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The Hijab as Social Tool for Identity Mobilisation, Community Education and Inclusion.

Abstract:

This paper explores issues of religion and identity among tertiary-educated Muslim women, and the role of education in negotiating social inclusion. Data was derived from 25 qualitative interviews with second-generation Turkish-Australian women aged 18 to 26 years. Sixteen women were attending Australian universities at the time of their interviews, and the other nine women had completed tertiary degrees. The paper examines the adoption of the hijab in the 'presentation of self' in the Australian context. The participants communicated an overwhelming support for the hijab as a rewarding religious practice that came with specific social duties given Australia's status as a multicultural nation. The women likened the hijab to a 'flag for Islam', and so they advocated the view that Muslim women who wore the hijab literally embodied certain Islamic responsibilities, including the roles of spokesperson and educator on behalf of Islam. While they felt a sense of marginalisation from the Australian mainstream, these participants ultimately believed that the hijab provided them with an opportunity to bridge the communication gap between Muslims and non-Muslim Australians. To this end, the women's tertiary education shaped their understandings of the hijab in relation to Australia's democratic ideals and its multiculturalism. This paper argues that education represents an important avenue for promoting inter-faith understanding and in strengthening young Muslim-Australians' sense of inclusion within the multicultural nation.

Introduction

Erving Goffman's (1959) analysis of the 'presentation of self' draws upon dramaturgical theory, which argues that identity is a specific type of social performance that is enacted in everyday social exchanges. Social 'props' or cultural symbols, such as dress, are used facilitate the communication of our self-image to other people. Goffman's analysis points to a complicated cycle of interaction between an individual's unique sense of self, other people's understandings of who they think we are, and public discourses about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable ways of representing our identities. Whether we accept or reject these discourses, on both a conscious and unconscious level, social actors still need to balance, readjust, and reflexively reconstruct their identities as a consequence of their social interactions with other people. In this light, wearing the hijab (the Muslim headscarf and dress) might be seen as a contradictory site for the 'presentation of self' in the Australian context.

The hijab draws intense social scrutiny, especially in countries where Islam is not a majority religion. Some people see the hijab as a patriarchal tool used to suppress women's autonomy, and others see it as a vital and positive symbol of Muslim identity (for example, see Mernisi 1987; Read and Bartkowski 2000). A Muslim woman does not have to wear the hijab in order to hold an Islamic identity, and yet young Muslim women growing up in multicultural countries like Australia increasingly report that the hijab is an important tool in the communication of their Muslim community identity and their femininity (Deen 1995: 164-171; Bouma and Brace-Govan 2000: 168-170; Kopp 2002: 66-67; Rassol 2002: 33-46, 65-82).

The employment of the hijab in the presentation of self might be interpreted as a contradictory or 'socially deviant' practice within secular social contexts because it challenges the dominant narratives of identity in countries such as Australia and Turkey. In Turkey, the secularisation process outlawed all symbols of Islam from public spaces such as universities and within the public service. To this end, the hijab was centrally targeted (Breu and Marchese 2000: 25, 36; Hirschl 2004: 1849-1850). In Australia, the hijab can also be seen as a sign of 'deviance' because it challenges Australian norms about religious expression. Australia is often represented as a tolerant, secular society, but some researchers argue that Australians are open to spirituality only if this is relegated to the private sphere (Bouma 2000; Humphrey 2001). For example, Gary Boma writes:

You may follow any religion you want, just keep it to yourself. If you call attention to your religious identity by wearing special clothes – like Muslim women wearing hijabs or Jewish men wearing skull caps – then you may experience harassment (2000: 397).

More specifically, Bouma and Jan Brace-Govan (2000) argue that the hijab is seen as the antithesis of Australian cultural sensibilities, especially in regards to representations of femininity and the adoption of consumer culture. The authors write: 'The hijab presents a paradox offering certain freedoms to some Muslim women but at the same time being the subject of harassment and discrimination' (2000: 168). Australian multicultural policies encourage migrants to maintain their cultural and religious traditions, and yet, as Scott Poynting and Victoria Mason (2007) argue, Muslims are still subject to various forms of 'Islamophobia'. Islamophobia refers to the demonisation of Islam and 'the construction of the Muslim "Other" in Western societies' (2007: 62). This includes institutional and everyday racism and media vilification. Within such a climate of Islamophobia, wearing the hijab is a potent and controversial social practice for Muslim women.

This paper examines how the hijab is employed in the presentation of self by 25 young Turkish-Australian women. The paper focuses on the women's subjective understandings of the hijab and the social marginalisation that they have experienced. The women described the hijab as a 'flag for Islam', meaning that the hijab symbolised a social tool that aided the communication of their Muslim identity. The women's high level of education and their understanding of Australian multiculturalism shaped their belief that the hijab could also be used to educate non-Muslims and promote acceptance of their religion. This paper argues that education provides an important resource to strengthen young Muslim's sense of social inclusion in Australian society, and it is also vital in facilitating active dialogue between Muslims and wider society.

Methodology

This paper is based upon a larger study on the identities of second-generation Australian women. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 heterosexual Australian-Turkish women aged 18 to 26 years. Twenty-two of the women were Australian-born, and the other three participants migrated before the age of two. All 25 Turkish women were Australian citizens and they lived mostly in the Western and North-Western suburbs of Melbourne, typically around Broadmeadows. The overwhelming majority of them had received a secular education in public schools. Sixteen women were attending Australian universities at the time of their interviews, and the other nine women had completed tertiary degrees. All of 25 women identified themselves as Muslim. Fourteen women wore the hijab and they referred to themselves as 'closed Muslims'. Eleven women identified themselves as 'open Muslims' because they did not wear the hijab. The sample was largely derived through snowballing from members of Turkish and Islamic associations in three Melbourne universities and one Islamic school. Additionally, most of the participants were interviewed within weeks of the September 11 attacks, and so their discussions are shaped by the political climate of this time. Nevertheless, current ongoing moral panics about Muslims, especially through the media, still render the data topical.

The study's qualitative design means that I am limited in making generalisations from my data to a wider population. Given that the sample was largely derived from women who were actively affiliated with Muslim associations, through their friends' or their own membership, it is perhaps unsurprising that Islamic identification should feature so prominently in the findings. That is to say, not only were these 25 women Muslims, but they were, by their own admissions, 'religious Turks' for whom Islam played a central role in their lives. My study, then, only focuses on highly educated, self-identified 'religious Turks', and so my analysis is contextualised in this light. In the quotes below, the participants' veiling practices are identified in brackets after their pseudonyms [*Open*] or [*Closed*].

Religion and identity

The participants had grown up in Muslim households, but their families were mostly non-practising or 'not very religious' Muslims, and their parents had not explained the meaning behind their Islamic customs. In contrast, the participants reported that they were 'more religious' than their parents. For example, most of the women's mothers did not wear the hijab, and so for the majority of the closed

women, their decision to 'close' had shocked their families. There was a recurring thread of self-educated religiousness among all the participants. The women said that they went out of their way to learn more about their religion by attending Islamic seminars in Melbourne aimed at young people. The majority of the participants had also learnt enough Arabic to enable them to read the Qur'an.

Cennet [Open]: I try and practice my religion every day as much as I can, however my parents aren't very religious. I can honestly say I'm probably the most religious one. People sorta freak out about that... I started learning the Arabic language and I started reading the Qur'an. I got so into it at one stage where I learnt things I'd never known before.

For eight of the eleven open Muslim women, having the option of 'closing' in the future was crucial to them. All the women believed that their 'choice' to wear or not wear the hijab in Australia is only realised because they are Australians. The participants noted ironically that they would not be able to attend university with the option to wear the hijab had they had grown up in Turkey.

Ferah [Closed]: If you look at Afghanistan or Iraq, you have to cover up there; they force it upon you. Turkey's telling you not to do it. But here you do whatever you want. You can live your life however you want. We've got our prayer rooms here. You need something and they supply it for you, but overseas you have to go to a mosque somewhere.

The participants observed that the hijab has taken on a different meaning in Australia. The hijab is more than a symbol of religious commitment. It is also an expression of identity, a marker that signals in-group boundaries of a broader Islamic community. In the participants' understanding, the hijab also embodies the spirit of Australia's democratic values and its multiculturalism. When I asked Fatma, a closed Muslim, what she sees is unique about being Muslim in Australia she answered:

I think it's [having] that freedom and being able to choose your path. We were born as Muslims, but we were given the choice to follow this path. We could've just – I didn't have to cover my head. My parents never forced me to dress up the way I am, but they gave me that freedom. For them to give me that freedom I think that was sufficient. That was enough for me to think that is what's unique in Australia, to be able to go out and to let everybody know that you can do that. That's unique in itself I believe.

The headscarf as a 'flag' for Islam

The interviews all had a common theme of education, particularly in regards to the women's search for meaning and in their attempts to make social connections with other people. More specifically, education was critical to their negotiation of social inclusion within the multicultural nation. Most of the participants had decided to learn more about Islam in order to expand their understanding of their Muslim 'otherness'. For example, during her teens, Kumru, a closed participant, asked herself, 'Why were we created and who created us? And why am I so different from everyone else? Why do I feel so out of place in Australia?' Kumru found that her 'research' into Islam fulfilled these uncertainties. In the wake of September 11, however, much like the other Turkish participants in this study, Kumru once again began feeling *different*:

I thought I actually felt that I fitted in, but after September the 11th I sort of felt everything back again that I was feeling when I was growing up. I was saying to some of my students that I felt as if I really don't have my own country. I don't have a country because if something happens then I'm automatically blamed because I'm from this particular culture or this particular religion. There's all these stereotypes around me and you get sick and tired of it, you know?

The participants' keen interest in Islam is not just personal – it is borne out of a sense of communal accountability. They all believed that Islam has a history of being misunderstood. For example, they spoke about the stigma of having their religion linked to gender oppression and terrorism.

Rana [Closed]: Especially now a lot of what's going through my mind is [concern] because of what's happening now, a lot of people look at me and think, 'Ugh! She's a feral, barbaric girl that's got some bomb hidden in her handbag!' You don't understand the looks I get!

Especially when I'm in a group like with my sisters, it's like, 'Okay we're being invaded!' ...After the bombings it's gotten worse. Before it was nothing like that. Actually once we were at the shopping centre and we were at the bank and people behind us, there was this guy and this girl and [they] said, 'They've probably got a gun hidden under there'.

The participants were unhappy to observe that Islam has a 'bad image' in countries like Australia. They lamented the fact that people feared Islam and they believed that the media played a key role in perpetuating negative stereotypes of Muslims.

Destan [*Open*]: I think the media has a lot to do with [the misconceptions about Islam]. Muslims have always had a bad reputation. All of our faults are straight away – none of our achievements are portrayed, but all of our faults and anything that we do wrong as Muslims are hyped up straight away...

The participants believed that Australian society needs to promote educational campaigns about Islam and that the media should also inform people about the Islamic lifestyle in Australia. Equally, they emphasised that Muslim-Australians also needed to play a stronger role in combating misrepresentations of Islam, by interacting more with wider society. Amatullah [*Closed*] said, 'I think it's also a problem on the Muslims here because they remain isolated'.

The participants advocated that an open dialogue should be promoted between Muslim-Australian communities and wider Australian society. The closed women especially envisioned themselves as educators promoting the 'real Islam'. Wearing the headscarf for them became a 'flag for my religion', and they saw themselves literally embodying a specific duty to educate people about Islam and to challenge the negative stereotypes of Muslims.

Leyla [*Closed*]: I think it's like my flag. I stand out in the crowd and you think to yourself, 'There's a Muslim'. If people wanna know anything about it, they can come and speak to me. So really it's my identity. People can say, 'That's a Muslim', and that's what I want, I want them to recognise me as a Muslim.

Fatma [*Closed*]: [When people see her] The first thing is me walking down the street, and people go, 'Oh my god, she's a Muslim'. That's what I want people to think, that I'm a Muslim and I'm a person that follows Islam. Or I try to follow it as best as I can, [and] obey god. By that, I want people to say, 'Okay she's a person who loves peace, who loves goodness and kindness and who respects the person across them'. That's what you want to portray to other people. About human rights, and having those human rights and respecting the person across you, and you want them to respect you as well for who you are. If you can portray that to them, that you're a person of peace and not of terrorism [laughs and trails off].

The overwhelming majority of the open Muslim participants shared this understanding of the social symbolism of the hijab.

Solmaz [*Open*]: Hey - if you're wearing a scarf, it is your flag for the Muslim religion. You're obviously wearing it to say that you're Muslim. If someone approaches you for religion purposes, to ask you a question you're there to answer it. You're not living the Muslim religion for yourself. You're living it to preach.

These women welcomed the opportunity to explain their religion to non-Muslims. For example, soon after September 11, many of the women who were still attending university had initiated 'open days' where other students in their university were encouraged to enter their prayer rooms and engage in discussions about Islam. Sahiba, a closed Muslim, had asked people at her university how they felt when they encounter, 'covered girls like me'. Their response distressed her:

They said, 'We feel uncomfortable, or we feel as though you might get offended of the things we'd ask'. Personally I wouldn't want anyone to feel that way. We are humans and we're not going to bite their heads off if they come and ask us.

Kumru [Closed] nicely summarises the concerns shared by this sample of Turkish women:

The problem arises in the fact that we have all these misconceptions, all these questions in our mind and we don't have enough courage to ask. Turkish-Muslim people love when people ask them questions. You know, 'Why do you do this?' And [we] would love the chance to actually answer it. I know that you have heaps of people just look at you, and you know that they're trying to, [they] wanna ask you something, but don't have enough courage to.

Discussion

The snowball sampling and recruitment of the participants limits the generalisations that I can make from the data. This paper therefore serves as a very specific case study into the ways in which highly educated Turkish-Muslim women understand the social meanings of the hijab in Australia. The participants likened the hijab to a 'flag for Islam'. This comment reflects their belief that, beyond its symbolism of religious commitment, the hijab embodied a duty to educate on behalf of Islam. The hijab was also adopted as a symbol in the presentation of self: it proudly signified their belonging to an Australian-Islamic community. This flag is one that the women unfurl boldly in the Australian multicultural context. Multicultural policies in Australia protect the diversity of religious expression that they believed would otherwise be denied to them in Turkey. These policies enabled them to choose whether or not they want to 'close', attend university, and participate actively in the public sphere. Clearly, however, this process was limited. Australia's official multicultural policies celebrate difference, but the participants also believed that wearing the hijab sometimes casts their difference in a negative light in the eyes of some non-Muslim Australians who are 'uncomfortable', confused or confronted by their dress. Nevertheless, the participants ultimately believed that the hijab provided them with an opportunity to bridge the communication gap between Muslims and non-Muslim Australians.

This paper argues that education represents an important avenue for promoting mutual understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians and in strengthening young Muslim-Australians' sense of inclusion within the multicultural nation. The participants' active engagement with non-Muslims through open days in their university prayer rooms and in other inter-personal exchanges were useful for both the women and the people they met, by providing an opportunity to address misinformation about Islam. The women's discussion of the media also highlights that this is a poorly utilised medium for education and inter-faith communication. The women's use of education in their search for religious meaning, identity and belonging suggests the strong role that Australia's education system might play in combating divisive views of Islam and in stimulating and inter-faith dialogue.

The women's tertiary education is likely to have influenced the way in which they framed their choices about 'closing' in relation to democracy and Australian multiculturalism. Equally, their high level of education is also likely to have strengthened their willingness to welcome strangers approaching them about their religion, because they had the cultural capital to handle such discussions. These points do not detract from the women's agency. Instead, their proactive views exemplify the potential for the education system to empower young Muslims in the face of Islamophobia, and in transforming otherness into a cultural resource. These women's reflexive presentations of their 'Muslim self' highlight that, far from being the 'other' of Western ideals, young, educated Australian Muslims are able to fly the flag for Islam whilst aptly navigating democratic ideals and supporting multiculturalism at the everyday level.

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