The Benefits of Hijab
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We have heard countless stories reported in the Western media on the plight of Muslim women around the world, caused by "oppressive" Muslim men that are wrongfully yet deliberately correlated to their religion and societies. Some of these stories are true but many have been shown to be nothing but hoaxes created to emphasize and perpetuate certain stereotypes about Muslims. One example that comes to mind is the book *Honor Lost* written b*y* Norma Khouri on honor killings in Jordan, which was later proven to have mostly invented stories (Abdulhadi 111). These stereotypes formed by the Western media's representational entrepreneurs have created misconceptions, lack of understanding, and intolerance towards Muslims and Arabs. As a result, "The War on Terror" launched by the US and other Western countries against the Arab and Muslim world has been justified, and perceived to be the way to get rid of fundamentalist Muslims.

In Western countries, one of the most debated aspects of Islam is the Hijab; a head covering that some Muslim women wear in public. In Islamic teachings, it has been said that God has asked women to wear hijab in order to achieve modesty and to redirect the focus of both women and men from the materialistic world towards the more spiritual world of God. Sadly, the hijab has been used as a tool to vilify Muslim societies by linking it to the oppression of women and patriarchy**.** In the article "Hijab and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves," the authors explain how feminist movements**,** along with the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S, have fought for equal rights for both genders on the bases of "gender neutrality". Thus, they perceive anything that creates a difference between men and women to be an attempt to confiscate the right to gender equality (Vashi and Giru). The fact that Hijab creates a separate sphere for women juxtaposed with the continuous portrayal of Muslim women in the media as victims of oppression by male figures in their societies has led the West to view the hijab as a tool that Muslim men use to coerce women to submit to their desires and wills.

Undeniably, some Muslim women are forced to wear the hijab, as in Iran and Saudi Arabia, where the government has enforced hijab on women by law. But many Muslim women, even when having the choice of not wearing the hijab, opt to wear it. Laila Abu-Lughod in her article, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" wonders why the West was so surprised when Afghan women, even after the Taliban regime had been eliminated from their country, still went out on the streets with a scarf covering their hair and in some cases even their faces (Abu-Lughod). In April of 2011, the Government of France implemented a law that banned the wearing of the Niqqab, a form of hijab that includes the covering of the face except the eyes. This is when we saw Muslim women from all sites of the Muslim spectrum: those who didn't wear the hijab to those who were completely covered from head to toe, taking to the streets and protesting the Ban. This begs many questions: why would Muslim women want to wear hijab? Why would they continue wearing it even when they are not forced to do so? And how does Hijab positively affect the lives of Muslim women?

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Amina Wadud in her book, *Qur'an and Women*, interprets the Qur'an from a female- inclusive standpoint. She argues that God is very fair to women, and uses the Quran to prove her argument. She explains that God has made it clear that he would favor one human over the other based only on the level of Taqwa[1], each one possesses. She notes that many of the reforms implemented by Islam were created for the benefit of women and not men as a result of the existing androcentric norm, which had already provided for the male's needs and wants. Wadud points out that Islam in its core aims to provide its followers with equity rather than equality, a base for a more just form of living and human interaction (Wadud).

Seventh century Arabia was far from an ideal society. It existed as a patriarchy that objectified women and deemed them to be worthy of some respect based on their lineage and fortune. According to Leila Ahmed in her book *Women and Gender in Islam,* only upper-class women wore hijab in pre- Islamic Middle East. It was a means to differentiate between "respectable" women, and women who were considered publicly available, thus were not allowed to wear the hijab (Ahmed). During the life of prophet Mohamed (PBUH)[2] only his wives were required by God to wear the hijab. Because Muslims consider the deeds of Prophet Mohamed to be Sunnah[3], hijab along with the Jilbab (a long dress for men) is considered by many Muslims to be part of the Sunnah. The hijab, therefore, worn by all Muslim women –at that point-was one step further taken by Islam to erase the social hierarchy implemented on women by the social system of the Pre-Islamic era. The connection between the history of hijab provided by Leila Ahmed and the exegesis of the Quran by Amina Wadud allows us to see how equity was achieved through Hijab during that time period. Nearly 1440 years have passed since Islam instituted the wearing of the hijab, yet it is a practice that is still very much alive and is adopted by many Muslim women around the world. In this essay I will point out some of the reasons that I believe encourages Muslim women to put on the hijab.

Spirituality. Muslims rely on both the Quran and the Sunnah to guide their life. They abide by the teachings of the Quran and follow the footsteps of Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) in his actions and hadith[4]. Consequently, many Muslim women embrace the veiling act adopted by the wives of the prophet in submission to God's command, as a way for them to express their own surrender to God by pursuing a similar lifestyle to that of the prophet and his wives. In doing so, they feel closer to God and spiritually more satisfied. Some argue that the hijab in this day and age creates many difficulties for women, especially in the Western world. They wonder why a woman would sacrifice her

1 Taqwa is the Arabic word for Faith. (God-consciousness)

2 PBUH, stands for Peace Be Upon Him

3 Sunnah; In general, the word Sunnah means habit, practice, customary procedure, or action, norm and usage sanctioned by tradition. In specific, any time the word Sunnah is mentioned, it is to refer to Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.). Here it means his sayings, practices, living habits. Muslims are expected to follow the Sunnah.

4 The Hadith are reports on the Sunnah.

own comfort and convenience by wearing Hijab so that she shows submission to God. My answer is one word and that is "love." When one loves, one is bound to sacrifice almost anything in order to achieve a higher and superior spiritual connection with the loved one, be it a human or God. A friend of mine who wears hijab once told me that wearing the hijab not only provided her with inner peace and power but was also reflected in her health and mental stability. She found that once she began wearing hijab she felt emotionally healthier and emphasized her point by letting me know the depression that she used to suffer from have almost ceased to occur. But hijab has outer benefits in addition to inner benefits.

Unfettered by the shackles of fashion and beauty. It is unquestionable that women's bodies in the West are highly policed by Hollywood , which is continuously and subtly sending messages to women around the world that their essence (worth) lies in their physical appearance. To many Muslim women, the best way out of this fashion and beauty maze is through wearing the hijab, which diverts attention away from their outer physical appearance to their inner selves. Nousheen Yousuf-Sadiq in her article "Half and Half" explains her journey out of a size-obsessed world in which females are expected to be "calorie-counting, salad-bingeing carbophobes." She states that Hijab was the tool that gave her confidence and control over her own body:

> Without Hijab, society's standards of beauty dictated how I presented myself to the world and, by extension, how I thought of myself when I didn't measure up. When following the Islamic dress code, I had control over who did and didn't look at me, who did and didn't touch me. I had a greater sense of authority over how people viewed me because for the first time, people were not seeing my outer appearance-they were seeing me. (Yousuf-Sadiq 21)

It is important to note that wearing hijab doesn't mean that women will become unfashionable or lose their beauty. On the contrary, hijab is worn in many different fashionable ways. One only needs to type "hijab fashion" on Google to find many websites on how to wear hijab fashionably and Muslim fashion designers who specialize in creating fashionable outfits for Muslim women wearing Hijab. Although I don't wear Hijab, I still have a personal favorite Hijab outfit company, located in Turkey, and I check their website (http://www.kayra.com.tr/) every season. Since I'm on the subject of appearance it is important that I point out that Hijab has many benefits for the hair and face. In many dry and hot countries, Hijab helps women keep their hair cleaner for a longer time by protecting it from wind and dirt. It also protects the hair, as well as the face, from the burning rays of the sun.

Fighting colonization through Hijab. Joseph Massad in the introduction of his book *Desiring Arabs,* explains how "Arab sexuality**"** has been employed by Western colonizing countries to gain monopoly over Arab and Muslim societies. He describes how the colonizers felt that by understanding how the Arab mind beholds its own sexual desires and sexual identity, they would be able to manipulate the Arab societies into submitting to their will. One of the demeaning assumptions of the anthropologists of the colonizing countries was that Muslim women wearing the hijab were passive, oppressed, and stupid, hiding exotic bodies under the hijab with the sole goal of fulfilling their

waiting Husband's whims and desires. One can perceive the degree of the misconception that the West had about Muslim women in many Western made movies, However, those mistaken beliefs where counteracted in the movie *Battle of Algiers*.

In the movie *Battle of Algiers* released in 1966 and directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, Algerian Muslim women are shown as active and essential parts of the Algerian liberation movements that fought to get rid of the French colonizers. These women used their hijab to smuggle weapons to their fellow freedom fighters. Because the French soldiers perceived these women to lack agency, they didn't see that the Algerian women were a potential threat to them. This lack of fear by the French soldiers allowed these women to walk around French soldiers unnoticed and unsuspected. The freedom of movement gave them access to places that Algerian men couldn't go to due to the many restrictions placed on Algerian men by the French colonizers. The control these women had over their bodies through hijab can be seen through their ability to take off the hijab and mix with the French colonizers without being noticed. Contrary to what the French believed about Muslim women wearing hijab, these women had tremendous abilities, wits, and courage, which allowed them to infiltrate into the places where the French colonizers gathered and plant bombs without being noticed or suspected.

Identity, authority, and credibility. The control women have through hijab can also be shown through their ability to construct their own identity and through their power to decide how other people will construe their identity. Hijab informs people of who these women are and to what group they belong, making it clear that they identify with Islam and the Muslim community. In the article "Hijab and American Muslim Women," the authors describe how many second generation Muslim American women refuse to assimilate into the Western culture by wearing the hijab. Thus, they create for themselves a new niche in their country, an immediate and recognizable simultaneous identity as a Muslim and an American, something their immigrant parents couldn't achieve (Vashi, Gira).

Hijab may also grant women authority and credibility in their communities. Based on what I have experienced as a Muslim woman not wearing hijab, I found that many Muslims relate hijab to piety, and that religious Muslim men find it easier to interact with Muslim women wearing hijab, since they consider them to be more modest and more aware of the teachings of Islam. As a result, women wearing hijab find it easier to be taken more seriously and are offered more opportunities in their Muslim communities than Muslim women who don't wear the hijab. For example, one of my professors at UC Berkeley told me that some years ago, her ex-husband kidnapped her child, and she had to go to courts in her Muslim-majority country to litigate to get her child back. She informed me that at that time contrary to her usual practice, she decided to cover her head, though not all her hair, and at some crucial moments of border crossing, even her face. She explained that her decision was made initially because she was in a meditative mood and liked the comfort of the scarf over her head, akin to that of a hoodie. This clothing-act, she explained, also gained her the respect and trust of the lawyers, judges, and other people in the courts, while keeping her hair cleaner and her body surprisingly cooler in the heat! It quickly became a comforting habit for her that also made her feel more dignified. She also mentioned that after winning the case through three levels of the justice system, and getting her child back, her story was covered

extensively by many newspapers, and that by wearing the headscarf and covering her face at some strategic points she was able to avoid being recognized, thus protected herself and her privacy.

Access to education, travel, and relationships. Whether a woman is from a Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist family, if her family is very strict and adheres to the patriarchal exegesis of the sacred Texts of their religion, then she might suffer from limited access to many of life's opportunities, like education and travel. Some Muslim girls choose to emancipate themselves through wearing hijab. In a strict orthodox Muslim family, wearing the hijab will signify the commitment of their daughter to Islam. To the many Muslim women whose fear or love of their family won't let them rebel against their family's will, wearing the hijab will provide them with a route to gain both the trust and approval of their family, thus the opportunity to be allowed to venture into the world with some amount of freedom. In Palestine, where I grew up, hijab is a sign of modesty. Hijab could be considered the protection that women adopt against accusation of moral degradation and in some extreme cases adultery.

I like to think of hijab, metaphorically, as a sword that can be used to protect or harm. In a world in which women's bodies are always the targets of policing by patriarchal powers, hijab has proven to be a very effective way of fighting these powers. Although it was and to some extent is still used to oppress some women, many women who are gaining access to knowledge of Islam are realizing the difference between their religion and culture, and thus figuring out ways to turn hijab into an emancipatory tool that enables them to destroy the web that patriarchy has been and in many cases still is weaving for them. It is undeniable that women in hijab are struggling to break the stereotypes that are imposed on them in the West. But their efforts are not going to waste. In 2008, Mnar Muhawesh, a Muslim-American woman in hijab, with a degree in broadcasting, was hired by UTVS, a local Minnesota TV station, as a special-reporter journalist. She is the first Muslim woman in hijab to be a news anchor in the United States. This is one step forward that tells us positive change is happening. With enough determination and compassion, this step will be followed by many other positive steps that will make this world a safer and more accepting place for future generations.

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