EVOLVING MEANINGS AND FUNCTIONS OF HIJAB FOR AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN

Taylor McInerney
“It’s O.K. to wear a hijab and be different and challenge these norms, these misconceptions of who we are...That can be really challenging, not ever knowing what someone’s hang-up is. And I’m at a point in my life where I just don’t care. Not interested.”
- Ibtihaj Muhammad, Team USA fencer

“I saw people wearing American flag scarves around their shoulders, and I thought it would be cool...It’s a shame that those aren’t considered ‘disrespectful’ but my hijab has been.”
- Saba Ahmed, Republican Muslim Coalition President
RECENT HISTORY OF THE VEIL

Early 20th Century → 1970s → 1990s
MAINSTREAM AMERICAN MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS

Islam as “personal practice and of ethical and spiritual sustenance” (Ahmed 2011)

Most women had already unveiled in the Middle East by the 1960s!
“NOW I THINK WOMEN WHO GO TO THE MOSQUE TO PRAY SHOULD BE COVERED…

…I don’t want to go to college with my head covered…I want to blend in as far as my clothes go. I want to look normal.”  
(Haddad & Lummis 1987)

Pressure to fit into American society?

“It is hard for us girls to dress Islamically because people will make fun of us” (Aswad & Bilge 1996).
BRINGING ISLAMISM TO AMERICA

- Persecution in secularist regimes in Middle East
- 1963 – Muslim Student’s Association
- 1981 – Islamic Society of North America

“Islam was seen as an ideology, a way of life, and a mission, and the organization was not considered simply as a way to serve the community but as a means to create the ideal community and serve Islam” (Ahmed 2011).
*Religious conviction*

- Women’s dress (including hijab) foundational to Islamist message

“…failure to dress in the Islamically required way, including hijab, would cancel out all good deeds and lead to hell” (Ahmed 2011).
MAINSTREAM MUSLIM ATTITUDES THROUGH 20TH CENTURY

• Gap between Muslim activists (Islamists) and the “larger Muslim population”
• Summer camps – daughters began insisting on hijab
• Mid-1990s – new generation of American Muslims “raised within the framework of Sunni Islam and the Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening, were reaching adulthood”

(Ahmed 2011)
THE 1990S, 9/11, AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Reports of hate crimes/bias increased by 1,600% immediately after 9/11

“Since the early 1990s, hijab and jilbab have become more and more commonplace” (Ali 2005).

• Multiculturalism?
• Increased political involvement?
• Re-evaluation of Muslim identity?
• Shift in teaching of Islam?
• Solidarity with Muslims in Iraq, Palestine, etc.?

“...here in America the tendency was toward a negative perception of all Muslims” (Ahmed 2011).

“...the 9/11 attacks also triggered a salient realization of civic responsibilities and demand for civil rights within the multi-ethnic Muslim American community” (McGinty 2014).
MAJOR FUNCTIONS OF HIJAB IN 21ST CENTURY

• Religious conviction

• *Autonomously creating a space for identity*

• *Resisting perceived oppression (American patriarchy)*

• *Adopt social trends/fashion*

• *Consciously challenge American stereotypes*
“CREATING THE SPACE FOR AUTONOMOUS SELVES” (WILLIAMS AND VASHI, 2007)

“Hijab carves out a cultural space for young Muslim women to live lives that their mothers could barely have imagined and still be publicly Muslim.”

“It wasn’t really taught to me. My mom doesn’t wear it, my grandma doesn’t wear it. No one wears it...just one day it hit me and I decided to wear it.”

“They always had that fear, while I feel like this is my place; I know this place more than any other, so I don’t have that kind of fear” (McGinty 2014).

“So I think there’s been a, you know, a rise in awareness, Islamic awareness, in my own generation compared to my parents’ generation.”
RECONCILING IDENTITIES?

American Muslim?
Muslim American?
Pakistani-American?
Pakistani Muslim?
Pakistani-American Muslim?
Muslim Pakistani-American?

(Aswad & Bilge 1996)
Attitudes of some South Asian Muslim American women (Karim 2009):

“I’m not really anything. I’m not this. I’m not that. I have a lot of American culture in me and then I have a little bit of Indian and a little bit of Arab too, but overall, I’m a Muslim. It is what defines me and my lifestyle more than anything else.”

“It’s not just about being Muslim. It’s also about being Indian because I have a coworker who’s Hindu and she felt the September 11 backlash.”

“We have to show who we are, and Dr. Umar says you have to create your own identity. That’s what we have: an identity problem. We don’t know if one foot is in the East and one foot is in America. We are not saying, put both feet in America, and we forget about our heritage. But there is a way to balance it. Neither do you accept everything nor do you reject everything. You have to take the middle way.”
“AMERICAN PATRIARCHY?”

“A lot of times, especially in our media and commercials, a lot of times a woman’s sexuality is used to sell things, or a woman is objectified.”

“…the pressure to dress provocatively as oppressive and a tool of the patriarchy”

“[wearing hijab] reflects conscious resistance to oppression” (Droogsma, 2007).

“Hijab is telling men that they don’t have the right to look at my body and to judge my beauty. It forces men to look beyond just the physical and to see who you are.”
SOCIAL TRENDS AND FASHION

• Pressure to be “cool” in MSA setting (Haddad, Smith, & Moore 2006)
• Identify with other American Muslim women

“It made me visibly Muslim, so that if I were to walk down the street or something, and I saw another woman with her hair covered, we already have a bond” (Droogsma 2007).

“For Leila, non-veiling entails feelings of exclusion from the Muslim community” (McGinty 2014).
“It is becoming very popular in various parts of the country to feature Islamic dress at specially designed fashion shows” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore 2006).
CHALLENGING STEREOTYPHES

“Some women say that by veiling they are making a statement against Western imperialism, which sees Muslim piety as a sign of terrorism, and against conservative Islam, which seeks to impose a traditionalist understanding of Islam that oppresses women” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006).

“Because Muslim identity embraces all ethnicities, Nasreen adopts this identity so as to resist the ways that others seek to put her in one ethnic box…” (Karim 2009).

“What most Muslim women do agree on, whatever they choose to wear, is that conservative dress does not represent constriction, repression, or any of the other terms by which Westerners have generally understood the Muslim woman’s ‘condition’” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006).

“While Western society delights in featuring images of oppressed Muslim women, converts are vocal in turning tables and insisting that it is the West that exploits women…” (Haddad, Smith & Moore 2006).
CURRENT IMPLICATIONS

“Muslim Woman Denied Job Over Head Scarf Wins in Supreme Court” (NY Times 2015)

“I was born in the United States, and I thought I was the same as everyone else.”

No. 14-86

In the
Supreme Court of the United States

EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION,
Petitioner,
v.
ABERCROMBIE & FITCH STORES, INC.,
Respondent.

ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI
TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE TENTH CIRCUIT

BRIEF OF AMICUS CURIAE THE COUNCIL
ON AMERICAN-ISLAMIC RELATIONS
IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER
Religion-based workplace complaints

Nationwide, complaints from workers over issues regarding religion filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have more than doubled since 1997.

![Graph showing the increase in complaints from 1997 to 2010.](source: Equal Employment Opportunity Commission)
American Catholic student wears hijab to experience challenges faced by Muslims.

World Hijab Day
Join us on #WorldHijabDay on February 1st

"I'm a Christian (Presbyterian PCUSA) in Seattle, WA participating to experience what it's like for my Muslim sisters to cover and to raise awareness for religious liberty and women's rights."
[Maggie Alma Lee Parker, USA]


