of innumerable small halal restaurants in Whitechapel in east London, located right next to one of London's biggest and most important mosques and Islamic centres. Our table is surrounded with a textile curtain, which separates us from the rest of the room. Many other restaurants around the area have similar table arrangements, so as to accommodate their Muslim female costumers. Women who wear the niqab can take off their veils whilst the curtain around their table protects them from unwanted gazes. In the privacy of our isolated space, Salma can enjoy a cup of coffee and a sandwich in a public space without her face veil. While slowly sipping her coffee, she goes on talking about gender segregation and the erroneous belief that separate entrances for women, divided spaces in mosques and veils render Islam patriarchal and Muslim women either oppressed or "necessarily brainwashed". "It just allows us to maintain privacy," she concludes.

Through the eyes of Salma and many other Muslim women, gender segregation is seen as an institution that is empowering women rather than suppressing them. The veil as one of its manifestation is, thus, seen as a welcome tool for avoiding surveillance; women themselves govern their social interactions by deploying the veil to regulate the male gaze. Roshan, too, shares Salma's views: "We have power over men, that's why it's up to us how we use it." She explains this thesis further: for her, women possess inherent sexual power which can wreak havoc if not suppressed. By controlling their sexuality, women, then, perform a crucial role in maintaining the social equilibrium.

This thesis is a commonly refuted one, even, or especially, within Islamic feminist circles, by women who refuse to allow their actions to be informed by the male gaze. Probably the most famous criticism comes from Fatema Mernissi whose

seminal works *Beyond the Veil* (1987) and *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991) continue to represent the leading writings in Muslim feminist scholarship. She is particularly concerned with the role of female sexuality in constructing rigid gender roles.

Mernissi engages in feminist readings of Islam's founding texts and argues against the compulsory wearing of the hijab. She writes:

“Paradoxically, and contrary to what is commonly assumed, Islam does not advance the thesis of women’s inherent inferiority. Quite the contrary, it affirms the potential equality between the sexes. The existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women’s inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain their power; namely, segregation and legal subordination in the family structure” (Mernissi, 1985: 19).

This segregation, she claims, is not something that is prescribed by the Prophet but is rather something that was introduced by his misogynistic companions, and those whom the Quran refers to as *al-Munafaiqun* (hypocrites), who were allegedly well known for harassing women. According to Mernissi, this male elite could not relinquish their *Jahiliya*, pre-Islamic backwards customs that Islam in fact wanted to eradicate. Their warped readings of the Quran were actualised in various laws and practices, including gender segregation and its manifestation in veiling (ibid., Rhouni, 2010: 116; Vahdat, 2015: 131). Mernissi suggests that the current debates surrounding the hijab recall *Jahiliya* customs that are, ultimately, against the teachings of Islam and are a product of the male elite faction who want to persuade us that “their egotistic, highly subjective, and mediocre view of culture and society has a sacred basis” (Mernissi, 1991: ix).

This leaves us with two important theses. Firstly, according to Salma, Roshan and

Fatema Mernissi, Islam as a religion (but not as a social institution built around it) promotes gender equality and gives the utmost respect and power to women. All aforementioned women agree that female sexuality is powerful, and disruptively so (Mernissi, 1985: 45). However, what Mernissi sees as a male-led social order that undermines this power (*ibid.*), Salma and Roshan perceive as a conscious decision on the part of women to take control of maintaining a balanced social order. By veiling and complying with the principles of gender segregation, they tone down their power to minimise the risks of a social mayhem.

Secondly, while all mentioned women recognise female power and its impact on social order, they differentiate significantly in their interpretations of veiling practices. In response to these differences, one could claim that their readings of the Quran and of Islamic history arise from distinct cultural contexts. Mernissi, born in a 1940s Moroccan harem, experienced gender segregation as an aggressive and oppressive institution. Roshan and Salma, born in the second half of the 20th century in urban Britain, have, on the contrary, been introduced to the institution of veiling as a matter of personal choice, liberated from its history of subjugation. This thesis will be expanded on in the concluding section of this chapter, for this major distinction in reading Islamic symbols is crucial to understanding contemporary British Muslim feminist thought.

What was also demonstrated with the example of Salma – as well as Nawaal and some other publicly active Muslim women introduced thus far – is that the division between public and private spheres is historically contingent, and cannot be subjected to normative European comprehensions of these two terms. This inevitably brings forward some dilemmas from the side of different feminists, as – in the words of Pateman (1987: 103) – the dichotomy between the public and the private is what feminism is essentially all about.

For further understanding of this conflict zone between Muslim and 'mainstream' feminism, the disparities in understanding the private/public divide should be discussed further. Following Aristotle's conceptions of oikos (home) and polis (the city) referring to women being confined to the private sphere and men managing the public realm, the private-public polemics have dominated the theories centring on women's subjugated position in Western societies, both in theory and in practice. Especially after the rise of Marxism and the civil rights movements, the fight against this division was reinforced and is still present today, as women demand more access to the public sphere – for example, in the form of more visibility in the media or at managerial level within companies. The private and the public are not conceptualised according to physical spaces, as much as they suggest a different set of responsibilities and rights (Burns and Monro, 2015: 10; Goodman, 2010; Wolosky, 2013).

Muslim feminists have been critiquing this binary distinction, noting the specific construction of Islamic space, which is "characterised by the spatial and interweaving pattern – the moving between sacred space and time and ordinary worldly space and time throughout the day every day" (El-Guindi, 1999: 81). According to Islamic beliefs, then, sacred spaces and rhythmic time cannot be only private or public, but are necessarily the domain of both. Roshan previously explained this notion by remarking how raising children is deemed sacred, for example. With this responsibility being typically associated with women – Roshan claims – their work in the domestic sphere can be observed as more sacred than "a man doing a boring job just to earn money and bring it home to his wife."

El Guindi (ibid.: 96), furthermore, observes how the private and the public are intersected in a manner that cannot be detected in secular Euro-American spaces. Many products of women's work, including veiling, are displayed 'publicly' –

according to Eurocentric standards, as the Arabic language allegedly does not even have a suitable lexis for describing these distinctions. For instance, an earlier conversation with Salma in a restaurant in east London took place in a separate space, created by a curtain (private) in a restaurant (public), therefore in a space that is both public and private at the same time. With these concepts clearly not being universally applicable, the veil, therefore, should not be seen as emblematic of the boundaries between the polar spaces in their Euro-American understanding, even though veiling essentially continues to be “privacy’s visual metaphor” (ibid.).

These ideas illustrate the notion that the Eurocentric conception of the private and the public cannot be applicable to Islamic modes of space division. Feminism premised on critiquing the female-male divide according to this binary, then, fails to incorporate perspectives that are unique to Islamic societies, in particular when it comes to matters of veiling.

5.3 Veiling against objectification

The division between the public and the private as well as the idea of regulating the male gaze is closely related to the concept of the objectification of female bodies. As pointed out by Salma earlier, the ability to maintain privacy whilst in the public domain can help women avoid the objectifying male gaze. In that sense, the veil functions as an “empowering tool of resistance” (Bullock, 2002: 216) for responding to increasing sexualisation of women and their bodies, and is as such a powerful political mechanism for resisting hegemonic gender roles in contemporary Britain.

Especially in the British context, many Muslim women talk about the resisting potentials of the veil for combating the extreme sexualisation of female bodies. We should recall the street art of Princess Hijab presented in the previous chapter (see Image 8). By spraying black veils onto the airbrushed bodies of fashion models, the artist uses the veil to question the sexist mechanisms behind capitalism. She raises a question about how hiding one's identity behind a black cloth is in any way more oppressing than hiding behind the airbrushed skin, glossy paper and innumerable beauty products. By introducing alternative fashion billboards, she challenges and deconstructs the Eurocentric ideals of female beauty.

Similar arguments premised on the comparison of different forms of patriarchal oppression, however, too often lack depth, and remain at the uncritical and non-reflexive level of pointing fingers. 'Men forcing you to veil objectifies you', yells one camp, whilst the opposing camp shouts 'pornography and nude adverts objectify you'.

The issue of the veil operating as an anti-objectification screen is anything but straightforward. Analogous to the matter of gender segregation, there are multiple dissimilar and often conflicting theories surrounding this claim. As discussed earlier, the feminist movement FEMEN suggests that women's liberation arises from women's freedom to take off their clothes and display their bodies, irrespective of the promiscuous male gaze. Following this vein of understanding, the need to veil in order to suppress or avoid male objectification is seen as counter-productive for realising the female agenda of women's emancipation (see Khir Allah, 2014: 239).

"I really don't see at all how taking my clothes off will make me any more liberated. No offence but miniskirts and high heels appear quite objectifying to

me,” claims Khadija when we chat about women’s freedom and objectification. Sitting in the women’s section of a mosque in north London, Khadija takes off her face veil and black textile gloves. “It’s not like I don’t want to look beautiful [...] Yesterday we had a party with my girlfriends. We did our hair and make-up, dressed up nicely,” a teenage niqabi explains further. “The difference is that I want to choose who I beautify for. I want to look beautiful for my family, my girlfriends and one day, inshallah, my husband. I don’t have any desire to be admired by some strangers on the street.” Echoing Salma’s views on gender segregation, Khadija equates liberation with the ability to choose who to dress nicely (or undress) for. She is not worried about hiding from the male gaze but, instead, simply believes that her body is a result of god’s work and should not serve as public entertainment.

Such ownership arguments are common ones. During a Discover Islam Week held in Newcastle, an all-women event was organised with the aim of addressing any questions non-Muslim women might have about living as a Muslim woman. After a couple of hours of activities and socialising over hot drinks and food, conversations became more intimate. One of the non-Muslim women in the audience asked a question about repressing one’s sexuality, which she assumed was something that Islam does. A niqabi in her thirties who had not spoken until then and was sitting quietly without her face veil, responded loudly and through laughter:

“A lot of people think that women like me are like nuns because of how we dress, that we live in some sort of celibacy and are asexual. I wear sexy lingerie, I definitely have a lot of sex, and I hope all my sisters do the same, all married sisters that is! I just think my body is for me and my husband to enjoy.”

Nervous giggling ensued, while the moderator of the debate, a young, unmarried

student, thanked the member of the audience for the comment and rounded up by saying that she, too, agreed with this claim; Islam does not repress sexuality nor does it encourage women to hide their bodies. The key lies in taking charge of, and also following guidelines about, sharing them.

As seen from these examples, the mentioned women refuse to be exposed to objectification from strangers, be they random passers-by on the street, or the advertising industry. Unlike FEMEN, they do not think the answer is in undressing, nor is it in displaying their sexuality publicly. Rather, it is about taking full ownership of their bodies and deciding who has access to it.

This argument is pushed further by Nadiya Takolia in an article for *The Guardian*, published in 2012. The researcher and publicist donned the hijab after delving into feminist theories during her studies. Appalled by the omnipresent “woman/sex combination” (Takolia, 2012), she reports to have taken several months to carefully reflect on the issue and eventually decided to reject capitalist-driven social expectations by covering up. In her opinion piece, she remarks:

“Though my mode of expression may appear Islamic, and my experiences carry a spiritual dimension, there is no theological monopoly on women’s empowerment; I really believe that a non-Muslim woman could do this if she chose to.”

Rather than protecting herself from men’s lust, she employs the hijab to announce that her “femininity is not available for public consumption” (ibid.). In this sense, the veil transcends a solely religious dimension and becomes explicitly political.

Private is, however, always political. Not only Nadiya Takolia but also Salma, Khadija and an anonymous visitor to Discover Islam Week perform a highly political act: it can be argued that repelling the sexualisation of female bodies by

covering them, they demand a sense of self-worth without adhering to – what Takolia (ibid.) would call – “capitalist culture’s beauty game.

5.4 #lifeofamuslimfeminist

Muslim feminists do not use the veil solely to criticise hegemonic gender roles in Britain and in the West more generally as exemplified in the previous section. Women also utilise it for revisiting gender roles that are considered normative by some representatives of their Islamic communities, especially men.

This phenomenon is particularly evidently and vigorously adopted by burgeoning online movements which employ social media channels as platforms for addressing gender inequalities in Islamic communities. The growing popularity of online Muslim feminist activism has been illustratively exhibited in the form of a trending Twitter hashtag *#lifeofamuslimfeminist* which gained popularity in 2014. Manchester-born Noorulann who initiated this movement explains: “Essentially the hashtag began with me trying to explain the frustrations I faced as a Muslim feminist – navigating between Muslims telling you that you don’t need feminism and mainstream feminism rejecting you. When this happens, there is nowhere you can position yourself comfortably” (quoted in Graham and Shahid, 2014).

Her idea snowballed and now features thousands of 140-character long texts narrating the main challenges and aspirations of Muslim feminists, which commonly involve the topic of wearing the hijab. “If only men obsessed over the education, health and justice of Muslim women like they obsess over hijab,” complains one of the women, whilst another user objects to “getting lectures on

how your hijab isn't 'correct' by brothers who clearly missed the memo about lowering their gaze" (see Image 11).

By publicly discussing the veil with regards to men's double standards and male control over women's dress, the women reassert their right to shape and transform the dominant meanings of the veil. They use the potentials of Twitter to channel their opinions on veiling; by sharing their experiences both with similar-minded Muslim feminists around the country and beyond, and with those who preach against their rights.



Image 11: A selection of tweets posted under the hashtag #lifeofamuslimfeminist

In addition to online movements starting with the purpose of spreading Muslim feminist ideas, Muslim women on social media commonly unite in response to various sexist or Islamophobic events or trends. In 2014, a meme regarding the hijab went viral in cyberspace. It featured two pictures of different items, commonly food, with one in an unspoilt condition and the other one being somehow deformed, damaged or rotten. One picture portrayed images of lollipops, with one them wrapped in a shiny colourful paper and the other open and covered with flies. On another meme a picture of a furry chicken would be accompanied with an image of a plucked one. Yet another featured an inviting, ripe apple and the other its rotten equivalent, and so on. Images, captioned 'with hijab' and 'without hijab', were circulated widely, by Muslim men and women alike. Synchronically, another trend gained popularity; online users were posting pictures of pearls in a shell and comparing these images with women covered with the hijab.

Numerous Muslim women from across the world responded sharply, including British Muslim feminists. Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, a prominent British Muslim writer known for her strong feminist stance, for example, writes: "I don't want to be a pearl. [...] Beauty is not my defining factor. I'm not an object to put in a box and be cooed at. I'm a real woman, with aspirations for self-determination, whose worth is recognisable in and of myself" (Janmohamed, 2014). A blogger with a nickname Salafi Feminist further reflects on the anti-feminist sentiments exhibited in these images. She writes:

"These memes – and there are definitely worse ones online – caricature female bodies, and dissect their attire in a dehumanizing manner. I am not sure how this is significantly different from teenage boys "rating" girls and women on a scale from one to ten. At least such teenage "ratings" don't pretend to be voicing what God thinks of the women in question" (Salafi Feminist, 2014).

Through antagonistic responses to lollipop and pearl analogies, hijabi, niqabi and non-veiled Muslim feminists took a strong stand against being compared to passive objects whose beauty needs to be protected, guarded and hidden (from men). They demanded the recognition of their individual agency and self-worth that extends far beyond their external appearance. Moreover, they made a strong point in asserting that the hijab is ultimately a woman's choice, which needs to be respected – whether she decides to cover or not.

What is fascinating in these examples is not only the messages that women are spreading online but also the strategies they deploy in doing so. While social media definitely proffers a platform for spreading patriarchal and Islamophobic sentiments, it can be simultaneously seen as a medium that embodies some core feminist values: it functions on the principle of democratic participation without adhering to hierarchies existing in so called 'real life'; it shares subjective accounts and experiences, and encourages women to unite beyond geographical and social boundaries (Messina-Dysert, 2014: 10).

This democratic potential of social media has been recognised by various women, from female scientists and business women facing discrimination in the workplace, to women of colour, to refugee and migrant women, amongst others. These individual women would probably only rarely have opportunities to share their experiences in person, either due to their physical distance or the different symbolic positions they occupy in society. This notion is evident in the case of women engaging in the above-mentioned initiatives. Not only are they scattered around the country (and beyond); they come from very different walks of life in regard to their socio-economic backgrounds, professional careers, ethnic profiles and different views on feminism and Islam – as well as their overlaps.

Another unique and attractive dimension of social media that is distinctive to

Muslim feminists lies in its ambiguity regarding gender segregation. While gender segregation might be much more determined in real life, Internet guidelines of halal engagements between men and women are less clear. This idea is explained by Hawa, a Somali student from west London whom we have met in the previous chapters: "Twitter's a bit of a grey area really. I wouldn't speak to single men in real life but on Twitter I can engage with them and I can say what I want. That wouldn't work in a face-to-face situation." This potential of engaging with men opens an opportunity for young Muslim women to establish dialogues and share their perspectives with those who continue to maintain patriarchal structures. The Internet gives women a platform to approach anyone without necessarily compromising gender segregation.

It is thus important not to ignore the emancipating potentials of social media for British Muslim feminists. As seen through a short analysis of Muslim feminists' usage of social media, the veil can serve as a good "feminist tool" (Contractor, 2012: 92) which grants them the agency to contest patriarchy and the objectification of female bodies. Women also employ the veil as a "dialogical tool" (ibid.), which functions as a catalyst for establishing platforms for representing themselves in their pluralist communities. By doing so, their messages can reach similar-minded fellow Muslim feminist, feminists with radically different perspectives, non-Muslim audiences and parts of Islamic communities that hamper the progression of women's rights.

5.5 The rainbow hijab

The democratic potential of social media is also keenly explored by Muslim queer movements. Similarly to Muslim feminists, the issue of accessibility is crucial for

queer Muslim women wearing the hijab. “*Hijabs & [b]urqas* are part of a Muslim lesbian/bisexual/queer woman’s identity,” recently tweeted the Safra Project, one of a few active British NGOs focusing on sexuality and gender in Islam, and in particular – in their own words – on LGBT+¹⁹ Muslim women and radical feminism. The organisation’s prime concern is connected to confronting gender biases that are prevalent in Islamic law, and campaigning for inclusive and reformed gender roles in Islam. Safra, however, is aware that their attitude is not commonly accepted and shared. While strong criticism of LGBT+ Muslim movements is generated by the majority Muslim population, similar exclusion is exercised by non-Muslim queers as well. I will expand and reflect on both.

The synergy between queer and Muslim identities is still a largely contested topic, despite its prevalence in the United Kingdom. In his analysis of current mainstream Muslim opinion, Bin Jahangir (2010: 299) concludes that the majority of Islamic scholars, including those espousing democratic and liberal values, focus on the Quranic passages narrating the destruction of the people of Lot to validate the notion of homosexuality being unnatural, pernicious and evil, and as such, a crime comparable to adultery or even murder. As already established in this thesis, the readings of the Quran are manifold; the accounts of homosexuality therefore cannot be subjected to one single and uniformed interpretation. Whilst scholarship in this field is still largely absent, queer interpretations of Islamic texts persuasively dispute Islam’s opposition to non-heterosexual relationships (see Ali, 2006; Siraj al-Hagg Kugle, 2010).

Those liberal scholastic interpretations of Islamic theology unfortunately do not always translate into the lived experiences of Muslim queers. In an interview for Channel 4 broadcast in 2014, for example, a hijabi from the LGBT+ community

¹⁹ LGBT+ is an initialism that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. The added plus sign (+) refers to other groups of sexual and gender minorities that are not included in the original acronym.

tells the reporter about the violent attack she was subjected to by her family after a discussion about an arranged marriage for her: "There was no discussion, there was no talking, it was just this is the guy, that's it - you're getting married. They just grabbed a hockey stick, and went nuts" (Lynch, 2014). According to the report, she eventually escaped the house, leaving her family and the area for several years. Despite being ostracised by her family, she continued embracing her religion and the veil, as well as her sexuality.

Unfortunately, the responses these women receive from non-Muslim queer communities are sometimes analogously negative. Returning to the social media and blogs, numerous users – normally concealing their identities under avatars and nicknames – share personal anecdotes about Muslim gay (self-identified) women being told off during various queer events on the basis of their visibly Islamic attire. A user called Pacinthe, for example, reports a stranger pulling off her friend's hijab at a queer hip-hop jam, and asking why she was there in the first place. On their Twitter profile, the Safra Project quotes some white women saying: "You wear hijab and are a lesbian, that's bizarre, try to look more lesbian."

On Black Feminists Manchester's blog, a blogger nicknamed Sonia shares similar struggles in a post entitled *My Hijab is Rainbow* (2013) in a reflexive manner. She recalls her attendance of a national conference where she engaged in a conversation with a gay person who thought she would not be willing to speak to them because she was Muslim. She writes:

"Without losing my temper, I looked at myself. Did my brown skin and colorful hijab scream homophobe!!? The assumption this individual made was that I must dislike gays because I'm Muslim and of course I wear the hijab which obviously makes me a more radical Muslim, it would never occur to people that my hijab wasn't forced upon me nor was it a religious compulsion, it was my feminism. Further, they assumed I was straight,

that clearly I can't be a lesbian – that could never be, how can a Muslim woman who wears the hijab be a lesbian?"

The experiences of Sonia and the mentioned Twitter users indicate how the hijab is commonly equated with the limited perceptions of gender roles in Islam. While antagonism spreads from the side of Muslims for supposedly acting against the Quranic teachings, the responses from mainstream LGBT+ communities are not intrinsically different. Even those who are frequently exposed to unjust discriminatory treatment and are subjected to prejudice themselves commonly fail to comprehend the struggles of the minority within their minority. This is resonating with the earlier discussions on the inclusion – or rather the lack of it – of Muslim women in colonial feminist discourses.

The struggles of queer hijabis are yet another call for resisting symbolic connections between the Islamic veil and narrowly defined gender normativity that is maintained at several different levels. Just like the example of FEMEN's quest to unveil women, the preconceptions about an acceptable femininity highlight the deeply problematic idea of a preferred and universal femininity that is promoted by movements that essentially work towards equal treatment and rights for all. The peculiar positionality of queer Muslims, located at the intersection of the two identities affected by constructed political resentment, jeopardises their ability to be accepted by any of the groups representing them, leaving them rejected both by mainstream Muslim constituencies and by LGBT+ community.

These tensions between multiple identities that Muslim queer women exhibit are, then, largely premised on specific and troublesome gender expectations, which evoke some immediate and obvious correlations to Judith Butler's canonic text *Gender Trouble* (1990). Introducing the term gender performativity, Butler claims

that gender is not a naturally inherent characteristic but proves to be performative – “that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (1990: 36). In this light, no identity can exist behind the expressions of gender because this identity is necessarily constituted by “the very expressions that are said to be its results” (ibid.: 25). The subject, then, plays a subsidiary role in enacting gender roles in order to reiterate an illusion of gender identity – mythical notions of the perfect woman (or the perfect man). These ideals are a mere phantasm that cannot be achieved but are, rather, categories that are heavily imbued with cultural ideals. In this light, Judith Butler famously claims that gender is not being but always “a doing” (ibid.: 36); if individuals do not ‘do’ gender according to the aforementioned ideals, they create so called “unintelligible gender” (ibid.: 41), which is not recognised by society because it is outside its gender economy, and is, therefore, penalised.

What is suggested by Butler is that due to cultural influences on gender identities, we cannot identify a single universal gender, but need to acknowledge the existence of multiple gender expressions that are open to interventions and re-significations. It is here that Butler encourages, what she calls, ‘gender trouble’ – subversions of established gender categories. Such manipulations, she claims, can help establish a different and a less violent gender reality (ibid.: xxiv). Butler illustrates this idea with an example of drags who stage a parodic illustration of subverting identities by dressing, acting and essentially performing roles that are not deemed normative.

Returning to the women from this section, queer hijabis, too, work against gender expectations and mobilise, subvert and proliferate alternative outlooks for perceiving gender identities. By deconstructing gender norms they promote a different form of womanhood, one that is queer and religious but does not fit into the preferred gender concept of any of them. In this light, the veil can be observed

as performing a crucial role in the processes of gender deconstruction, as it represents the most visible and striking symbol of these subversive gender norms.

5.6 Conclusion

Judith Butler's fluid conceptualisation of gender and femininity both summarise and provide a critical premise for the central theoretical messages of this chapter. Although she has never written extensively on Muslims or the veil in particular, her theoretical input can help significantly with unpacking the complexity of veiled Muslim women's gender identities, as well as some central points of Muslim feminism.

What became clear in the previous section on Muslim women's queer identities was Butler's emphasis on multiple, fluid, performative gender identities. Butler also acknowledges that these identities unavoidably coexist with numerous other identities that are not necessarily in competition or conflict with one another, but can in fact interface rather harmoniously. Butler writes:

"If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler, 1990: 3).

Butler posits that feminist politics which insist on a universal concept of womanhood can and should be interpreted as damaging – even when they are designed with an emancipatory agenda in mind and implemented in the name of

advancing women's rights. As observed through the example of FEMEN's opposition to Muslim women and the practice of veiling, such conceptions of an acceptable feminine appearance, of an acceptable emancipation and an acceptable feminism construct clear boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, with Muslim women being a priori omitted from these feminist discourses. Butler is critical of such dangerous generalisations that do nothing but reproduce discriminatory patterns within anti-discriminatory movements and ideologies. She calls for the required recognition and celebration of idiosyncratic differences exhibited by women and their subjective experiences. By doing so, she argues, feminist actions can be more productive, as they would appear more congenial to those women for whom the meanings of certain imposed and static categories are "permanently moot" (ibid.: 15).

Butler's insistence on transforming gender identities can help us to understand the claims of contemporary British Muslim feminist thought. As demonstrated with the examples of Nawaal, Hannah Habibi's artwork and some other women's testimonies introduced throughout the chapter, gender identities within one religious entity cannot be reduced to a single interpretation of being a Muslim woman. Whilst Fatema Mernissi perceives gender segregation, including the veil, as an oppressive institution that was imposed on her at the beginning of the last century in Morocco, the majority of British women are not subjected to comparable experiences. The meanings of the veil are therefore not static, but change when they travel through time and space.

The notion of the veil's ever-evolving meanings and connotations brings us to yet another important angle Butler consistently calls into consideration: the one proposed by semiotics. "What does transparency keep obscure?" asks Butler (1999: xix), clearly suggesting that any representation is a distorted and limited view of a reality. Her rhetorical question has, in the case of my research, a very

direct answer in the form of numerous examples of emancipatory readings of the hijab presented in this chapter, which show that representations of the veil in the media, historical accounts or various texts by religious scholars cannot be taken for granted. They indeed reflect only certain realities whilst obscuring others.

Alternative understandings of the symbol of the veil emphasise an important notion that was briefly evoked earlier in this chapter: just like in the case of any other symbol, the connection between the veil and its meaning is in the causal sense always arbitrary (Parsons, 1968: 484; Pierce, 1998: 5). It is hence impossible to insist on a single interpretation of the hijab according to the dominant definitions of gender roles and expectations. Instead, it is essential to acknowledge the subjective nature of the hijab, which continues to leave it open to social manipulations by individuals in different socio-cultural contexts. Subsequently, the connotations of the veil are consistently subjected to dynamic alternations through time and space, and reflect the norms and values within certain cultural or subcultural circles, including their omnipresent metamorphoses. As such, the veil can be an effective mechanism for facilitating social mobilisation, with the feminist ideas introduced in this chapter being an especially illustrative example of that.

As demonstrated by the women who were sharing their views in this chapter, the continuous and ritual acts of resistance which are materialised in their outfits “fashion a new structure of categories” (Comaroff, 2013: 181), which reorganises the pre-existing relationships. Women take particular objects with sedimented meanings and re-order them entirely. They relocate the veil out of the prevailing semiotic domain of female oppression, heteronormativity and counter-modernity into a novel total ensemble, thus generating a different discourse with a new set of messages. The most vocal of these messages is certainly the one that accentuates the significance of female agency and women’s freedom to fabricate

and channel their own version of the hijab. For Nadiya Takolia it is a political revolt against capitalism's ideal body image; for Khadija it is a refusal to expose her god-made body for the entertainment of strangers; for Nawaal it is about emphasising the intersectionality of new British feminist voices.

Returning to Nawaal who opened this chapter, her activist engagement has a strong message. A feminist story belongs to all women. Black, Muslim, young and veiled, she insists on retelling the story of feminism on her terms, liberated of the secular Western metanarrative that has been marginalising the voices of women who live different realities (Salem, 2013). For Nawaal and other women in this chapter, religion is of central importance and they cannot accept its dismissal on the basis of its supposed patriarchal foundations. "It's just about the way you look at it, if you're looking at bad things in the Quran, you'll find them, you can interpret it in a way that supports your prejudice. People don't read the same thing in the same way, it's the same for Muslims, we don't believe in the same things," says Nawaal in our interview on feminism, echoing the other women from the chapter who emphasise that Islam is not inherently patriarchal, and that gender inequality can only emerge from its later interpretations. Therefore, Nawaal and her fellow Muslim feminists call for independent interpretations of the Quran, known as *ijtihad*.²⁰ They do not wish to remake Islam but are seeking emancipatory interpretations within its confines.

Hannah Habibi's image (see Image 10), used at the beginning of this chapter, underlines this notion. Just like she has added a headscarf onto a female figure from a 1943 feminist poster, the women in this chapter, in a similar manner, add new elements, interpretations and meanings to feminist engagement. As British Muslim activists, artists, queer individuals and intellectuals incorporate the veil

²⁰ Ijtihad refers to individual's ability to interpret the Quran based on independent and contextual reasoning in the light of socio-cultural and historical rationality (see Bullock, 2002).

into their everyday sartorial practices, they prove that “they can do it”, as suggested by the poster: they have the right, means, creative solutions and will to define the meanings of being British, Muslim, a woman and a hijabi.

The idea of the harmonious coexistence of multiple identities, and inevitable challenges in which they are entangled, will be extended into the next chapter which will focus on citizenship, race and otherness.

Chapter VI: The invisible veil of otherness



Image 12: Georgina Choueiri – A detail from an artwork Veils Mural

It is a gloomy Monday morning in late February. Strong wind mixes with discrete raindrops as Sumaiyah exits the train in Cardiff and heads towards the main university building. The commute between her home town and the university takes nearly two hours, and Sumaiyah takes it several times per week. If she doesn't travel to attend her master's studies lectures, it is for the social and political activities on campus that she is actively involved in.

Today she arrived in Cardiff to help out her friend who is running for a position within the student union. Sumaiyah puts on a T-shirt emblazoned with a handmade slogan and grabs a box of halal jelly sweets to attract potential voters. She is ready to start. She is mingling with the students enthusiastically, introducing them to her friend's manifesto and confidently addressing their questions. She seems to know every second person walking down the hall of the student's union and pauses her campaigning from time to time to catch up on their latest news and gossip.

"Stop it, you know that I can't hug you," she says with an entertained tone in her voice to one of her male friends who wants to greet her with a hug. They both laugh and carry on chatting. "I'm quite expressive, I like to think I'm quite expressive even in the niqab, so it doesn't make a difference," she says later when we chat about the face veil as a barrier to interaction with her fellow students. With her positive attitude and bubbly personality, she is a popular girl on campus, and her friendship circle includes Muslim and non-Muslim students alike. Sumaiyah claims her experience with student life has been great and blames the "hype" about the incompatibility of British and Muslim values "when there shouldn't be".

"I see myself first and foremost as a British Muslim. It means I adhere to British values – my values of my faith don't contradict British values. That's also part of Islamic values," she explains. A master's student in Islamic studies and a citizenship education teacher at a Muslim all-girls school, she is a poster girl for British Muslims who are proudly British

and proudly Muslim at the same time, and demonstrates the harmonious coexistence of the two identities in her attitudes, actions and way of life.

However, not everyone recognises, or is willing to recognise, these intertwining identities. Her surname, translating as 'a foreigner' in her parents' native tongue, reflects sentiments she often experiences while navigating her life on the borders of many identities. Whilst she's seen as British in her parents' homeland, she is also perceived as foreign in her own homeland. Sumaiyah is well aware that people often perceive her in a negative light because "that's what they've seen and that's what they've heard."

Fast forward a couple of hours, the student's union is slowly emptying and Sumaiyah takes this as a sign to leave the venue. "I can still catch the Islamic society lecture," she says while checking the time on her phone. Today, they are hosting a lecture on Isa/Jesus from an interfaith perspective and – not surprisingly at all – the organiser is one of her many friends. She collects her belongings and rushes towards the mathematics building, still wearing her friend's green campaigning T-shirt over a black skirt and a purple sweater. A day with Sumaiyah is enough to believe her when she comments on antagonism she experiences due to her niqab: "If people knew me and spoke to me, I think they wouldn't think of me as a threat."

Shadowing Sumaiyah for a day in Cardiff offers a perfect setting for opening and leading the chapter on veiling, citizenship and otherness. An active citizen and a devoted Muslim woman, she knows all of the above-mentioned categories inside out, and brings them together in a harmonious manner. At the same time, she is aware of the boundaries that are set by the societies which she inhabits and co-creates, as we will see throughout this chapter. She is no stranger to the concept of otherness, for she has been seen as the Other for most of her life – in her homeland, in her parents' native India and among her fellow students.

I met Sumaiyah at a conference on European Islam in Cambridge during my fieldwork, where both of us were delivering papers. After my presentation, she approached me with a number of questions on feminism, and we immediately engaged in a stimulating conversation that did not finish with the end of the conference, and is still continuing to this date. It was this very conference that provoked my interest in the theoretical framework commonly deployed by Islamic scholars who were giving papers. From W. E. B. Du Bois to Frantz Fanon, canonical black scholars were frequently referenced by speakers who discussed Muslim identities in contemporary Britain. The concurrence of the two events, meeting Sumaiyah and beginning to think about Muslim identities through the prism of race studies, will inhabit this chapter, with Sumaiyah and Du Bois holding a reflective mirror for observing the issues of veiling and otherness in the context of Britishness.

In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois speaks extensively about the veil. Rather than concentrating on the actual physical item, he uses the veil in an exclusively metaphorical sense to illustrate the concept of black folks' 'double-consciousness' – a self-realisation of being different due to one's skin colour and the ideology attached to it. He compares the veil to darker skin as a palpable manifestation of being different from normative whiteness, which is inevitably wrapped around people of colour since they are born. Moreover, he compares the veil to an invisible screen that is distorting white people's observation of people of colour, thus preventing them from perceiving African Americans as true Americans. In addition, for Du Bois, the veil is also an explicitly internal device that precludes the Blacks from seeing themselves outside of white America's conceptualisation of them – hence the term double-consciousness.

All these points – that will be unpacked throughout the chapter – suggest Du

Bois' interpretation of the veil of double-consciousness as a helpful analytical tool for rethinking the otherness experienced by Muslim women, by those who don physical veils and subsequently wear a symbolic one. By no means will this chapter simplistically compare veiling to race. Rather, the idea of a metaphorical veil will be deployed to illustrate the socio-cultural burdens that come with donning the veil. The veil in Du Bois' sense, hence, assists us in comprehending both the ways these meanings are generated and projected onto individuals, as well as the ways in which individuals experience and deal with otherness attached to their selfhood.

This overarching concept of otherness and symbolic separation is neatly visualised in the opening artwork by Georgina Choueiri (see Image 12). A Beirut-born and London-based artist has dedicated her painting career to exploring the concept of veiling. Having grown up in an Arab Christian family and having lived in Britain for half of her life, she perceived the veil as "a curtain between our worlds" (International Museum of Women). Reflecting on her work she further writes: "I couldn't understand why these women had to cover themselves, only allowing others the sight of their deep dark eyes. Why was it forbidden for a woman to reveal herself to the outside world? Why did she have to be hidden away like some fragile bird in a golden cage?" Based on interviews conducted with Muslim women around the world, from the Middle East to Pakistan, Choueiri has used the medium of art to dissolve, explore and reconsider the barriers around the piece of cloth – not only physical but also religious, social, political or psychological. The opening image portraying women in transparent and overlapping veils is an excellent example of the artist's artistic explorations of multiple barriers.

These barriers, these various metaphorical veils stitched by political and historic mythologies will be questioned throughout the chapter. Through the stories of

Sumaiyah and her fellow Muslim women, this chapter will explore how British Muslim women fit and do not fit into the ideological conception of Britishness, according to them and to the perceptions of the societies in which they reside.

6.1 The veil of double-consciousness

Having briefly introduced Du Bois' veil of double-consciousness, I will engage this concept further and investigate its potential implications for discussing Muslim female identities and the ways in which they are moulded through the ideas of self-realisation and the acknowledgement of difference.

As already mentioned, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) did not draw any connections to Islamic garments, nor did he refer to Muslim identities at any point in his work. For Du Bois, the veil is a merely symbolical concept that serves as an illustration of invisible boundaries that are surrounding, and to a large extent determining, 'the souls of black folk.' As evoked in the previous section, this invisible veil is not a simple emblem of dark skin that indicates palpable physical difference; it is rather a reflection of African Americans' 'double-consciousness' that transpires from the self-realisation of being different due to their own skin colour and the ideology surrounding it. As a metaphor for skin colour as well as for the socio-political implications attached to it, the veil, on Du Bois' account, stands between the black population and the white American majority; it prevents black Americans from accessing the privileges enjoyed by their white compatriots, and simultaneously disables white Americans' capacity to see the problems of race and racism. Black Americans, then, navigate their lives through this challenging dual experience; being aware of one's own identity and having an understanding about how they are read through the prism of race. Due to this veil, this "peculiar

sensation, this double consciousness" (ibid.: 12), a person of colour is always looking at her or himself through the eyes of others. Du Bois claims poetically: "One ever feels his twoness – an American, a negro, two souls, two thoughts" (ibid.).

It is precisely these experiences that Muslim women commonly speak about. Sumaiyah is well aware of the twoness – being British, being a Muslim. She perceives the antagonism from the side of the majority white British population "who have not come across Muslims and who have not seen a veiled woman before," and their belief that Muslims are foreigners and that their culture is alien to the British one. "I'm seen as a Muslim who can't integrate," says Sumaiyah about the way the society in Britain observes her. She adds: "I think that's very damaging. It kind of says that Muslims are not part of this society. But for Muslims who are born here, this is their home."

Despite Britain being very much her home, Sumaiyah acknowledges that she is commonly perceived as the Other; her outfit – the niqab – her name and her skin colour prevent her from accessing the same privileges white Britons have a full access to. She is simultaneously struggling to position herself in this contradictory conglomerate of identities; perceiving herself as "British first before anything else", as she puts it, and society refusing this label; her family in Saudi Arabia and India seeing her as British but the majority of British society back home seeing her as a foreigner. "Like how damaging is it for people – I'm a confident girl so it doesn't matter – but for people who don't think like that, how damaging is it to not have an actual identity – I think that's really heartbreaking," concludes Sumaiyah.

It is precisely this feeling of uncomfortable positionality and ideological strife between the two worlds – one reserved for whites and the other inhabited by

blacks – that Du Bois centres his critical reflections on. What he posits is the need for African Americans to not only know their own world but also to understand how the other world perceives them and how this affects their own selfhood – whilst knowing that the other world will remain ignorant about their struggles arising from racial differences. This idea resonates loudly in Sumaiyah’s struggles to position herself comfortably in British society; although she perceives herself as an active and loyal citizen, she is aware of the negative sentiments she is stigmatised with by the majority British population. The language Sumaiyah utilises – for example, speaking about herself as being seen as a Muslim who can’t integrate – suggests that she is aware that, in the eyes of white Britons, she is not only a foreigner, but also a problematic foreigner.

To explain this further, Sumaiyah tells me that she is not regularly told *directly* that she is a Muslim who can’t integrate, nor do people call her a foreigner in face-to-face interactions. However, she is strongly *aware* that tension surrounds her like an invisible veil, suggesting prejudice that is not vocalised but does exist. Du Bois documents this exact tension. He writes:

“Between me and the other world there is ever an unmasked question: unmasked by some through feelings of delicacy; the others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word” (1903: 11).

Here, the concept of ‘being a problem’ is suggested at two different levels. It exists amongst the majority privileged population whose emphatic gaze fails to

penetrate the invisible racialised veil. Secondly, this belief is internalised by the Other as well; even when unspoken, the lingering sensation of being a problem continues to wrap their presence – just like a veil. To put it differently, although people on the street might not call Sumaiyah a problem in her presence, she is aware they do think of her as a problematic element of their society.

Even though Du Bois' work focuses on the experiences of African Americans, it resonates more widely. Nasar Meer (2010) asserts the importance of Du Bois for studying Muslims and citizenship in contemporary Europe. He claims that Du Bois bequeaths us an important corpus of work which can help us “theorise minority social formations that strive for an elevation of their civic status, specifically through the incorporation of their difference into prevailing citizenship practices” (ibid.: 31). Meer applies the concept of double-consciousness to describe the twoness of European Muslims who continue to be subjected to the processes of othering. I take this argument further and deploy it for contextualising the otherness of veiled women in Britain.

The veil – with (remote) similarities to skin colour – is an emblem of difference for arbitrary reasons. It is not just a piece of cloth – it is a highly politicised piece of cloth. It is not the cloth per se that obstructs integration, if I return back to Sumaiyah's example. It is the work of ideological implications that are embroiled deep into the fabric, weaving an invisible veil over the physical one. This veil automatically renders women ineligible for access to certain privileges, for example holding specific jobs or walking down the street without being stared at or even harassed. At the same time, women themselves recognise that the veil distorts the ways in which they are seen by society – as evident from the language and examples used by Sumaiyah earlier on.

Many, if not most, of other hijabis and niqabis share reflections that are similar to

Sumaiyah's. Another brief example comes from a Twitter user and hijabi named Brown Shakespeare. Her name – a combination of brownness as a symbolic adjective for her non-white and immigrant origin and Shakespeare as the ultimate emblem of Britishness – suggest the 'twoness', as Du Bois would put it, of two identities. In her tweet, Brown Shakespeare compares the hijab to a flashing sign which reads: “Yo people, I'm an alien.” In a conversation with another Twitter user, she then complains about how this alien identity tends to be seen as incompatible with British identity, saying: “I think it's more people conflating hijab with 'otherness'. Some alien identity that is incompatible with British way of life.” This Twitter user connects the actual material veil and the ideological weight that comes with it.

Following this idea, women are inevitably wearing two veils: a physical one and an invisible one. It is the latter that comes with the baggage – in many ways similar to skin colour. That said, comparing the veil with skin colour is a dangerous avenue, for a removable piece of cloth cannot be simply compared to skin. The veil can be removed, which is not the case with one's skin. For example, in the chapter on fashion, we met Noora, who decided to remove her hijab in the post-9/11 period in order to protect herself and her daughter from potential Islamophobic attacks. This choice cannot be assumed by people of colour: the veil in Du Bois' sense is an organic part of one's being and is with an individual from the cradle to the grave.

However, it is important not to overlook an emic perspective on the matter on being Muslim. It was at the aforementioned conference where a burning discussion surrounding race and religion developed among some of the participants. “It's not my choice to be a Muslim, I am a Muslim,” said one, implying that religion is not something one chooses but is bigger than that. This idea is echoed by Saba Mahmood (2013: 81) whose discussions on controversial

Danish cartoons²¹ deconstructs the normative idea that being Muslim is simply a matter of choice. Mahmood challenges the presumptions of the civil law tradition “in which the epistemological status of religious belief has come to be cast as speculative and therefore less 'real' than the materiality of race and biology” (ibid.). Reducing religion to a simple set of beliefs is further reflected in claims about what “counts as evidence, materiality, and real versus psychic or imagined harm” (ibid.).

This idea was briefly evoked in the previous chapters which brought forth the concept of Islam not being translatable into Christian, secular or Eurocentric codes.²² The religion is seen as all-encompassing, and as such grander than the individual’s personal choice. Sumaiyah agrees; she deems the niqab to be a part of her body and her selfhood, not just an item she dons in the morning and can choose to take off whenever she decides to.

Similar sentiments are shared by her fellow niqabi Rahena Sidat from Leicester, who was attacked on the street and had the veil torn from her face by a stranger. “To some people the removal of a veil may be a very minor thing, but for me he may as well have touched my body,” she commented to the Leicester Mercury (2014) and added: “That is what the veil means. It is a part of me. I have been wearing it for nearly 16 years and I feel naked without it. He invaded my personal space, my privacy. It is not like touching my coat; it was as bad as him touching my body.” For Rahena and Sumaiyah, a veil is not just another piece of clothing but is an integral part of their selfhood.

²¹ In September 2015, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published several cartoons depicting Prophet Mohamed. Supposedly satirical cartoons evoked multiple complains and eventually led to international protests.

²² Some theorists claim that secular and Christian can be used interchangeably. For example, in her discussion on Edward Said's Orientalism, Gil Anidjar states that “secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions” (2008: 48). As a result, Christianity can be thus seen as 'neutral', which is particularly interesting when observing how religions are perceived in (European) public spheres and what becomes permissible or forbidden, e.g. wearing a cross versus wearing the hijab.

Back at the conference venue, the debate continued and many participants agreed with the idea of being born Muslim. Even self-proclaimed moderate Muslims, who approached the subject pragmatically and distanced themselves from the aforementioned divinity argument, acknowledged that it is not so simple to “escape” a Muslim identity. For the majority of Muslims it is their name, their family background, their ethnic origin and physical appearance, alongside skin colour, that swiftly announce their ‘problematic difference’ – to refer back to Du Bois and Meer.

In one of the previous chapters, Shanaya, a woman of Mauritian descent who resides in a predominantly white neighbourhood, told us the story of being subjected to racism due to her appearance. Realising she was ‘the Other’ whether she wanted it or not due to her dark skin colour, she decided to take up the veil and practise her religion the way she wanted. She knew that the invisible veil of race could not be removed, and donning an additional veil did not drastically alter the way society perceived her. Racism, she agrees, is an issue for Muslim women, and it is absolutely vital to acknowledge the racial dimension when discussing the prejudice against veiling in the United Kingdom. A Muslim identity, especially an identity of veiled women, is inevitably a racialised one, thus making Du Bois’ metaphor of an invisible veil highly relevant.

6.2 Hoodies and hijabs, race and religion

Although the history and experiences of black descendants of transatlantic slavery and British Muslims of a South Asian, North African or Middle Eastern ethnic background, to mention just a few examples, are vastly different, it is not difficult to see the common patterns of racialisation they are all undergoing.

When I speak about racialisation I embrace the working definition coined by Robert Miles (1989: 76) who maintains that racism is a product of social and historical processes of racialisation, whereby certain somatic characteristics – real and imagined – become introduced as either superior or inferior. Miles emphasises that these characteristics, and the meanings attached to them, are not static entities but undergo transformations across time and space. In response to Miles' definition of racialisation, Cole (2009: 29) investigates the meaning of the word 'somatic'. Quoting common dictionary definitions, he claims that somatic refers to things that are pertaining to the body in the broadest sense. Subsequently, one can claim that people can be and *are* racialised on the grounds of clothing, with Islamic headgear providing a practical example for this theory.

The parallels between these two types of racialisation, one based on allegedly biological features and one grounded in religious clothing, have been commonly highlighted by British activists who recognise the importance of emphasising racist patterns in different minority discourses. One illustrative example occurred in the spring of 2012, following two murders that took place close to each other in the United States. Travyon, a black teenager in a hoodie, and Shaima, an Iraqi-American woman in a hijab, were killed brutally in – what it was then thought – were hate homicides.²³ These two brutal crimes evoked strong reactions in Britain, where both black and Muslim activists recognised themselves in the archetypes that majority American and British societies discard as unwanted. A series of solidarity events was organised in London and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, both commemorating the victims as well as raising awareness about the danger of discourses that condemn minorities. The overarching theme of these demonstrations were hoodies and hijabs as two symbols of otherness in the 'Western' world, with hoodies being associated with black youngsters and hijabs

²³ The death of Shaima Alawadi was initially seen as a hate crime due to the note left with the body. However, it was eventually her husband who was charged with killing her.

referring to the Muslim minority, especially visibly Muslim women.

To complement the protests, social media users shared photos of themselves condemning racism in all shapes and forms. One user, for instance, tweeted: “In a supremacist world, hijabs and hoodies affect your life expectancy.” Another user shared the following post: “Hoodie or hijab; racism is racism. I’m Iraqi & I want justice for Trayvon.” During Trayvon Martin’s family’s visit to London – attended by many Muslim women – spoken word poet Zita Holbourne performed a touching poem about the similarities between hijabs and hoodies. Sitting on the stage of the University of London Union, she recited:

“Hijabs and hoodies, deemed baddies not goodies, blamed for society’s ills, justifying reason to kill, looking for a scapegoat, taking us by the throat or with the shot of a gun, no need after to hide or run, because the law doesn’t protect the victim, it defends them, the murders and racists, endorsing their hatred. [...]

But really it is about the race, the religion, the face of the person wearing not what they are wearing. Call it ignorance of fiery but it is the hatred of being racist, Islamophobic, xenophobic, thinking that justifies the theft of lives...”²⁴

What the activist poet clearly asserts here is the idea that clothes themselves are irrelevant in the discourses of xenophobic hatred. It is the invisible veil – “the race, the religion, the face of the person wearing” as Zita Holbourne puts it – that motivates the emergence of racist hatred. The visible veil is just another item in the assemblage of visible symbols that have been hijacked to justify racist hatred. In a way similar to skin colour, the veil has turned into a demarcation of undesirable alterity through a conscious and deliberate process of othering which serves to legitimise the excommunication of a certain strata of society and for

²⁴ This is my transcript of the performed poem and thus might not be entirely accurate.

denouncing white supremacy.

Expanding on the concept of white supremacy, Frantz Fanon writes about the need to produce blackness prior to constructing the concept of whiteness. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967 [1952]), Fanon talks about the concept of blackness as a product of white colonial society. For generating its dominant social position and banishing its collective guilt, whiteness needs to create a counterpart, onto which it can project negative sentiments and meanings. This counterpart has to be mutually exclusive and absolute, as it is only then that the concept of whiteness can be seen as a unified and stable identity. The concepts of whiteness and blackness are, thus, both highly essentialised, for only when the boundaries between the two are clear cut, can the idea of white supremacy be effective. The Other – the projection of all impurities and incongruities – is used as the ultimate scapegoat for the atrocities, crimes and guilt of the whites.

Alia Al-Saji (2010: 875-902) draws illuminating parallels between Fanon's theory on the construction of blackness and Muslim female identities that were brought forward in another of Fanon's seminal works, entitled *Dying Colonialism* (1965 [1959]). In the chapter *Algeria Unveiled* (ibid.: 35-67), already discussed in this thesis, Fanon speaks about the French initiative to unveil Algerian women as part of its 1930s colonial project. The veil, on Fanon's account, was not seen as a mere item of clothing but a symbol for Algerian culture and Islam more generally. In the analysis of his work, Al-Saji notes the similarities between mechanisms deployed in both Fanon's works. The French coloniser saw the veil as unified attire – overlooking the vast variety of veils sported by Algerian women; in a similar manner, he perceived the Algerian culture and Islam as equally homogeneous and essentialised (ibid.: 882-887). The category of Algerian Muslim women served as an absolute category onto which the coloniser projected the negative features and located it in binary opposition to whiteness.

To wrap up this theoretical detour into Fanon's work, it could be argued that Muslim and black identities share strong similarities in terms of the analogous processes of racialisation they undergo in predominantly white societies. They are essentialised, homogenised and totalised as absolute categories with the deliberate intention of justifying the supremacy of whiteness. Similar to the black population in the context of the pre-civil rights United States, or veiled Muslim women in colonised Algeria, British minorities face comparable social antagonism from the groups in power.

To conclude, when discussing the Islamic veil in the United Kingdom it is vital to acknowledge a strong interlink between race and religion. Yulia Egorova (2015: 494) points to a growing body of literature highlighting that the racialisation of religion has been “occurring throughout the history of Christianity's encounters with non-Christian groups and in the contemporary Western world,” which resulted in the category of race becoming co-constituted with religion. Discussing the status of Muslim women in British society is impossible without taking into account British historical engagements with those countries from which a high proportion of Muslim communities initially emigrated, and the role whiteness has played in defining British identity throughout recent centuries.

Secondly, it is important to reinforce the idea that discrimination in any shape or form is necessarily a societal product based on socially defined categories rather than biological facts. Whilst racism against African-Americans is dramatically different to discrimination of British veiled women, both groups of people share comparable experiences of walking through life with metaphorical veils that announce their difference both internally and externally.

6.3 The otherness of white hijabis

As established in the previous section, the otherness of Muslim women often stems from deep-rooted racism and a colonial preference of whiteness, as demonstrated with Sumaiyah's experience of feeling like a stranger in her own country or Shanaya's realisation of being the Other – regardless of her clothes or behaviour. As already mentioned, the somatic elements that profile 'the Other' and subject them to racialisation are not limited to supposed biological features but can incorporate other visible categories, including clothes. An illustration of racialisation based on clothing styles can be found in the example of white Muslim women, especially those who have converted from non-religious or other religious backgrounds.

Women who are born white, secular/Christian and English tend to be less often subjected to discriminatory othering than women of colour and minority ethnic backgrounds, as they are not born with racialised invisible veils. This is, however, not to ignore the existence of other potential invisible veils, such as a visible disability or socio-economic class. However, for several women I have spoken to, the conversion to Islam and their decision to embrace Islamic dress was their first major experience of being ostracised on the basis of their appearance and identity.

Among them is Emma, a white convert from east London, who experiences the effects of Islamophobia first hand and "traumatically," as she puts it. Raised as a Christian girl, she converted to Islam in her mid-teens, following the example of her older sister who found adopting Islam a solution for escaping on-going conflicts in their immediate family. Accepting her sister's invitation to join her for social and religious events at a local mosque, Emma, too, found allies, friends and family among Muslim sisters who provided the needed warmth in times when

she needed it most. Her conversion did not immediately affect her appearance. Being a young school girl, she did not want to attract unnecessary attention in class in the middle of a school year, and she wanted to ease her family into accepting her choice.

However, with a new school year and starting at a new college, Emma recalls that she decided to manifest her new religious identity visibly by embracing the hijab. She remembers how the veil immediately altered the ways in which she was now seen by society when in public spaces – from sitting in a classroom to walking on the streets of London. And with the change came Islamophobia. In addition to passing comments in the street, she also experienced prejudice at work, which was already described in one of the previous chapters (see Chapter III). Coming into a new traineeship at a restaurant, her boss was – according to Emma – visibly annoyed by her appearance, and made some remarks about the incompatibility of a headscarf with health and safety requirements. Having carried out all prior correspondence via email and telephone, Emma’s name and accent did not prepare the boss for accepting a Muslim girl into her team.

The worst resentment, however, was displayed by Emma’s father. Emma remembers how, following her sister’s conversion, her dad and her sister had a serious argument which resulted in the severing of all the ties between them. Emma did not think the same thing could possibly happen to her: “I’ve always been my daddy’s little girl. Out of all our sisters, I was always his favourite one.” Before she had a chance to collect enough courage to approach her dad, he had already found out about Emma’s conversion through word of mouth. She remembers: “He called me and shouted at me. He didn't let me explain anything. He said that I wasn't his daughter any more. I couldn't say anything, I still can't say anything. I'm not his daughter anymore.”

The case of Emma demonstrates the level of hatred that is attached to the invisible veil of being a Muslim. Not only did prejudice against Muslims jeopardise her professional recognition; the fact that her own father was willing to disown his 'favourite daughter' is far more telling. Emma is not sure about the genesis of her dad's prejudice towards Islam, as he has never spoken to her about it. Whether his disapproval was of political, social or theological nature, he was willing to cut all ties with her on the basis of her conversion. He was not willing to meet her half way and discuss her motivations behind embracing Islam. Her conversion to Islam meant that Emma's relationship with her dad was terminated.

Emma's story is not an isolated example of white converts experiencing Islamophobia. During my fieldwork, I attended an event featuring Lauren Booth, a renowned English journalist and commentator (also known as Tony Blair's sister-in-law), who spoke about her own personal experiences of Islamophobia and the media. Similarly to Emma, Lauren Booth, too, has experienced a transformation – as she puts it – from being “a 6 foot white European member of the master race” to the US Homeland Security asking her “Do you speak English?” at the border control. Being a public personality, her conversion challenged both her private and public life. She experienced Islamophobia at an intimate level – for example by observing her white, blond, English daughters being bullied simply for having accepted faith. Moreover, she was attacked publicly in the media sphere. During her talk, she showed us an article published in *The Independent* reading: “What sort of woman freely converts to a religion which supports the oppression, torment and murder of thousands of Christians, homosexuals and spirited women, worldwide, every year? The sort of woman who writes love letters to a serial killer, I reckon” (Burchill, 2010).

In an attempt to comprehend this sudden shift from being a respectable journalist

to being degraded as a second-class citizen, Lauren Booth reflected on the effect of the media – the area that she knows best. Being an absolute insider, she understood how media discourses are produced and reproduced. She spoke about how journalists and columnists are pressurised by editors with a clear marketing agenda. With the media competing to sell more, journalists – according to Booth – appropriate their opinion to fit the preferred narrative. With the Murdoch media empire, she stated, a single story of the Muslim Other always prevails.

As already demonstrated in the introductory chapter on etic discourses on the veil, antagonism towards Islamic garments has emerged through the interplay of various historical discourses that served socio-political schemas of demonising the Muslim Other for the purposes of asserting power, with the same agenda being nowadays replicated by the media and party politics. As pointed out by Esra Özyürek in her analysis of German converts to Islam, the case of converts bring forth an extra layer of complexities as it provokes “new anxieties about the changing realities of being European” (2014: 136), and in this case, of being British. The converts thus expose national apprehensions about a British identity and its potential future alternations. Booth’s personal experiences with the media, and its reaction to her conversion, illustrate how these anxieties and hatred towards Muslims are generated in the realm of hegemonic media and how they influence the lay audience, potentially also including Emma’s father.

Although Islamophobia is often intertwined with racism, and imitates its modes of operation, the stories of Emma and Lauren Booth demonstrate how the idea of a Muslim foe stretches beyond the notion of race. Born and bred as English Christians, both women underwent a transformation into unwanted aliens literally in seconds. By taking up something as simple as a relatively small piece of fabric, they also donned an invisible veil of prejudice. This act has changed

how they are now perceived by society – by officials, by employers, their family, friends and the media. This idea, once again, establishes parallels between the mechanisms of biological determinism and Islamophobia, and brings us back to the writings of Du Bois and Fanon. Demonising visible indicators of difference facilitates the reinforcement of preferred collective identities. Being a fully-fledged British citizen presupposes whiteness and a Christian/secular background. Any deviations from this norm result in social sanctions. In the case of Emma and Lauren Booth, embracing Islam – and especially taking up the veil – pushed them onto the symbolic margins of British society, despite having been born white and British.

6.4 Unavoidable Islamophobia

The imposed status of unwanted citizens legitimises and justifies discrimination against veiled women. As already observed, women are often excluded from various social circles, be they professional or intimate. Additionally, such resentment is not limited to social isolation but is commonly materialised in verbal and physical abuse. Not a single veiled woman I have spoken to for the purposes of this research could say she that has never been subjected to any abuse on the basis of her appearance. Not a single woman has gone through life without feeling threatened due to her attire. The women appear unison in recognising Islamophobia as one of the biggest hurdles in their lives.

Although Emma and Lauren Booth, alongside the overwhelming majority of other respondents, frequently cite Islamophobia to describe their experience of discrimination at a personal and institutional level, it is paramount to highlight the contentious nature of the concept itself. As the term Islamophobia has been

widely used for several decades in varied social and political contexts, there is no scholastic consensus as to its meaning (Özyürek, 2014: 9; Shyrock, 2010). Originally defined as “an unfounded hostility towards Islam and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Runnymede Trust Commission, 1997: 4), it is nowadays applied to a plethora of phenomena, ranging from xenophobia to anti-terrorism policies, to overt forms of violence against Muslims (Shooman and Spielhaus, 2009: 199).

Subsequently, many scholars doubt that all of the aforementioned phenomena “emanate from an identical ideological core, which is a 'fear' or 'phobia' of Islam” (Maussen, 2006: 101; see Shooman and Spielhaus, 2009: 199). As such, Islamophobia is often deemed “too vague to be fruitful” (Özyürek, 2014: 9) or “redundant” (Miles and Brown, 2003: 116) due to its numerous overlaps with existing theories of racism and xenophobia. Despite its analytical challenges, Islamophobia continues to be the most common term applied by respondents themselves to describe the varied experiences of discrimination and resentment which they experience in their lives.

These experiences of Islamophobic abuse can be manifested in a variety of forms. The most commonly mentioned type of harassment is verbal, and commonly occurs at street level. All respondents have reported at least one incident of verbal abuse directed towards their headgear. “Why would you buy soap, you don’t need to wash your face anyway,” said a man in a shop to one of the niqabi women who was standing next to the shelves displaying washing products. “Don't hide your pretty face,” was said to another, whilst a third reports being subjected to rude shouts featuring swear words.

“I’m quite lucky because I haven’t had many negative experiences,” says Sumaiyah positively when we discuss Islamophobic abuse while sitting in the

cafe of her student union. Not many negative experiences, however, does not stand for not having had any negative experiences. She speaks about being shouted at in the queue at a supermarket by a self-proclaimed feminist who was angered by Sumaiyah's attire, namely the niqab. She also recalls a story that occurred recently in her home town. She was walking to work early in the morning when a man suddenly approached her and shouted: "You effing terrorist, get off the street." It was early morning and still really dark, and Sumaiyah was scared. She decided to take another footpath but the change of the route did not prevent the screaming man from following her. Luckily for Sumaiyah, a passer-by offered to escort her to work and tried to encourage her to report the event to the police.

Sumaiyah considers herself lucky for having only had limited negative encounters, but she is well aware that many of her fellow hijabis and niqabis cannot claim the same. "After the Woolwich murder,²⁵ I was pretty shocked about the Saudi female student who was killed, somewhere in London I think it was. I never thought something like that could happen. It does worry me thinking that that could have been me – because I fit that same criteria – but it's not going to stop me wearing the niqab or from being me." The case Sumaiyah mentions refers to a brutal murder of a Saudi PhD student Nahid Almanea who was fatally stabbed as she walked to the University of Essex in June 2014. At the time of the killing, she wore an abaya and a headscarf.

Attacks on hijab-clad women are not a rarity in the UK, and occur equally frequently in metropolitan areas and in more remote parts of the countryside. During my fieldwork in the autumn of 2013, two attacks were reported in the

²⁵ On 22 May 2013, a British Army soldier, Fusilier Lee Rigby was murdered by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich, southeast London. The men told witnesses and the police that they had killed a soldier to avenge the killing of Muslims by the British armed forces.

North East. Yasmin, a 22-year old niqabi and a recent law graduate, was travelling on the metro in Newcastle when a man approached her shouting that he wanted to see her face. "I didn't say anything so he put his arm around me, grabbed me and tried to pull, physically pull, my headscarf and my face veil off," recalls Yasmin (Engage, 2013). None of her fellow passengers helped her and it was eventually the man's friends that pulled him off her. Just miles away, another attack took place following the murder of the soldier Lee Rigby. An unknown man approached Khadija, a Newcastle-based hijab-wearer and a nurse, grabbed her body firmly and started shaking her aggressively shouting: "You're one of them!" None of them reported the event to the police immediately after it occurred. Yasmin remained silent for two months. Similarly, Khadija, a Newcastle-based hijab-wearer and a nurse, did not report the harassment immediately and waited for five months before speaking to the police.

These two cases highlight some important issues. Not only do they show that the victims of Islamophobic attacks were subjected to violent interactions simply for wearing the hijab. They, moreover, emphasise another significant idea: women who are the victims of Islamophobic attacks often refuse to report the issue, as they are fearful they might be misunderstood or even mocked by the police, who are located on the other side of the invisible veil.

To fill this lacuna of hate crime reports, Fiyaz Mughal established an organisation Tell MAMA, a national project which records and measures anti-Muslim incidents in the UK. Tell MAMA monitors Islamophobic abuse through anonymous reports in a confidential and non-judgemental manner. Sumaiyah praises Tell Mama:

"I think with this Tell Mama stuff I now feel that I do need to start reporting incidents that happen because I've had some incidents which I've never reported. The police just

put it down as hate crime as opposed to Islamophobia – that’s very important nowadays because there’s an evident prejudice against Muslims whether people like to think of it or not.”

According to Sumaiyah, having incidents flagged as Islamophobic helps build a bigger picture which reflects the extent of the situation. In email correspondence, the director tells me: “We have especially interesting data on the niqab or the veil at street level, these women suffer repeated and more aggressive anti-Muslim incidents”. Tell MAMA recorded 584 Islamophobic attacks in the span of one year (2012-2013), both online and offline. Out of attacks in the physical world, the majority are targeted at women, especially at those who are visibly identifiable as Muslims because they wear the veil (see Image 13). In their report, published in 2013, Tell MAMA revealed that out of 20 British Muslim female victims of Islamophobia whom they had interviewed for the study, 80 per cent wore some type of Islamic headgear. A 2009 report entitled *Data in Focus: Muslims* produced by European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) also points out to the high levels of Islamophobia in the context of the European Union; the report shows that 28% of women polled, from various European countries, experienced Islamophobic attacks in the span of one year.

‘for the past 6 months when i have started to wear a hijab i have been getting people pushing me on the floor and being very rude to me on the bus or trying to take off my hijab and calling me a terrorist. 3 weeks ago i was walking to the mosque to pray Maghrib and i had 2 black boys push me to the floor and then 2 white boys came from behind me and spit on me , they told me that im a paki and they wish that all muslims were dead. the most thing that broke my heart and made me cry is when i walked away and they said the most horrible things about allah.’

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Image 13: An anonymous report sent to Tell MAMA (Copsey et al, 2013: 19)

However, statistics are not the best approach to illustrate the consequences of abuse for women like Sumaiyah, Yasmin, Khadija or the Saudi PhD student murdered in Essex. Mughal agrees: “For far too long, people talk about the number of victims, the statistics of victims and the kinds of cases. They simply miss out on the core facts; that there are people, emotions and familial and psychological impacts to hate incidents and crimes” (Elgot, 2013). However, with the media being saturated with the narratives of Muslim-led crimes, there seems to be little room for reframing reports from the perspective of women who have been subjected to abuse themselves.

6.5 Making the invisible veil British

Recalling the cases of two violent events in Newcastle, namely the attacks against a law graduate and a nurse, another important dimension to Islamophobic abuse has to be highlighted. These attacks did not occur due to the women’s behaviour. They were motivated only by their attire, and the meanings this attire represents. As shown throughout this thesis, these meanings are a deliberate result of historiographies and current political narratives that support agendas of those in power.

Both attacks took place in the North East of England in the same year the English Defence League (EDL) held two significant gatherings in the region. In May 2013, a reported crowd of 1500 supporters of the extreme right-wing organisation gathered in the centre of Newcastle, just days after the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich. The soldier was murdered and mutilated by two British-born Muslim converts whose criminal activity was supposedly linked to Islamist terrorism. The second gathering took place in the autumn of the same year, when

the EDL hosted a rally titled 'Ban the Burka'. Ironically enough, the protest took place in Hartlepool, a seaside town where 689 Muslims lived at the time of event. No niqabis were known to reside in Hartlepool at the time of the protest.

With the women who were attacked clearly not posing any direct threats, the issue with Muslim women stems from social and political events past and present. In the previous sections, I spoke about Frantz Fanon's writing on the colonial setting in which resentment towards the Islamic veil developed as a convenient tool which France deployed for justifying attacks on Algeria and Muslims. Earlier on in the thesis, I also delved into PR strategies of the US-facilitated war on terror, revolving around the warped ideology of liberating female victims of oppressive Islamic regimes. The United Kingdom holds parallels to both examples, with a strong colonial legacy, and active military engagement in the present.

Especially in the context of ISIS, British Muslim women are frequently and aggressively targeted "as symbol of the problems perceived to be inherent to Islam" (Karlsen, 2015) and are ascribed "the particular role" in Government anti-radicalisation agendas (ibid.; Ameli et al, 2007; Geaves, 2005). This modus of political and press preoccupation with the Islamist terrorist threat associates veiled Muslim women 'with narrow types of specialities within Britain' (Bhimji 2012: 47) linked to religious extremism and a potential danger for the security of the nation. The consistent equation of Muslim women, especially niqabis, with terrorism is familiar to most respondents. Especially after the rise of ISIS, the fear of Muslim female terrorists is reflected both by political narratives and in street discourses. For example, I have already touched on the government's counter-terrorism strategies, which render all Muslims a suspect community and veiled women supposedly vulnerable for radicalisation.

According to some respondents, especially niqabis, the continuous bashing of veiled women often leads to frustration. As devoted Muslims they (are required to) advocate for peace for all and actively contribute to the general well-being of (British) society. In return, they are held responsible for crimes caused by perverted forms of Islam on the other side of the globe. Among those who share their annoyance is Khadija, a niqabi from north London. She states: “All niqabis that I know of are against terrorism. There should be a clear distinction between Islam that is taught by the Quran and Islam that is promoted by Islamists who are using the religion for all wrong reasons.” She believes that connecting the niqab with crime and terror is paradoxical: “The Quran claims that Muslims should treat people of all faiths and beliefs with tolerance and compassion.”

With those accounts being only rarely channelled to a broader audience, many Muslim women have decided to take a strong stand against terrorism. Under the lead of Sara Khan, some British Muslim women joined forces in a campaign #MakingAStand. With a campaign poster featuring a pale woman in a Union Jack hijab (see Image 14), the initiative calls for Muslim women to fight against radicalisation, in particular by ISIS. In a video that was released to promote the campaign, British Muslims – predominantly hijabis – speak about ISIS’ atrocities, from operating slave markets, selling and buying women, beheading aid workers and stoning women to death. “Stop and think, sister,” urges one hijabi, calling on Muslim women to rethink their real duties as Muslims.

Although the campaign ultimately aims to combat ISIS and radicalisation, the usages of language and visuals support another objective – one trying to eliminate the invisible veil that is, in the current political climate, thicker than ever. “We are British Muslim women – proud of who we are – British and Muslim. We cherish the values of peace, democracy, citizenship, and human rights. As women we know our role in challenging extremism is essential,” said

the founder of the initiative at its launch. By speaking about values that are both British and Islamic, and using Union Jack hijabs, she attempts to demonstrate how British British Muslim women are.



Image 14: A pale woman in a Union Jack hijab 'making a stand'

Yulia Egorova (2015: 500) emphasises that minority groups are sometimes put in a position when they have to alter their sartorial practices to demonstrate that despite their perceived 'foreignness' they are loyal to the state. Making their hijabs more British can be considered one such sartorial practice. Moreover, by emphasising the role of Muslim women in the fight against the state's number one enemy, the founder Sara Khan also asserts the idea that British Muslim women are not only not dangerous to the British nation, but are rather essential for defending its existence.

A similar objective can also be recognised in the 'poppy hijab', a highly

controversial initiative launched to mark Remembrance Day in November 2014. Designed for Muslim women to commemorate the occasion and co-religionists who fought alongside British troops, the poppy hijab plays with the motif of poppies that are traditionally worn at the anniversary to mark the end of World War I. The headscarf has not been welcomed by everyone. "The fact that it is being promoted by the likes of the Daily Mail, part of the thinking is, 'Okay, you are a little bit British but not British enough. We will accept you, but on our terms,'" commented Faezza Vaid, executive director of the Muslim Women's Network UK, on Al Jazeera (Hooper, 2014). Similar sentiments are shared by Sofia Ahmed. In her piece for Media Diversified (2014), she explains how she refuses to wear a poppy hijab – not because she is an extremist Muslim, but due to her "ideological position based on anti-war sentiment." She shares the story of her grandfather fighting with British troops, who ended up being shunned and perceived as someone who did not belong in Britain. The writer realises that she would always "be seen as the 'other'" regardless of how much she tries to fit in (ibid.). According to Sofia Ahmed, it is this antagonistic attitude from the majority of Britons that needs to be addressed, and not the alleged lack of Britishness among UK Muslims. She concludes:

"If there's one thing I am sure of, it is that given Britain's never ending lust for war in Muslim lands, and the use of the poppy campaign to garner support and sympathy for the military, my grandfather and those countless other Muslim men who took part in the world wars, would turn in their graves at the sight of their grandchildren wearing that hijab" (ibid.).

As pointed out by Faezza Vaid and Sofia Ahmed in the respective media pieces (Ahmed, 2014; Hooper, 2014), this method of demonstrating one's Britishness is a highly problematic one. It implies that British Muslim women are deviating from the preferred mytho-historical norms. They need to adhere to the white non-

Muslim population's ideas of Britishness in order to be fully accepted into the inner circle of citizenship. This notion resonates with the writing of Homi K. Bhabha. In his essay *Of Mimicry and Man* (1984), Bhabha theorises the civilising missions of new lands by employing the concept of colonial mimicry. It refers to "the desire for a reformed recognisable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994: 86). The discursive practice of mimicry is constituted around the process of double articulation that simultaneously appropriates the Other and at the same time "continually produce[s] its slippage, its *excess*, its *difference*" (ibid.: 122).

In other words, the colonised aim to imitate the behaviour or characteristics of their colonisers in the hope of acquiring their power. However, the mimicry can never be applied fully, but necessarily includes a certain level of hybridisation with the cultural identity of the colonised. Drawing on Bhabha, the method deployed by nationalistic hijabs fits into the concept of colonial mimicry with British Muslim women demonstrating their belonging to their home country by adopting the symbolism of those in power.

Although these seemingly para-colonial initiatives of almost but not entirely equal British citizens can be seen as an opportunistic action, Bhabha acknowledges the subversive potentials of any acts of colonial mimicry, an idea that will be further explored in the following chapter.

6.6 Conclusion

The title image of this chapter portrays a number of niqab- and burqa-clad women. Their transparent veils create multiple layers that overlap with each

other. The resulting effect appears to offer an artistic illustration of Du Bois' famous metaphor of the veil that has represented a theoretical backbone of this chapter. Just like the women represented in this art work, the protagonists of this research inevitably wear multiple veils. Apart from a physical veil which they choose to don consciously, society wraps them in an additional invisible veil – a thick veil of prejudice, mythological narratives and denied privileges. No matter what they wear and how they behave, the invisible veil continues to denounce their status as unwanted British Others. For example, even though Sumaiyah, the leading female character in this chapter, is an active citizen, a proud British woman and a citizenship education teacher, the invisible veil prevents her from obtaining the symbolic standing of a fully-fledged Briton.

Although the colour line between the black and white populations in the pre-civil rights movement USA is intrinsically different from a Muslim-non-Muslim divide in the 21st century United Kingdom, observing the two in parallel can indeed be a productive analytical process. Just like the construction of a colour line is embedded in the colonial past, discrimination against British Muslim women cannot be comprehended without acknowledging British political agendas from its imperial past onwards. Centuries-long military engagements in various Muslim states are crucial to understanding why women today remain demonised solely on the basis of their attire and what it represents.

The toxic process of othering is expressed in various ways. As observed in the cases of two white converts, it can be shown through ostracising practices. For example, Emma was pushed away by her own father and her employer, and the journalist Lauren Booth has experienced antagonism in her professional circle. The decisions by society members did not appear to have been linked directly to their behaviour or performance. Donning the hijab did not introduce Emma as a less loyal or less loving daughter, or eradicate Lauren Booth's journalistic talents

and capabilities. It could be assumed, to at least a certain degree, that the act of shunning was informed by mytho-historical discourses and current political and media narratives premised on the concept of perilous otherness of a Muslim woman.

The power of anti-Muslim contempt can be observed in the frequent abuse experienced by *all* veiled Muslim female respondents. Either in the form of verbal abuse or physical violence, women are continuously subjected to attacks that are, once again, motivated by nothing but an invisible veil that casts a shadow of ungrounded prejudice over the women's bodies. Due to the existence of an invisible veil between the women in question and the majority white population, women often do not feel confident reporting these violent incidents and harassment to the police, who occupy a symbolical space on the other side of the invisible veil.

This disconnect between two parts of one society experienced by women, creates a poignant self-realisation about their own difference. For instance, Sumaiyah demonstrates that she is aware that her own society sees her as a Muslim who cannot integrate. This idea strongly echoes the writing of Du Bois, who talks about this precise sensation of the twoness of two unreconciled identities, which represents "two warring ideals in one dark body." In Du Bois' account, Afro-Americans are granted a unique position of observing themselves from within the veil and from outside the veil, replicating the gaze of the white majority. They see themselves not only introspectively but, moreover, experience "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 1903: 3).

Realising that the invisible veil cannot be lifted, women resort to different tools to

demonstrate their legitimacy in their own home country. 'Patriotic' hijabs with the motifs of the Union Jack or poppies, for example, are just some of the attempts to paint the veils British, both in a physical and metaphorical sense. Such appropriation of the hijab to the preferred standards of the majority in power is, however, highly problematic. As demonstrated by Muslim women's frequent critiques, the idea of becoming British on the British majority's terms resonates with the notions of colonial mimicry. Following Homi K. Bhabha's theorisation of the term, the coloniser strives for "a reformed, recognisable Other" who is almost the same, but not quite. Drawing upon Bhabha's understanding of this double articulation, it can be argued that the veil as an ultimate visual emblem of difference is appropriated in the way that celebrates the power of the dominant group rather than questions it.

Bhabha speaks about mimicry as an opportunistic method of copying the person in power. This idea echoes theories of Frantz Fanon whose writing, too, paved the theoretical paths of this chapter. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon famously writes about the desire of a black man to mimic the white, which haunts him day and night, saying: "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (Fanon, 1952: 12). Putting a white mask over an invisible veil is precisely what the Union Jack and poppy hijabs are an illustration of. They depict the neo-colonial political strategies that send a clear message: we will accept you, but only on our terms.

There is, however, no need to don a white mask, suggests Sumaiyah. "I'm British. I just happen to wear the niqab," she states, adding: "We are living in British society, we are British and it's important for the British people to know what Islam stands for. And at the same time it's important for Muslims to be entwined with British society and learn more about British society and be more active citizens." Sumaiyah deconstructs the complexity of multicultural and multi-faith

cohabitation in a simple manner. She knows that a cloth itself is not a barrier. She herself is living proof that the headscarf and face veil do not prevent communication and integration, nor do they embody radical Islamist ideas. She is a highly expressive person who is actively integrated into student life, is employed as a part-time teacher of citizenship education, and is involved in a variety of political and social causes. Sumaiyah, and some of her fellow veiled Muslim women whom we have met in this chapter, strive to be recognised and accepted as equal citizens without compromising their faith, dignity and their preferred life-styles.

Striving to be recognised and accepted is indeed a challenging task, which will be expanded on in the following chapter focusing on resistance and social change. I will look at some inventive strategies that British hijabis employ in a pursuit of removing the invisible veil of otherness.

Chapter VII: Hijab Metamorphoses



Image 15: Shamsia Hassani's mural in Kabul, Afghanistan

The Library of Birmingham is a majestic building occupying Centenary Square, right in the heart of the city. The building that houses an amalgamation of thousands and thousands years of wisdom, stories and histories is not typical of those libraries with green study lights, oak desks, Victorian windows and the obligatory dusty smell. With a contemporary design and feel, the largest public library in the United Kingdom conveys an impression of change, future and forwardness.

Similar sentiments are embodied by Wahida who can be found sitting quietly at her regular table in the library café. Notebook in hand, she is drafting her next spoken word piece. It might be on rape within Muslim communities, or on the war in Yemen, or perhaps on something completely different. Despite the subject, it will be, almost without doubt, highly controversial and bold, challenging the prevailing opinions and offering alternative ones.

Everything about Wahida feels fresh and almost revolutionary. In her early twenties – and with a five-year career under her belt already – she is among the youngest established artists on the Birmingham underground scene. And one of a very few hijabis in those circles, too, she says. Her style is striking from the inside and the outside; she accessorises heavily, does not hesitate to don bright colours and brave patterns, and she almost never leaves the house without her signature bow tie. Today it is a shiny one and it complements her attire, from her stylish headscarf to her glittery trainers. She is not afraid to look in the mirror, she says. She is equally vocal about global politics and about issues that happen behind closed doors in her own community. She is reflective and deep, and hence goes by the stage name 'soul poet'.

The choice of her favourite table at the Birmingham library is not an arbitrary one. "At this very table, I had one of the most epic photos taken," says Wahida and tells the anecdote about meeting Prince William during his visit to the new library. She was selected to sit next to him and when joking about his favourite rap artists, a photo

portraying the two laughing hysterically was snapped. She is not one of the artists who categorically rejects the establishment; she works hard towards changing it by promoting a constructive dialogue. "Earlier this week, I went down to London to parliament to discuss moving the voting rights age to 16+," Wahida tells me enthusiastically.

She stands up and packs away her stuff, including a precious notebook containing countless lucid ideas that might be soon seen on stage, or at least in a YouTube video. She walks out of the futuristic building down Birmingham high street to a meeting for an upcoming workshop, and towards new challenges.

This chapter is opened by two young and bold artists, Shamsia (see Image 15) and Wahida. Although they reside in different parts of the globe, namely in Kabul and Birmingham, they have a lot in common. At a superficial level, they are both young, female, religiously observant and are engaged with the underground art scene. More symbolically, they are both challenging and changing society, and promoting societal transformations in their local settings and globally. As role models, transmitters of novel ideas and critics of the social status quo, both Shamsia and Wahida create a different version of reality – with their words and their cans of spray respectively. It is thus not a coincidence that these two artists have been chosen for the final chapter on resistance, refusal and reformation.

As seen in the opening vignette, Wahida's resistance does not necessarily fit into conventional conceptions of resistance by participating in public demonstrations or causing violent disruption, for example. Her resistance is subtle and informal. She utilises her poetry and creative skills to resist the prevailing stereotypes and injustices that she faces as a young Muslim hijabi, ranging from violence against women in her community to the ignorance about young people demonstrated by the British government. Wahida's social, cultural and political engagement

illustrates the idea that resistance comes in various shapes and forms; it is not limited to revolutionary upheavals but stretches to private everyday acts of resistance that are equally significant despite receiving considerably less public attention (Scott, 1987; Martin, 1999). Just like the sites of power vary in size and form, the responses to the means of power come in an impressive array of variations (Lilja, 2016: 20). They can be informal or formal, violent or non-violent, held at street-level or digitally, deconstructing or reconstructing, subtle or loud (ibid.).

Despite its form, they all contribute equally importantly to the disruption and challenging of existing power structures in their own unique ways. As famously summarised by Michel Foucault, “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978: 95). Lila Abu-Lughod, who has been our theoretic partner throughout this work, toys lucidly with Foucault's words when she states that “where there is resistance, there is power” (1990: 42). As suggested by the artwork featured on this chapter's opening page (see Image 15), by Shamsia Hassani, resistance is not only about undermining power but about claiming and reclaiming it as well. By painting oversized, bright and dynamic figures of burqa-clad women, for example, Shamsia Hassani presents veiled women as powerful individuals with a strong sense of agency. She resists patronising portrayals of Afghan women by local politicians and the global media alike, and promotes a new vision for herself and her fellow Afghanis.

This chapter will explore different forms and motivations of resisting sentiments and acts that are expressed, and also questioned, by British hijabis without falling into anthropological traps of over-romanticising and fetishising resistance and the subjects central to its implementation. I will examine both organised and subtler everyday forms of resistance, and all modalities in-between, and explore a sense of choices, creative approaches and aspirations experienced by British

hijabis.

7.1 The dilemmas of recognition and intention

“Once upon a time, resistance was a relatively unambiguous category, half of the seemingly simple binary, domination versus resistance,” claims Sherry Ortner (1995: 174). She reminds us how early scholarship on resistance saw domination as a relatively institutionalised form of power, while resistance was perceived as its organised opposition. In popular discourses, too, the concept of resistance is often equated with protesting crowds, overtly political language and violent disruptions. As already outlined in the introduction of this chapter, resistance cannot be reduced to simplified definitions of collective and contentious mobilisations against the dominant structures of power (see Hoffman, 1999: 672; Seymour, 2006: 305). It is a much broader and more fluid concept, which comes in various shapes and forms.

It is precisely this fluidity and broadness that has made resistance difficult to define. The last half of the century of anthropological theorisations of resistance have framed the acts and actualities of resistance in a plethora of definitions, and the consensus on one single working definition of the term is still pending. This analytical incoherence is not necessarily counter-productive, for a diverse breadth of attempts at a definition can do nothing but help us embrace a range of acts, sentiments and behaviours within this conceptually contested category.

According to Hollander and Einwohner (2004: 539), this contention surrounding the definition of resistance is predominately generated around two major parameters: the question of recognition, and the discussions about the intent

behind resisting acts. As the authors emphasise, much of the scholarly discussion centres around the question of whether oppositional action has to be readily apparent to others and recognised as resistance (ibid.). In addition, the issue of intentionality, too, occupies a central role in polemics about the applications of resistance. It refers to exploring whether the actors are consciously resisting some exercise of power or are even aware that their actions are perceived as resisting (ibid.: 542). As I will show throughout the chapter, the recognition and intentionality of resisting acts are not always apparent, or even present.

Before I focus on exploring such ambiguous forms of resistance among British hijabis, it would be beneficial to look at some conventional modalities of resistance which fulfil both of the mentioned criteria in an apparent manner.

7.1.1 Protesting against the burqa ban

When France introduced the so-called 'burqa ban' in 2011, niqab-wearers and their allies responded to the new policy with conspicuous rage. Several protests were staged within and beyond national borders, exhibiting the demonstrators' disagreement with imposed political decisions. In addition to the 'epicentre' in Paris, the British branch of the international pan-Islamic organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir organised parallel protests in London. Gathering in front of the French embassy, niqab-wearers expressed their strong disagreement with French lawmakers across the channel. The protesters shouted slogans and exhibited various banners displaying messages such as 'Our peace is one, our war is one, our honour is one', 'Niqab: Honour for Women' or 'Shariah 4 France'. The protests were planned, coordinated, advertised and documented. The group of demonstrators gathered intentionally and with a clear aim, and their expression of resistance was recognised as such by various audiences, from random passers-

by to the media, such as the Daily Mail, which documented the event extensively (2011).

Moving ahead two years, and about 130 miles from the previously mentioned protest, another set of public demonstrations took place in front of Birmingham Metropolitan College, which I visited during my fieldwork. Following the decision by the college to prohibit the wearing of face veils by staff members and students, its student body organised a rally which vocalised their opposing opinions. Heavily backed by social media users, the demonstrations were well organised and advertised. For example, the campaign was accompanied by a Facebook page, a press release and a group of designated spokespeople. The group's manifesto was communicated clearly and campaigning updates were published regularly. The well-developed communication strategy thus left little space for questioning the intentions behind the protest.

As part of the communication campaign, the organisers distributed leaflets and posters (see Image 16), mostly through social media. The imagery on the promotional leaflet featured a sharp font and was printed in black-and-white, thus embracing visual approaches that are commonly deployed for advertising political protests. The illustration on the leaflet portrayed several niqabis; whilst the women in the background were dressed in black, the woman in front of the image sported a white niqab, which made her stand out from the graphic artwork. The symbol of the white niqab is a well-known and established emblem of resistance among young Muslim female protesters. Having been continuously donned by Arab female students during Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the white niqab goes well beyond complying with its religious meanings within Islam. Throughout recent decades of use by student movements, it has turned into an instrument that is often deployed for demanding political change and peace (Guibernau, 2013: 12).



Image 16: A leaflet calling potential protesters to join the rally against the burqa ban at Birmingham Metropolitan College

Choosing this imagery for the campaign zooms out the focus from a very local college-based event and highlights the struggles of Muslim women globally. Although the protest was organised around a specific issue – the prohibition of face veils on this Birmingham college campus – the campaign exhibited a broader aim of fighting Islamophobia and injustices faced by the Muslim population. For example, the campaign was eventually endorsed by the National Union of Students, a nationwide body of students. Its black students' officer Aaron Kielty commented that the ban, “is a complete infringement on the rights to religious freedom and cultural expression” (Sherriff, 2013). BBC News (2013) also responded to the campaign and published a collection of opinions on burqa bans, in Birmingham and globally, by various British opinion makers.

These two campaigns offer prime examples of – what might be deemed as – 'traditional' types of resistance. They generate little room for potential polemics around the aforementioned issues of recognition and intention. The two described protests follow a similar operational matrix. They were both organised by Muslim women's groups; they were advertised extensively; they were implemented in the form of a public gathering, and their effective communication strategy attracted wider public attention and generated broader debates on the issues. Despite an analogous format, the sentiments of the two campaigns were vastly different, with one transmitting what could be considered conservative Islamic views and the other one promoting liberal values of freedom of expression. The accompanying manifestos, banners and slogans all communicated these messages clearly, thus not leaving space for misreadings and confusion among protesters themselves and their various intentional and coincidental audiences. Such a degree of clarity is, however, not present in all forms of resisting acts, with many expressions of resistance failing to address one of the parameters fully or altogether.

7.1.2 Coincidental and unrecognised resistance

Redirecting our attention back to Kabul, the birthplace of this chapter's opening image (see Image 15), the artist Shamsia Hassani tells me that the genesis of her work is not necessarily linked to resistance and protest. In an online interview, Shamsia talks about the various institutional constraints she faced as an aspiring artist. Being a young woman instantly disqualified her from working and exhibiting her work in institutionalised spaces and conventional artistic venues. At the same time, she was also tired of multiple restrictions that prevented Afghan audiences from accessing, consuming and enjoying art. "Many Afghan people have no opportunity to visit exhibitions. If I do art that is there for a

longer time and does not require paying for a ticket, people will slowly recognise it and it will become part of their lives,” stated Shamsia. Seeking the needed alternative, she enrolled herself onto a street art course with a British graffiti artist and has thus found a new avenue for her creative endeavours in graffiti art.

Her artistic engagement was originally not meant to be either a critique of Afghan internal politics or a counter narrative to patronising international discourses on veiled women. However, her images were soon reclaimed by political movements and the media nationally and internationally. From CNN to The Guardian, international media outlets quickly noticed her work and framed it into the discourses of resisting the Afghan regime (e.g. Rose, 2014). This can serve to demonstrate how certain unintended actions can be recognised as forms of resistance by the audience. Although Shamsia admits that resistance did not initially motivate her art, it has quickly turned into her trademark, and she eventually started capitalising on the potential of street art for staging public protest.

Contrary to Shamsia's example of unintended acts being recognised as forms of resistance, numerous deliberate acts of resistance might also go unrecognised. For instance, earlier in this thesis I introduced Nadiya Takolia, a feminist intellectual who decided to don the niqab as a political gesture against capitalism's unjust and unrealistic beauty games, which pressurise women to constantly modify and beautify their bodies. Although her actions carry clear ideological aims, her motivation might be recognised by an extremely limited audience. The hegemonic group that is targeted by her resistance, namely the global marketing industry, will not necessarily recognise nor acknowledge her actions as resistance against their industry and their values. For random audiences whom she might encounter during everyday interactions, her niqab, too, will not necessarily constitute an act of protest. Even though the outcomes of her act might not be

recognised, Scott (1985: 290) claims that it is the actor's intention that can be considered a significant indicator of resistance.

Although Shamsia Hassani's work might not originate as a manifestation of resistance, and Nadiya Takolia's political niqab might not be recognised as an act of protest by the majority audience, these examples demonstrate that the theoretical scope of resistance is broad and fluid, opening a vast field for deviations in different directions. Even if particular acts are not meant to resist or are not recognised as resisting, they still contribute towards diluting the structures of power in their own capacities. Whilst Islamic headgear has elicited public protests and marches in the UK and beyond, it is precisely these hidden, everyday, low-profile and indirect strategies of resistance that have played the leading role in fuelling hijab metamorphoses over the last decades.

7.2 From hidden to veiled transcripts

The examples of latent resisting strategies exhibited by Shamsia Hassani and Nadiya Takolia are illustrative of the insights made in James Scott's groundbreaking work on everyday resistance (1985). His ethnographic and theoretical contribution focuses specifically on the ordinary acts of subordinated groups that both challenge and accommodate the imposed dominant regimes. Coining the term 'token resistance' (Scott, 1985: 291), Scott claims that this type of resisting scheme contrasts greatly with the organised, systematic and principled counterparts, which embody "ideas or intentions that negate the basis of domination itself" (Collins, 2009: 10). Token resistance is consequently often unsystematic, individualistic and opportunistic, and exists within the limits of the power that is imposed on the subordinated group. Whilst resisting in its nature,

these acts of resistance are hidden or disguised enough to avoid major social sanctions (Scott, 1985). The actions of token resistance are thus sufficiently subversive to challenge the power structures but are also discreet enough to fall within the remit of what is considered acceptable, legal and appropriate by the groups in power.

Following such understanding of resistance, Scott introduces the notion of public and hidden 'transcripts' as the established modes of social actions and interactions with accordance to a particular socio-political setting. He claims that resistance is essentially a subtle form of contesting 'public transcripts' by making use of prescribed social roles and imposed language to resist the abuse of power (Scott, 1990: 137). Or to put it differently, hidden transcripts represent a set of acts and activities that exist parallel to public hegemonic culture. By playing creatively with the dominant 'modus operandi', the oppressed groups resist the abuse from the oppressors with minor but gradual acts (ibid.).

Rumena's wedding preparations offer an illustrative example. I met Rumena, a Bengali woman in her early forties, about four months before her big day. At that time, Rumena was buried in hectic planning of what would be her second wedding, having married her first husband decades ago. Rumena had a clear vision of the kind of wedding she wanted – she was hoping for an intimate and romantic affair with her closest family, especially her two children, and without hordes of distant relatives and friends. Especially as this would be her second wedding, she wanted to avoid any unneeded pomposity and celebrate the union with her new husband privately. However, her mother-in-law did not share her vision, and was, in fact, very persistent in promoting the exact opposite. Rumena eventually gave in and decided to accommodate her new in-laws' wedding ambitions, thus agreeing to organise a grand event with two separate halls for men and women. The latter arrangement was something that especially bothered

the bride, who had initially opted for a joint celebration. She wanted all her family, including her adult son, and her friends from different backgrounds to enjoy the day in the same space, as opposed to having her wedding segregated by gender.

“I decided, I won't wear the hijab for the wedding party,” Rumena announced to me some weeks after telling me about the problems with her in-laws's vision of her wedding. “I want to do my hair professionally, so that it looks really nice” she added. Given that the event would be segregated anyway, her not covering up should be irrelevant, she further commented. Surprised by her decision, I questioned her further and mentioned the photographs in her wedding album that would be shared with strangers. “They [in-laws to be] are paying for the album so they can figure something out,” she replied. The conversation soon crystallised Rumena's intentions. Angered by her future mother-in-law's level of engagement with planning her wedding and the conservative nature of her plan, Rumena deployed the hijab to perform a hidden act of resistance. Knowing her partner's mother's obsession with following veiling protocols precisely and at all times, she used the act of unveiling to dilute her authority. As her mother-in-law pushed for segregation – something which Rumena strongly disagreed with – going bare-headed for the day was her strategy of resisting her new in-laws. Although her decision would be considered acceptable since the halls were segregated, it would still anger and potentially embarrass her new family.

Sumaiyah, whose story took us through one of the previous chapters, offers yet another ethnographic example illustrating the notion of hidden transcripts. Following the Israeli military's assault on the Gaza strip in the summer of 2014, the British public responded with mass protests which brought together hundreds of thousands protesters around the country. Beyond the loud demonstrations in English towns and cities, Sumaiyah joined a silent protest

organised by Muslim sisters online. Connected by a Facebook group, hundreds of women decided to don the keffiyeh, a Palestinian scarf, and wrap it as a headscarf or niqab. This gesture expressed their solidarity with the people of Palestine and conveyed their messages of resistance to the Israeli occupation and its policy towards Palestinians.

Popularised in late 1960s by Leila Khaled,²⁶ the famous female member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the keffiyeh-hijab has become a popular symbol of resistance by Muslim women. By reclaiming the keffiyeh, an item of clothing that is usually associated with Arab masculinity, women not only pronounce their solidarity with the Palestinian independence movement but also denote gender equality within Islam and beyond. Sumaiyah's act of donning the keffiyeh-hijab was subtle; instead of her usual floral, stripy or mono-coloured headscarves, she merely chose a different textile to serve as her headscarf. However, her act was recognised as political by those who were familiar with the symbolism of her headgear. This act of resistance, as she commented later, enabled her to minimise the calculated risks a single woman marching in a mass protest or attending an evening solidarity event. Sumaiyah's act of resistance fits into Scott's notion of hidden transcripts. By wearing the keffiyeh she manifested a hidden discourse of dignity and self-assertion within the prevailing public script, whilst disguising and muting ideological resistance for the sake of her own safety (Scott, 1990: 137).

However, the example of Sumaiyah's resistance challenges Scott's concept of hidden transcripts and invites us to rethink it from a new angle. Firstly, in his writing on everyday resistance, Scott focuses on highly individualised modes of

²⁶ Leila Khaled is a vocal advocate for the independence of Palestine. She has been involved in various direct actions to protest the Israeli occupation of her homeland. For example, she is credited as the first woman to hijack a plane, having been part of a team that hijacked a plane on its way to Tel Aviv in 1969.

resistance as he discusses it in the terms of unplanned, uncoordinated and small-scale actions against the oppressor. As this might indeed be the case with some particular examples, for instance with Rumena's decision to take off the hijab to challenge her in-laws, the overemphasis on singular engagement fails to recognise, what El-Kholy (2002) and Turton (1986) would call the 'middle ground' – the various forms of resistance that might be everyday and hidden, but which require active engagement and involvement of different social networks and informal groups.

Drawing on Turton's concept of 'patrolling the middle ground', Heba Aziz El-Kholy (2002: 17) applies this critique in an attempt to 'gender' the concept of everyday resistance and study unbalanced relations of power between genders. With a reference to her ethnographic study of gender in low-income Cairo, she enunciates that it is precisely the informal networks of women which play a crucial role in gaining power, either in the context of their families or communities at large. As seen in the example of the keffiyeh-hijab, the actions of resistance are carried out in a planned and coordinated manner by an informal group of women who share a similar belief; Muslim hijabis utilised Facebook to plan a collective response to a global political event.

Furthermore, Scott contrasts his hidden transcripts with public transcripts, thus suggesting a different type of avenue into which these transcripts are channelled. In his own words, the place of hidden transcripts is, as suggested by the name, "off stage" (Scott, 1990), beyond the public eye and the limelight. As observed in the aforementioned case studies, the public-hidden dichotomy does not necessarily extend to the types of everyday resistance we have been witnessing throughout this work. The actions are not always hidden; on the contrary, they are often deliberately and visibly featured on various cyber platforms, from social media channels to blogs and e-zines – even though the subversive content may

seldom penetrate hegemonic public discourses, such as the mainstream media and politics.

The critique of Scott's notion of everyday resistance, in particular his notion of hidden transcripts, invites us to rethink his original concept and propose a new concept that is congruent with the vein of this thesis. I thus propose the concept of 'veiled resistance', which refers to everyday token resistance that is counter-hegemonic in its origins, discreet in its manifestation and modest in its size. However, rather than being an individual domain that is separate from the public transcript, veiled transcripts are ambitiously and intentionally attempting to enter and become a part of the public realm by mobilising informal groups of engaged individuals. Due to veiled meanings and embodiments, these acts are not always recognised as resistance, nor are they communicated in manners that "conform to conventional understanding of politics" (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013: 10). It is essentially about everyday practices that are not conventionally and openly resisting, for example the way of dressing or even a choice of lifestyle. The resisting messages are veiled into everyday phenomena that the groups in power would not automatically recognise as political. This veil simultaneously enables the agents to avoid any potential sanctions and at the same time offers an effective camouflage for having open access to the official public transcripts. To outline and clarify this concept, I will offer further ethnographic examples.

7.3 Veiled resistance and humour

No example of veiled transcripts is more explanatory and exciting than humour. Jokes, Internet memes, one-liners and caricatures do not merely serve to entertain audiences. Through an anthropological lens, humour is perceived as particularly

insightful as it “pervades all aspects of human behaviour, thinking and socio-cultural reality” (Apte, 1988: 7), and often “manifest[s] a consciousness of group identity and solidarity” (Apte, 1985: 66). Humour on the one hand serves as a mirror reflecting society and its issues. On the other hand, it also possesses a unique power to inflict the existing power relations in a socially acceptable manner. As such, it holds the potential to stage resistance and subsequently generate political tension.

In his discussions on everyday resistance, Scott (1985) often refers to joke-telling as the weapon of the weak, and talks about its significance for diminishing power in his fieldsite in a Malaysian village. Numerous later scholars (see Constable: 2007; Johansson: 2009; Peteet: 1991; Richter-Devroe: 2011; Sorensen: 2008), too, have recognised how various expressions of humour can be deployed to resist different formal and informal oppressing groups alike, ranging from dictatorships to patriarchal figures. British hijabis similarly offer countless examples of resisting through humour.

At the talk in east London, I asked a group of women – otherwise also passionate activists with strong feminist views – if they knew a good joke. One of the ladies responded: “Today’s cover of the Sun says that British women should not wear the burqa. Below the title it is written: for a detailed recommendation on how British women should be dressed see page 3.” The joke, which initially emerged online as a response to The Sun’s obvious pro-burqa-ban position amidst the debates in Europe, criticises the tabloid paper’s problematic political stance towards women: while it opposes face veils due to their allegedly oppressive nature, it simultaneously supports objectifying women by publishing naked photographs on its (formerly) notorious page 3. By sharing this joke, the joke-teller resists the newspaper’s deplorable politics which promote hatred towards her and her Muslim and non-Muslim sisters. Even though it is packaged as a

simple joke, it contains strong campaigning messages backed with short yet clear argumentation.

Similar short jokes are often shared online. Even more frequently, however, social media users resort to popular memes – typically amusing images with a short caption that are easily circulated in cyberspace. A popular example is a viral trend 'What people think' that emerged in 2012 and sustained its popularity in subsequent years. People from all professions, studies and walks of life started sharing images of how different parts of society perceive them and how they see themselves, with humour being generated by the disconnect between these different representations. Not surprisingly, some of these memes have been created by hijabis about hijabis. Unlike some more casual takes on this particular meme, the variations focusing on hijab-clad women tend to be politically loaded. They focus on distorted representations of veiled women as oppressed or dangerous, explore the contradictions within their own family and community's expectations, for example to be pious and successful, and share their own desired role within society, such as being powerful and resisting. For example, one compilation of images, published on Pinterest, depicts a caged niqabi with a caption 'what society thinks I do'; an ISIS female fighter corresponding to the supposed government's perception of hijabis; a belly dancer as a portrayal of what hijabis' friends think of her; a praying hijabi as her parents' vision of an obedient daughter, and a hijabi with a protesting sign subtitled 'what I think I do'.

These memes give the women who create and share them a welcome opportunity to identify the problematic perceptions and attitudes of dominant groups and resist them by promoting alternative modes of representation. In that sense, humour can generate a distance to the oppressive conditions and can create a space for “breathing and manoeuvring, therefore a way of creating themselves as agents of change” (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013: 19). They use this space for

resisting the sexist, Islamophobic or racist cultural framework and discursive structure that subordinates them by making the oppressing groups complicit (ibid.).

These examples, again, deviate from the notion of hidden texts and point towards the altered heuristics of everyday resistance that I developed in the previous section. The discussed examples of humour exhibited by British hijabis channel a response to socio-political situations publicly, and work to establish a collective trend that surpasses the domain of the individual. Despite their frequently open resistance against established meanings, the memes avoid any social reprisal as they are rarely recognised as a form of resistance but are instead perceived as a form of entertainment.

The previous examples have briefly demonstrated how the medium of humour is deployed creatively to widen the reach of the message by making it relevant and accessible to broader audiences. Although the majority of activities are limited to social media sites and other informal spaces, the facetious take on political debates surrounding the Islamic headgear often grants women the access to the mainstream media as yet another form of a public transcript.

An example comes with The Guardian's 2013 publication of a humorous article entitled 'Nine uses for a burqa... that don't involve bashing them' (Aly, 2013). Circulated to a wider audience amidst the tensions of pan-European niqab interdiction debates, the author Remona Aly, a veiled Muslim woman herself, lists various funny tips for rejuvenating "the black onesie's image" (ibid.). She proposes using it as fire blanket during a Guy Fawkes event, bringing it to court to generate some media furore and chase away boredom or attending a flashmob without feeling ashamed. The author utilises humour to enter the public transcript and transform it into a site of resistance. Using obvious cynicism, she

releases her political frustrations in a manner that does not appear confrontational, threatening or obviously political.

A brief overview of humour-fuelled methods of resistance – from informal interpersonal jokes to wider Internet communities to broader audiences – explicates how the routine use of casual entertainment can effectively articulate resisting sentiments. Unlike Scott's previously mentioned research among peasant populations, British hijabis often promote a bolder and louder version of everyday resistance. Rather than performing their actions secretly – out of sight and without recognition by their oppressing targets – they position their resistance in the limelight, thus blurring the boundaries between hidden and public transcripts. Humour is not used to hide the messages of resistance from the public eye, but is rather employed to enable resisting content to enter, and manoeuvre freely within, the dominant discursive frame.

7.4 Veiled resistance in art

Just as apparent as humour, the idea of hidden texts entering the public discourse is evident in the field of arts. Exhibited, performed or published, various artistic artefacts and texts hold the power to convey resisting messages in the public arena. Anthropology has long recognised the role of art as a tool of resistance, especially in times of social and political crisis (Gal 1995; Gell, 1998). Holding the power to challenge and change public perceptions, art creates effective platforms for reflecting on the dominant and subordinate views alike, and subsequently fostering solidarity, change and resistance. From street art such as Shamsia Hassani's opening mural to spoken words, such as those of Wahida, who was presented in the introductory ethnographic vignette, artistic interventions frame

political processes into aesthetically or poetically appealing and explicitly public formats.

This idea is further developed by Charles Tripp (2013). In his discussion of paths of resistance in the Middle East, he compresses the interactions between art and the politics of resistance into three main categories. Firstly, he claims that art has a powerful way of announcing presence and reclaiming public space. Secondly, art can contribute towards promoting a shared vocabulary of solidarity and collective identity. Finally, artistic interventions can create a common imagery which challenges existing hegemonic discourses and replaces them with alternative imaginaries of the past, present, and future. Drawing on Tripp, Salih and Richter-Devroe (2014: 16) maintain that resistance art does not only “challenge the status quo through alternative political messages” but can also “disrupt established hegemonic aesthetic forms or act as visualized evidence of political, social, and cultural imaginaries and identities” that counter those that are imposed by the groups in power. These three categories of engagement between art and the politics of resistance can be examined further in the light of artistic interventions exhibited by British Muslim women.

As already discussed, Tripp talks about the importance of art for signalling presence and consequently reclaiming public spaces (ibid.: 306). Shamsia Hassani's artwork offers an illuminating example of this synthesis between art and resistance. On display and accessible to a wide audience, her stone canvases commonly feature over-sized women with explicitly female figures in striking turquoise burqas. “My women are big, strong and modern. I capture them in movement and draw them bigger than in real life. I want people to perceive these women differently,” says Hassani. By introducing fully-veiled Afghan women as powerful and independent, she contests unilinear narratives about Afghan women as oppressed victims of patriarchal regimes and burqas that have been

carved out by local authorities and global superpowers, and refocuses media attention onto the real problems of Afghan women.

Her art is not only decorating physical walls but is also breaking down the metaphorical walls that Afghan women have been forced to stand behind for several decades, from Taliban rule to the US occupation. The artist liberates female issues from the invisibility and anonymity of four walls, and secures their permanent presence on the public side of the wall. By reclaiming the public space, she redefines the symbolic border – or rather the wall – between her public and private space, between a hidden and a public transcript. She enters the public realm and leaves a permanent mark of her existence. Her problems of being a woman move from the private side of the house wall to the public walls exposed to everyone's attention. Shamsia Hassani deploys the medium of art to resist the prevailing version of history, women, veiling and Afghanistan imposed by those in power. Or in words of Charles Tripp, she reclaims public spaces to signal women's presence.

In addition to reclaiming public spaces, Tripp identifies the second link between artistic interventions and resistance in creating powerful shared vocabularies that foster solidarity and collective identities (Tripp, 2013: 307). Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned the symbolism of the white niqab as an emerging emblem of resistance within younger Muslim communities, from Palestine to England. Artistic representations of the white niqab are just a minuscule example of how a certain symbol can become a part of global visual vocabularies that forge a sense of shared cause among otherwise unconnected individuals and groups.

Another interesting example of building common artistic vocabularies lies in various zines that are prevalent and popular among the younger generation of 'underground' artists in the United Kingdom. One of My Kind, popularly known

under its abbreviation OOMK, is an independent publication that focuses on young women, art and activism, and places a special focus on women from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. OOMK has been consistently utilising art – be it drawings, poems or cartoons, amongst other forms – to explore the identities of young Muslim women. "Art is so powerful," said Sofia Niazi, one of the founders and editors of the zine who is a hijabi herself when being interviewed by The National (2013).

"If you write an essay to make a point, you block off so many people: people who can't read that language, people who aren't academic. But as soon as you turn to illustration, barriers are broken. People are drawn in. They ask questions. They start debating. That's a really powerful connection. People are exploring issues in creative ways (ibid.)"

The OOMK collective has served as an incubator for such creative explorations. It has facilitated emerging artists coming together and sharing their creative takes on Muslim female identity, including aesthetic reflections on the Islamic veil. Many of the artworks from this thesis, including the feminist poster of Hannah Habibi, which opened one of the earlier chapters (see Image 10), were featured in the mentioned activist zine. The broader global appeal of OOMK's shared visual language of resistance was proven apparent when the zine opened a sister magazine in Malaysia, where its artistic content, too, resonates with young female Muslim audiences. Returning to Tripp's second category of linking resistance and art, the women of OOMK demonstrate the importance of creating shared vocabularies of resistance which provide the basis of new solidarities – "the performances that escape and challenge the everyday ordering of power (Tripp, 2013: 7). The proliferation of shared symbolic languages and spaces opens the door to new imaginative possibilities that enable British hijabis to express and explore their identities through solidarity and resistance.

This example leads to the third category of cooperative overlaps between resistance and art according to Tripp. He underscores the importance of art for collapsing hegemonic narratives of the past, present and future, and redefining them with alternative representations (2013: 307). An example can be found a short walk from Rich Mix in Bethnal Green, where new editions of OOMK usually come to life with public launches. In east London, various street art works manifest the need to collapse the dominant representations of the hijab by offering alternative imagery. "This one is my all-time favourite," says fashion designer Hannah, pointing towards the famous image of a niqab-clad woman holding hands with, what appears to be, a white man. The symbolic image was sprayed onto a wall in Brick Lane by British male artist Stik, a renowned name in the street art scene. "It shows how open and multicultural London is, and how Muslim girls don't just hang out with other Muslim girls, if you know what I mean," comments Hannah whom we met in the chapter on fashion.

In close proximity to Hannah's favourite mural, more hijabi-inspired art works are on display above the streets of east London. Many of them are signed by BR1, an Italian male artist whose art focuses exclusively on depicting Muslim women in different everyday situations and in diverse social roles, such as playing golf, listening to music, drinking Pepsi (see Image 17), gossiping, doing make up or smoking. Graduating on the topic of veiling and actively studying the veil for several years, the artist claims to be careful about rendering different types of headgear, from the Afghan burqa to the Iranian chador, and multiple identities of Muslim women. Tired of the continuous homogenisation of Muslim women, BR1 tries to promote an alternative representation of veiled women in the public space. "They live with us, they are in public spaces with us, they are Italian, French and Australian," the artist tells me when I ask him about the subjects of his work. He further explains that he feels the need for veiled women to be

represented in ways that counteract negative stereotyping promoted in the Western media and in politics.

However, his work has been largely criticised by those who feel a white man representing Muslim women using Western methods of street art bolsters the Orientalist paradigm rather than deconstruct it. BR1 dismisses criticism by questioning why the Western graffiti toolbox is incompatible with women who have been living and breathing this culture for several generations. He moreover rejects the claim he is attempting to speak on behalf of anyone, and says he merely depicts women who inspire him. “In general, a woman is the best source of inspiration for artists, why wouldn’t Muslim women be the same?”, he asks. He is sure that artistic depictions of white blonde women would not evoke such vocal controversies.



Image 17: BR1's artwork in Hoxton Street, Shoreditch

Rumena, who we met earlier in this chapter, has lived close by her entire life. She says that she is fond of the murals and explains this further: “Growing up, I never

saw anyone who looked like us, like myself, my family members, my friends on any graffiti in Shoreditch. These graffiti pieces give a sense that we are here, that we are part of this city.”

Art, accessible and ready for public consumption, once again highlights the idea of veiled transcripts. The resisting messages, be they in the form of graffiti art, poems or art zines, display private messages of resistance in a public setting. They enter and reclaim public transcripts, foster collective movement and solidarity, and ensure that counter-hegemonic readings of the hijab are present and recognised in public transcripts.

7.5 From resistance to refusal

As observed throughout the chapter, the young generation of British Muslim women fight hard and persistently for a different vision of the hijab in their communities and society. However, not all hijabis who think, act and react differently from the predetermined norms are necessarily staging acts of resistance. Whilst veiled discourses are definitely apparent and carry significance for altering the perceptions of veiling practices, hijabis simultaneously operate openly within the realm of public transcripts, with their existence not being imbued with subversive sentiments. Rather than resisting the dominant discourses they simply refuse (parts of) them.

Although genealogically linked, the concept of refusal cannot be seen as a mere extension of resistance. Rather than creating parallel discourses, as it is the case with resistance, refusal generatively chooses preferences within the existing system. It is about actively selecting one option over another, or strategically

deciding to refuse one or all of them. It is not a coincidence that anthropological conceptions of refusal became prominent with Mauss' seminal work *The Gift* (1967), in which he addresses refusal as a dynamic force in creating and regulating social complexities. Indeed, refusal is not simply about rejecting an authority altogether and insisting on a new systematic order but it rather implies “a dialogue with exchange and equality” (McGranahan, 2016: 319) that redirects levels of engagement. Refusal thus subsumes the notion of two equals rather than the idea of having a classic dominant-oppressed binary model of power. Individuals or groups refuse certain prescribed roles, identities and activities “in ways that are not about domination or class struggle but instead about staking claims to the sociality that underlies all relationships, including political ones” (McGranahan, 2016: 320; see also Scott, 1985; Sivaramakrishnan, 2005).

An illustrative example of such refusing practices can be found on a small community pitch in south London on a cold late winter morning. Amongst children dressed in T-shirts which proudly display the names of their favourite footballers, stands Jenny, their coach. She wears a fashionable track suit, a hoodie from the football club where she coaches professionally and a black headscarf. Jenny is a full-time football coach who spends her free time volunteering with various sports community projects in London and the Midlands. Although she has strong opinions and frequently vocalises them publicly, Jenny would not describe herself to be of a rebellious type, nor does she perceive her career choices as acts of resistance. Rather than resisting the system, she has been making conscious and strategic decisions about the ways she wants to live her life, and has fought hard to achieve it her way.

“It is not a norm for a woman like me to be a football coach. People from my community would expect me to be a doctor or a lawyer,” comments Jenny. She tells a story about how she began coaching men whilst studying for her master’s

degree in the North East of England. She remembers the looks on the faces of bulky “Geordie men” when a woman in a headscarf walked onto the pitch and introduced herself as their coach. They weren't prepared for a woman, let alone a Muslim woman, recalls Jenny. However, over the course of the year, the players accepted her as one of their own, and respected and followed her coaching. Jenny thinks that is about the magic of the pitch. Once you get onto it, it is about your performance, about your skills, about football. Headscarves become irrelevant.

For the love of football and faith, Jenny has refused many identities, alliances, relationships and expectations imposed on her by her family, community or society. She refused to become a doctor or a lawyer. She refused the stereotype of white and male football coaches. Jenny did not resort to resistance, but instead refused to walk her predetermined path. Her potent decision resulted in creating new possibilities that had been missed and unexplored before. As observed by Audra Simpson (2014: 107), the point of refusal can reveal something new, “a stance, a principle, a historical narrative, and an enjoyment in the reveal.” For Jenny, this enjoyment came as a possibility of establishing herself as a professional football coach.

Reflecting on the opening vignette, Wahida, a poster girl for hijabi resistance, often employs similar tactics when she speaks about her engagement with government campaigning or discussions with Prince William. Rather than resisting their authority and their hierarchical order altogether, she – in her own words – engages in a dialogue. Therefore, some of her actions cannot be seen as resisting in the context of the refutation of the dominant groups as a differential force. Rather, she positions herself as a partner who discusses and implements potential changes within the system itself, thus refusing public transcripts as much as legitimising them at the same time.

It is not fortuity that the concept of refusal plays a central role in Sherry Ortner's critique of resistance. Ortner (1995) expresses her discomfort with anthropological romanticisation of resistance by proclaiming many resistance studies as ethnographically thin. She observes how many of anthropological studies sanitise politics by insulating the act of resistance from wider contexts and subsequently overlooking various systemic and individual conflicts and contradictions that are an inevitable part of them. By focusing on the oppositional relationships of those in power and those who resist, such approaches contribute towards creating a "monolithic, romantic notion of subaltern agency" (Grandin, 2003: 243) that fails to recognise the plurality of subjectivities within its realm. Ortner refuses the almost reflexive equation of subalterity with resisting sentiments, and realistically assesses that for most of the people resistance will not constitute a part of their daily routines, at least not a significant one.

Indeed, this idea has been reinforced throughout this chapter. In addition to Jenny's example of refusal, I have explored two public demonstrations with the niqab at the centre of their campaigns. One of the groups campaigned against the French ban by promoting Sharia law, whilst the other protest on a Birmingham campus took an almost oppositional approach by promoting diversity and inclusion for everyone. These tensions highlight the complexity of relationships and psychological ambivalence that exist within – what tends to be seen as – subordinate groups. As summarised by Ortner (1995: 190):

"These ambivalences and ambiguities [...] emerge from the intricate webs of articulations and disarticulations that always exist between dominant and dominated. For the politics of external domination and the politics within a subordinated group may link up with, as well as repel, one another; the cultures of dominant groups and of subalterns may speak to, even while speaking against, one another."

Therefore, prioritising, selecting and refusing certain options should not be perceived as simply rejecting the legitimacy of public transcripts, but rather suggests that these conscious decisions represent individual or collective ambitions to modify those transcripts in one's own best interest.

7.6 Conclusion

In light of the socio-political climate of Islamophobia and racism that was painfully apparent during my fieldwork, and is presently equally ubiquitous, the idea of resistance has been brought up continuously among the women in the centre of this thesis. Countless discussions have revolved around resisting the burqa ban, everyday Islamophobia pertaining to the hijabis, the excluding anti-radicalisation policies which target visibly Muslim women and an increasingly right-leaning mainstream politics, both in the UK and globally. Many of the respondents could not hide their desperation about the status quo and urgently wanted to see change.

In response, women deploy different tactics to tackle their disagreement with the current political and social system. Some of them take it to the streets and shout their messages loudly and clearly, while others resort to intimate methods and resist quietly on their own. However, the need to organise and resist, which is shared almost across the board in one way or another, can even be perceived as a social glue that brings together various women from different walks of life, and across borders, both geographical and invisible. By developing and deploying shared vocabularies, young Muslim women from different parts of the UK and the world come together in what appears to be an urgent quest to change the

existing hierarchical orders in their communities and societies. Whether it is the symbol of the white niqab, Shamsia Hassani's signature turquoise burqas, the hijab-keffiyeh or Instagram memes, to mention just some examples from this chapter, the shared language of resistance builds upon the mutually accepted visual and symbolic lexis that is then manifested in different context-specific ways.

It is precisely the symbolic, veiled resistance that can be observed more frequently and with greater curiosity when it comes to resisting practices of young British hijabis. Building upon Scott's concept of everyday or token resistance, the discussed resisting interventions operate in the field of everyday conventionalities, such as art, humour, fashion and lifestyles. However, unlike Scott's peasant-led construction and promotion of 'hidden transcripts' that clandestinely reject the official 'public transcripts', I have dedicated a large part of this chapter to delving into a different heuristics of everyday resistance. Rather than being individual, unorganised and hidden, the 'veiled transcripts' of British veiled women operate slightly differently. Whilst remaining grounded in the realm of the everyday, veiled resistance aims to penetrate into public transcripts and promote resisting messages from within. As it remains veiled into the seemingly apolitical cloak – by channelling itself through the medium of humour or art, for example – it is only rarely recognised for its resisting objectives by those in power.

Despite the shared need to resist, not all acts of living and thinking differently can be deemed as consciously subversive and resisting. Sherry Ortner (1995) reminded us not to be tricked and trapped by the attractive poetics and politics of resistance, as for the majority of people, subaltern or not, resistance will never represent a significant part of their lives. It is with this in mind that we need to acknowledge the importance of refusal – both as an individual choice of subjects

to address their everyday tensions with the dominant groups and their systems, as well as an ethnographic practice of taking into account thick descriptions and wider contexts that frame individual's choices and actions.

Following Ortner's insistence on removing the veil of romanticism, I have demonstrated how not all acts of refusal necessarily deny an authority and carry ambitions to dilute it. Some of the seemingly resisting discourses not only cooperate with dominant groups but moreover legitimise their power. For example, having an outspoken underground artist captured joking in a photo with Prince William, the ultimate representative of the establishment, suggests the message that those in power can accept and accommodate everyone, even representatives of youth activism.

This brings us back to discussions on the close interdependence of power and resistance that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The two concepts can never exist in isolation but are interdependent and consequently entangled. Power and resistance cannot, therefore, be seen as two binary poles, but have to be observed as an interaction of dynamic power relations (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013: 26). As demonstrated in the examples of women presented in this chapter, power breeds resistance, but in turn this resistance brings power to the women, even if only on a small scale.

Chapter VIII: Moving beyond a single image

As I edit the final pages of this thesis, I am observing dramatic events unfolding in my close proximity. Days after the Westminster attack, discussions on terrorism and extremism are high on the agenda of the international media, politicians and the general public. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the veiled Muslim women have again been thrust into the limelight.

Shortly after the attack, a photo of a hijab-clad woman was circulated widely online (see Image 18). She is pictured looking at her phone on Westminster Bridge whilst passing a group of people helping an injured victim of the attack. Turned into innumerable memes, the image has been shared by thousands of social media users who pointed out the woman's supposed ignorance, and turned it into a symbolic portrayal of Muslim's lack of concern for the effects of terrorism. For example, one of the memes compares the photo to a picture of the MP Tobias Ellwood kneeling next to one of the victims performing CPR, with the caption 'the main difference between us and them'.

Following the circulation of the photo, the woman from the picture has approached the organisation Tell Mama to issue an official statement, in which she said that the photo captures her in the moment of distress following the confusion of the attack. Her statement reads:

"My thoughts at that moment were ones of sadness, fear, and concern. What the image does not show is that I had talked to other witnesses to try and find out what was happening, to see if I could be of any help. [...] I then decided to call my family to say that I was fine."

She also reported severe online abuse “by those who could not look beyond [her] attire” and drew “conclusions based on hate and xenophobia.” (Tell Mama, 2017).



Image 18: The hijab-clad woman on Westminster Bridge (photo: Jamie Lorrigan in Hung and Pegg, 2017)

The image of a Muslim woman on the Westminster Bridge is just one of numerous examples of how the veil is interpreted, or misinterpreted, in British society. Although women have been covering their heads and faces for millennia in a variety of ways, and in different religious, geographical and historical contexts, the veil has become the subject of wider and more frequent public and scholarly discussion in recent decades, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the consequent war on terror and rise of right-wing politics. Entangled in ferocious semiotic wars, the veil has become a powerful political, religious and cultural symbol, which is deployed, exploited and manipulated for omnifarious political goals – by Western powers and Islamist regimes alike. Amidst these global tensions, Muslim women manoeuvre their own paths of conceptualising the hijab and their relationship with it.

This thesis has focused on such creative yet challenging processes of negotiating meanings, practices and identities. Pursuing multi-sited ethnographic research among a diverse group of British Muslim women, I have aimed to contextualise the experiences of wearing the hijab, or not wearing it, in the particular temporal and spatial context of contemporary Britain. More specifically, I have been interested in exploring the personal dimension of veiling in the United Kingdom and locating the Islamic veil within the social milieu of contemporary Britain.

Combining women's voices captured in ethnographic interviews with media and social media accounts, I tried to move away from conventional media and political discourses which commonly frame the hijab into a singular, gendered and fixed monolithic definitional category, and to explore the diversity and importance of ethnic, cultural and subcultural, social, historical and, above all, individual differences. Building upon these differences, I have been particularly interested in observing nuanced and often contradictory meanings of the hijab.

Drawing on the semiotic approaches to symbols (e.g Parsons, 1973; Peirce, 1931), I argue that the causal link between the hijab and its meaning is unavoidably arbitrary. It is hence paramount to acknowledge the very subjective nature of the hijab that leaves its definitional frame open for social, individual and cultural interpretations. Throughout this thesis, I have shown how such subjective meanings are not only shaped by particular normative and cultural systems but are the result of women's individual and intimate negotiations. These, too, are unfixed and floating, and are thus subjected to dynamic metamorphoses throughout the life of each woman.

These fluid meanings, I argue, are situated on a vast and diversified semiotic spectrum. The hijab can manifest sentiments of piety, political beliefs, anti-racism, collective identities, revolt, tradition, new subcultures, gender roles, stylistic

preferences and otherness, to mention just a few. In this concluding chapter, I will cluster such varied meanings of the hijab into three main thematic categories, namely faith, fashion and feminism. I will summarise and reflect on how this dissertation has addressed all three of them and highlight some of the most interesting findings. I will also expand on the politicisation of the veil in Britain and offer some final remarks on the entanglement of the hijab into the perpetual cycles of power and resistance. Lastly, I will summarise the contribution of this thesis to the anthropological knowledge and identify some areas for future academic consideration.

8.1 Faith

This thesis has focused on Islamic practices of veiling. Although I have briefly mentioned and reflected on examples of non-Muslim women donning the veil (see Chapter IV), the real protagonists of this research are Muslim women. Islam, and the way it is perceived by hijabis and wider society, thus plays a particularly important role. What has become crystallised through various ethnographic accounts in this research, is the existence of frequent disconnects between etic and emic perceptions of Islam and consequently the hijab; between hegemonic media and political discourses on one side and personal experiences of faith and religion on the other.

It was therefore essential to critically reflect on historiographies of the veil and its place in the recent global and local political spheres in order to identify the origins of discriminatory conceptualisations of the hijab in Britain. It has become evident that the concept of the oppressive hijab stems from warped colonial perceptions of Muslim women. Burdened with colonial legacies, narratives on

Muslim women in Britain and other Western countries are further informed by emerging stories about forced veiling and various gender-based atrocities in certain Muslim countries. Rather than discussing the coerced veil in the wider context of female oppression and radical Islamist politics, they instead introduce it as the main problem of Muslim women in general. In these times of political crises, entailing various military interventions in the Middle East, the subsequent refugee crisis and the threat of international terrorism, demonising the hijab is a convenient propaganda strategy (Ghosh, 2010). This type of narrative suggests that veiled women need saving (Abu Lughod, 2002; Abu Lughod, 2013), with such presumptions legitimising everyday, state and military discrimination against the Muslim population and veiled women in particular (see Chapter II).

Beyond the frequent condemnations of Islam as the religion of terror and the Quran as the book of oppression, female accounts suggest alternative outlooks. All veiled Muslim women interviewed for the purpose of this research don various types of headgear voluntary and for spiritual purposes. Surprisingly, especially in the context of media portrayals of the veil, many women are in fact the first members of their families to embrace the hijab. This was particularly evident in the case of the face veil, with the majority of my niqab-wearing respondents not having a close family member or even a friend wearing it. Their autonomous decision to veil their heads and faces is evidently not imposed on them by the institutionalised religion but is instead a reflection of adherents' connection with their god, and a manifestation of their faith (see Chapter III).

This notion is epitomised illustratively in the metaphor of a journey which has been articulated by a number of respondents. The women presented in this work have reflected on the process of exploring their spirituality, which differs in length and intensity. The hijab, for many, is a reflection of these explorations. For some, the journey of taking on the hijab or niqab, has taken years of studying the

Quran, whilst for others it has come more organically and without much deliberation. Moreover, what respondents have pointed out is that their practices of veiling do not necessarily measure their progress on the spiritual journey; some women might wear the niqab but are not proficient in reading the Quran, for example, whilst some other women might practise Islam intensely but veil only occasionally, or not veil at all. Again, these choices and considerations are a reflection of each woman's religious journey. Hence, the degrees of veiling and choices behind them do not only vary from woman to woman but are equally dynamic within each individual. Veiling can indeed be an enunciation of her growing or declining relationship with a god, and with spirituality more generally.

The diversity of practising Islam, and consequently observing the hijab, suggests how different women explore religion and interpret Islamic texts, particularly the Quran. As demonstrated, women are engaging in the process of *ijtihad*, thus interpreting the Quranic verses for themselves (Chapter III; Bullock, 2003: 156). This refutes the claims of some (Islamic) feminists, who believe that the Quran restricts women's liberation. Due to its poetic style, the Islamic holy book is prone to different interpretations, with its guidance on the hijab no exception. The women in this research have shown that the Quranic guidelines on observing the hijab can be not only read differently but also, to a certain degree, appropriated, negotiated and compromised by the adherents.

Spiritual journeys, with the hijab or without it, are highly individualised and person-specific. However, this is not to undermine the importance of Islam as an institution and a collective identity. Pnina Werbner (2012) has reminded us about the role of the hijab in expressing the wearer's participation in a global Islamic movement, and her thesis has indeed been echoed by a number of 'sisters' featured in this study. Just as with any other sartorial choices, the veil, too, can be

deployed for expressing belonging to a certain cultural, political or social group. For instance, wearing the hijab can serve to explore and articulate a woman's ethnic roots. Equally, it can express solidarity with Muslim women who reside in the countries that are facing warfare, such as Palestine, Iraq and Syria, and those who are fearing prosecution for wearing the veil, such as niqabis in France. As also evoked at several points in this thesis, the veil can emphasise the notion of sisterhood and mutual care for each other. Some respondents have spoken about turning to Islam following an emotional upheaval, be it domestic violence or family alienation (see Chapter III & VI).

The discussions surrounding the hijab should not underestimate the role of faith and religion, for the journey closer to god is ultimately what motivates the majority of women to take on the veil. In that sense, the practice of veiling is highly individualised and reflects the adherent's spiritual growth and her perceptions of faith. At the same time, it is important to observe the role of the hijab in a global Islamic movement which is for many wearers an important part of expressing a collective identity of belonging to Islam and Islamic culture.

8.2 Fashion

The notion of diversity and individuality follows us to discussions on the hijab and fashion. As argued in the previous section, explorations of religion are highly individualised processes which are manifested in different types and styles of veiling. Whilst some Muslim women might opt for a face veil, some others settle for the hijab, observe the hijab by wearing loose clothes or do not express faith by their choice of dress at all. Whatever their choice may be, women make conscious sartorial decisions on how to express, or not express, their religious sentiments

through the selection of clothes and potentially headgear. Each of these expressions is idiosyncratic and no woman styles her faith in the exact same manner.

This thesis has demonstrated that styling faith is indeed a highly contentious subject for many hijabis. Consequently, many find styling and Islam a paradox, and state that the very purpose of the hijab is to move away from beautifying female bodies. At the same time, some respondents do not mind styling their outfits but are cautious about using the term fashion, for the fashion industry has been consistently failing women who wanted their style to comply with Islamic guidelines. The lack of suitable clothes, the continuous sexualisation of women, the unethical production of clothes and the absence of hijabi or even Muslim models have all contributed towards a problematic relationship between the hijab and fashion (see Chapter IV).

However, most of the respondents embrace fashion to a certain degree in their everyday lives and seek vestimentary solutions that are both Islamically acceptable and fashionable. They do not perceive fashion and faith as mutually exclusive, but locate their styles at the intersection of the two. As I have also shown with the examples of Muslim fashion designers, some Muslim women create modest fashion themselves. This type of fashion not only attracts Muslim consumers but is, as my respondents suggested, equally popular with non-Muslim women. Most British hijabis who feature in this research, however, do not necessarily choose Islamic brands but instead pick and choose clothes from high street fashion brands or, in the case of those with greater financial means, haute couture designers who do not create clothes aimed specifically at Muslim consumers. As a result, the growing trend of Muslim purchasing power has influenced a number of high profile mainstream retailers to incorporate the hijab into their lines.

I have thus argued that Islamic dress, and the hijab in particular, is not about specific items, but is about the context in which these items are deployed. Any mainstream clothing item can be styled as part of the hijab by deploying the technique of layering, and any Muslim attire, too, can be donned by a non-Muslim consumer – either by those seeking modesty or public personalities looking for publicity. In that sense, the hijab and its observers have to be contextualised within wider nets of global consumerism. By buying clothes online, watching the hijab beauty tutorials on YouTube, or buying high street and high fashion brands, British hijabis are unavoidably embedded into capitalist circuits of exchange (see Chapter IV). Drawing on that, I propose that modern British hijabis' stylistic presentation does not replicate their families' dressing practices, nor does it follow specific ethnic or national sartorial codes. Throughout the research, it has become clear that women pick and choose elements from different cultural spheres and assemble them into their own stylistic expressions.

I further argue that clothing is necessarily an extension of the Self. Physically positioned between the self and the environment, clothes hold a high degree of linkage to the body, person and personality. Thus, the eclectic fashion of British hijabis reflects their necessarily hybrid identities (Suterwalla, 2013: 167), which merge influences from transnational popular culture, the cultures of their parents and the trends that their peers follow and consume – to mention just a few factors. This is equally true for hijab fashionistas or niqabis who favour all black and simple attire.

8.3 Feminism

The idea of ever-transforming and hybrid identities extends into the argument about Islamic feminism. The intersection between feminism and Islam has been a particularly contentious topic in Britain during my fieldwork, especially in light of the debates regarding the interdictions of Islamic veils. As has become clear with a media analysis, Islam and gender equality are often introduced as an impossible contradiction (Chapter II). However, my ethnographic work suggests that British hijabis, particularly the younger generation of women, feel a strong need to promote their rights in public. These women want to dismantle patriarchy in British society and Islam, and they want to wear a headscarf while they do it.

Returning to my earlier argument about the fluid and unfixed symbolic meanings of the hijab, I claim that the veil should not be seen as a rigid structure that is imposed on an individual. British hijabi feminists recognise and build upon the semiotic potentials of the veil to subvert dominant meanings, thus welcoming it as a conspicuous insignia for channelling voices of the subaltern (see Spivak, 2010). By resisting male hegemony, narrowly-defined gender identities or capitalist modes of objectifying female bodies, the veil represents a new version of feminism that is embodying emancipation without conforming to Western gender normativity or refuting Islamic values.

This argument moves away from some of the established theories on Islamic feminism for example Fatema Mernissi's argument from her canonic text *Beyond the Veil* (1975). Unlike Mernissi, who links gender segregation – and the veil as a physical and symbolic manifestation of it – to male elites, I argue that the hijab should not necessarily be seen as an oppressive patriarchal institution. Just like

the argument about fashion, which I developed earlier in this chapter, the veil is exposed to perpetual temporal and spatial transformations, which continuously change its meanings.

In contemporary Britain, the hijab can therefore be seen as a feminist symbol. As demonstrated in this thesis, women reclaim the hijab to fabricate and channel their own conceptualisations of what feminism means for them. For some, it is about resisting capitalism's beauty games, which objectify female bodies and impose unrealistic demands upon them. For some other women it can be about having ownership of their bodies and exposing them only to selected people. For others, the hijab represents an opposition to non-Muslim and male politicians and self-proclaimed Islamic leaders who have a symbolic monopoly on regulating their dress and bodies.

In that sense, many women recognise the patriarchal oppression entangled not only in the fabric of wider societies, but also in some Islamic practices and teachings. However, all hijabi respondents agreed that Islam itself is not oppressive or discriminatory towards women; in fact, many of them emphasised the privileged and sacred position that a woman holds within Islam. This notion once again brings forth the openness of the Quranic readings, and the significance of women's own interpretations. The latter appear to be more influential in informing women's sartorial choices and their meaning, as do the teachings in the hadith and some later Islamic texts.

Against this backdrop, I echo Judith Butler's insistence on deconstructing the damaging notion of a universal concept of womanhood, which promotes a culture of exclusion within a supposedly inclusive and anti-discriminatory feminist movement (1990: 3). Recognising and celebrating idiosyncratic differences can open new feminist possibilities. As illustrated by many of the

women in this thesis, hijabs and niqabs can be part of them (Chapter V).

8.4 Politicising the veil

I have argued that British hijabis inevitably wear multiple veils. Apart from a physical or material veil, namely a headscarf or a face veil, which women choose to don consciously, society also dresses them into an invisible veil – a thick veil of prejudice, mytho-historical narratives and denied privileges. This invisible veil introduces them as unwanted British Others. I have turned to Du Bois's interpretations of the invisible veil (1903) which theorise the persistent colour line between the black and white populations in pre-civil rights movement America. Whilst Du Bois's account of invisible veils focuses on a gradual realisation of one's difference and the resulting lack of privilege in society, I claim that for the majority of hijab-wearers such realisation is almost instantaneous. Taking on a visible veil unavoidably alters how she will be perceived by society and modifies the ways in which she will also perceive herself. I use the metaphor of a reflection in the mirror to illustrate the crucial moment in which a woman recognises and internalises her new identity. Although I have acknowledged intrinsic and major differences between the discussions on race and the hijab, deploying the theory of invisible veils has proven to be a useful analytical tool for dismantling centuries-long demonisation of Muslims as part of various political and military agendas (Chapter VI).

As expressed by my respondents, the processes of othering are experienced at an institutional and personal level. For example, all veiled women featured in this research recalled Islamophobic abuse at the hands of strangers, either in the form of verbal attacks or physical violence. Moreover, there have been mentions of

institutional discrimination, which was especially apparent whilst at work as well as at state level. Stop and search interventions at international airports and the government's soft counter-terrorist strategies, such as Prevent, are just some of the examples of how hijab-clad women continue to be rendered suspicious, dangerous and negative. Drawing on Du Bois, I claim that such discriminatory practices are a direct result of invisible veils, stitched by centuries of politics-fuelled anti-Muslim sentiments (Chapter II & VI).

This disconnect between two parts of one society experienced by women creates a poignant self-realisation about their own difference. The women in this thesis have addressed such realisations differently. For example, some women have attempted to lift the invisible veil by removing their physical veils in the hope of protecting themselves and their families (Chapter IV). Some others have admitted they work hard to appear happy, and bubbly in the public in order to transform the prevailing and predetermined opinions of the majority British population (Preface & Chapter III). Furthermore, some other women have attempted to 'britainise' their hijabs to pledge their allegiance to Britain and selected British values (Chapter VI). The examples of patriotic hijabs featuring the Union Jack or poppies are illustrative of such approaches towards legitimising one's position within British society and seeking acceptance.

Alternatively to these strategies of addressing the invisible veils of otherness, many hijabis whom we have met in this thesis, have decided to challenge the status quo and resist excluding practices, attitudes and policies (Chapter VII). As observed, women develop and promote different strategies to challenge and change the current political and social systems. Some of them take it to the streets, whilst others resort to everyday forms of resistance. I have paid particular attention to the latter, for such subtler forms of resistance can be observed more frequently when it comes to the resisting practices of young British hijabis. Scott's

notion of everyday resistance (1985) discusses the resisting interventions in the realm of everyday conventionalities, such as art, humour, fashion and lifestyle. However, ethnographic accounts of British hijabi resistance identify some crucial disparities with Scott's peasant-led 'hidden transcripts' which operate in secrecy and reject the official 'public transcripts'. Rather than being individual, unorganised and hidden, the 'veiled transcripts' of British hijabis penetrate into public transcripts and promote resisting messages from within. By being veiled into seemingly apolitical discourses, they are only rarely recognised for their resisting objectives by the groups in power.

Discussions on oppression and resistance, on invisible veils and veiled resistance recapitulate illustratively the omnipresent power struggles that are unavoidably experienced by British hijabis. Their lived experiences reflect the continuous tension created by the existing centres of power – such as the government, religious institutions and the mainstream media – on the one hand and creative, subversive and persistent quests to dilute those hegemonic forces of power on the other. As seen through the discussions on faith, fashion and feminism, power and resistance not only engage in semiotic wars on the hijab but also feed each other. In other words, where there is power, there is resistance, and where there is resistance there is power (Abu-Lughod, 1990:42; Foucault, 1978: 95). As a result, the hijab is caught in a state of perpetual contestation, which keeps its meanings and practices dynamic and fluid.

8.5 Contribution to anthropological knowledge

With a unique research scope, which focuses on a diverse range of UK-based Muslim women from different class, age, geographical, ethnic and educational

backgrounds, this thesis offers an illuminating anthropological insight into Islamic veiling practices in contemporary Britain. Capitalising on the broad and diverse selection of respondents, this thesis renders intelligible the plethora of Muslim women's approaches to veiling, alongside their interpretations of the hijab in light of faith, politics and gender. These various and varied ethnographic accounts of women's subjective conceptualisations of the hijab have assisted me in critically evaluating the existing anthropological body of work on the hijab and enriching it with new perspectives. These perspectives have resulted in the formation of novel theoretical arguments which were presented at the beginning of this concluding chapter. The theory of multiple veils, the reflections on the hijab's temporal existence in women's lives, the definition of Islamic dress that is based upon a context rather than upon specific clothing items, and the examples of semiotic subversions of the hijab based on resistance, refusal and mimicry are just some of the fresh contributions to the anthropology of veiling, religious dress, feminism and Islam.

Furthermore, this research has approached the topic of Islamic veiling from an innovative methodological vantage point, as it has inter-weaved women's subjective accounts elicited in ethnographic interviews and participant observation with cyber-ethnographic data, critical discourse analysis of the media and political reports, and the analysis of artistic portrayals of the veil. Utilising a multi-method approach has been particularly informative in accentuating the apparent disconnect between emic and etic perspectives of the veil; between dominant media and political discourses which promote a determining perception of the hijab, and British Muslim women more generally. This has assisted me in unravelling the ways in which these different discourses interact and feed each other. Given that my fieldwork took place in turbulent political times, the thesis has contributed to the timely anthropological analyses of contemporary social challenges which relate to the hijab and Muslim minorities,

including – but not being limited to – various hijab and burqini interdictions and gender segregation.

The unique scope of the study, the innovative methodological approach and the resultant theoretical arguments all contribute to the existing anthropological knowledge of the hijab in contemporary British society and to anthropology of Islam, dress and gender more broadly.

8.6 Coda

During my ethnographic fieldwork, I have identified several topics which appeared to be under-represented in scholarship but call for further academic reflection. One element of my research I was unable to investigate to the level of detail I would have wished to was the role of the hijab in Muslim LGBT+ movements and various challenges encountered by self-identified women who are seeking to accommodate their faith and sexuality in a harmonious way. Moreover, I would have liked to further explore the artistic articulations of the hijab, something that eventually became part of my many small-scale side projects. From provocative street art murals across the world to graphics and collages, the veil has been explored in various artistic forms, which indeed call for in-depth anthropological reflections.

Moreover, I would like to see practical applications of this research, especially in the context of policy making. I am of the belief that a study of Muslim women's responses to veiling could establish a welcome dialogue between policies and the clients of government programmes (see Apthorpe, 1997: 43; Geilhufe, 1979: 577). This might be particularly insightful when discussing the existing and future

legal interdictions of the hijab in the United Kingdom or the implementation of various counter-terrorism schemes which target Muslim women specifically.

During the past four years of researching Islamic veiling practices, there was barely a month without any new hijab-related interdictions being passed and implemented across Europe and elsewhere. A never-ending emergence of new bans on face veils, burkinis and religious symbols in public, at workplace and in schools not only dominated daily news headlines but often provoked lazy and partial reporting which reinforced toxic narratives, similar to the one mentioned at the beginning of this concluding chapter. These affected my respondents. They were manifested in frequent Islamophobic abuse and discrimination at a personal, community, social and state level, and reflected the prevalence and degree of misunderstanding surrounding the hijab and women who observe it.

The original idea behind this thesis arose from such prevailing ignorance and its effects on British Muslim women. However, what eventually inspired the final version of the thesis was the vigorousness and creativity of British hijabis that exists beyond the various legal, political and social challenges. As shown throughout this thesis, women continue to create their own coping strategies, generate their own meanings and develop their own practices. Their intimate and social engagements with the hijab result in its varied physical forms and diversified semiotic meanings. It is thus important to go beyond a single image of the hijab and acknowledge a woman's freedom to choose not only her own form of a dress but also to shape its meanings – whatever they may be.

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