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HIJAB AND THE LOSS OF IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of literature about people from Western societies who convert to Islam, but there has been little discussion about how converting to Islam has affected the lives of Caucasian (white) women. By converting to Islam and by choosing to visually distinguish themselves as Muslims, these women forgo many privileges associated with being white. This research examines how the daily lives of white women are affected by the choice of the hijab (Islamic dress code) in Western society. It also demonstrates that the participants' social identities change after they start to wear the hijab. The forces of this change come from both the women and the society in which they live. Interviews were conducted with white women who wear the hijab. Initially the women reacted negatively to the idea of wearing the hijab. Once committed to wearing it; however, the women stayed confident in their choice and were able to face and endure many of their society's ongoing negative stereotyping.

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There I was again in the desert of 29 Palms California Marine Corp base. It was the year 2001. I came back to help a friend move. He was getting out the military. I couldn't believe I had already been out of the Marines for three years. It was nice to see the base again. There I was passing by the barber, where my fellow Marines were lined up and ready to get their haircuts. I vividly recall my last haircut like it was yesterday.

As I stood there outside the barber, I looked through the door and there was a long line of Marines standing. Some of them were looking at me. No, they were all staring at me. I had grown a beard according to Islamic tradition. I was receiving the kind of stares that I used to give others who visited the base and looked similar to how I do now. Now I was on their territory. I wanted to yell and say, "Hey, you're looking at one of your own! You have no right to look at me like that!"

As short-lived this experience was in comparison to many good years in the Marines, truly this one moment taught me what it feels like to be part of something and then loose that identity.

Being a Caucasian male in America, I can only attempt to learn about the struggles that women and minorities have gone through to be recognized as equal in a white, male dominant society. My choice to grow my beard was to be recognized as a Muslim. Even with this distinguishing characteristic, there are other subcultures in our nation that have beards such as hippies, the Amish, Jews, and bikers. For women in Islam, the attire is known as hijab. It is a modest way of clothing including the veil or the headscarf (known as the hijab). Women in the hijab do not easily pass off as another group; therefore, are distinguished as the out-group.

As I spent more time in the Muslim community, I got to know many of these women and heard of their struggle. I wondered how the white women, with the European backgrounds, had dealt with their choice of the hijab and how others react to their decisions. I knew that my Marine Corp. experience at the barber was minimal compared to what they go through. The lack of our understanding to their experiences is what initiated this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Islamic tradition and Quran has required for both men and women to dress modestly. For women this requirement traditionally includes the covering of the hair, a practice called the hijab. (Quran,24.31; Doi 1993). In feminist literature we will find the condemnation of the hijab, as a tool of oppression against women, but also the hijab as a sign of women's liberation from dominant male driven cultures. (Franks, 2000, p.915) For many Americans and Europeans, the veiled (hijab) woman symbolizes the oppression of women in Muslim communities and provides proof that these cultures are backward and need to be "saved". (Cloud, 2004)

Throughout Western civilization it has been expected that women's bodies be subject to the gaze of men, particularly the bodies of poorer women. Wealthier women, such as the women of Ancient Greece, veiled themselves, and their veil reflected their status as protected women. It was and continues to be normative for men in patriarchal societies to have access to the physical beauty of women. Greek art displays women in the nude, serving as an example toward the secure position of the established gaze hierarchy. (Franks, 2000, p.915) For contemporary Western men and also women, the hijab is seen as a barrier to this long established gaze hierarchy. The white American woman, who wears the hijab, is then scrutinized by her own people and labeled as traitor, because they choose not to allow others' free access to their physical beauty. (Ferber 1998) The experience of Muslim women born into societies where the hijab is normative is not the same as that of Muslim women who converts from Western societies. According to Franks, "Literature which debates the degree of liberation or oppression associated with wearing the hijab is frequently focused on the Middle East." (Franks, 2000, p.915) So,

what happens to the Western women of European heritage who choose to become Muslim and wear the hijab? What is the response of the societies they come from?

These are important questions, because “hijab functions first and for most as a visible marker of one’s identity as a Muslim.” (Droogsma, 2007, p.301)

These white women, who choose to wear the hijab, said they don’t consider themselves as traitors. They see the hijab as a way to deflect the masculine gaze towards becoming a sexual object, while being recognized by their intellect. (Franks, 2000, p.925) They explain that this deflection defines the reconstruction of gender equality, which is often a center point of struggle for women’s rights in the West and the United States. These women see the hijab as a personal choice; and therefore, the hijab should be accepted by the Western social order. (Gocek, 1994 pg. 41-43) Unfortunately many Westerners do not share their views on the hijab. This conflict between their ideals and their reality puts the women in a difficult position that affects their daily lives. (Franks, 2000, p.921)

METHODOLOGY

The participants of my study consisted of five Caucasian-American women who converted to Islam and who wear the hijab. Their respective family heritages are Dutch, English, German, Scottish, Irish, Polish, Jewish, and Norwegian. Three of the participants volunteered upon my wife's request. Two of the participants responded to a request I submitted to the Muslim American Society of Minnesota. Prior to soliciting study participants, a research proposal was submitted to and approved by the Human Subject Review Board.

The data for this study was collected through a total of five face-to-face interviews with the participants. These interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the participants. The interviews were semi-structured. A copy of the interview questions is attached in the appendix. The participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions prior to giving consent. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were tape-recorded. After the interviews were tape-recorded, they were downloaded to a password-secured laptop, and then deleted from the tape-recorder. After all of the data was collected, I transcribed the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the participants. After the transcription, the data was analyzed for emerging themes through the use of conceptually created categories.

FINDINGS

Comprehending the idea that prior to hijab, these women had never been “outside of their skin” is an important factor for understanding my findings. In other words, these women were all born and raised in families that were white, and they had no prior exposure that could have prepared them for wearing of the hijab. It is important to note that the women connected with the idea of America’s cultural melting pot, but were not prepared for the heat needed to do the melting. Each individual experienced the burn of culture shock. One woman, Susan stated:

Growing up as a white person, you don’t have the minority experience as others might. So I think it’s really interesting, because you identify as white. You kind of lose that, as you become Muslim and wear the hijab, because you’re not looked at that way anymore. It changes your identity.

As these women started to wear the hijab, they described what could be visualized as being uncloaked by the eyes of strangers, while becoming a stranger in the eyes of familiar faces. Not expecting, nor having some kind of life experience to relate to what was about to come next, they soon found themselves disabled, without the option of a wheelchair. They no longer blend into mainstream America and felt that they had to justify their decisions to whoever stared at them. When recalling her life before wearing the hijab, Susan refers to it as, “Back when I was white... because I didn’t get treated the way I do now. It’s like I now have a handicap.”

All the participants related having gone through similar feelings after they chose to put on the hijab. During the course of the interviewing process, all participants shared how their lives have been affected after wearing of the hijab, and they all compared it to how

it used to be prior to the hijab. They expressed that they were invisible before wearing the hijab, and did not realize that until afterwards. Being raised in a society that is predominantly white was a factor for this invisibility.

Another factor was the disillusion that resulted from a lack of understanding about the hijab. The hijab was formerly seen as a cultural norm observed by a particular minority group. This played a large role in the cultural shock that was created when the women, who were not from the minority groups, chose to wear the hijab. Data also suggests that the participants shared similar ways of thought before they met Muslims.

Cultural Norms

Without exception, all of the participants in this study related that even when they were in college, their knowledge and understanding about Islam, Muslims, and the hijab was primarily nonexistent. Jennifer, who started wearing the hijab in 1995 explained, “There was hardly anyone that was a Muslim back then, so we never saw Muslims or Islam.” Cindy, who has been wearing the hijab since 2003, explained that when she took classes in World Religion and History, she still had not found information about Islam and Muslims. She makes this point by stating, “When looking back, I find it strange that in the world of academics, we are taught too little about Islam. Both in History and the class I took on religion, did not mention Islam or hijab.” Susan, who has been wearing the hijab since the summer of 2001, recalls clipping out political articles regarding the war of Bosnia and Kosovo for a teacher every week. These articles had pictures of women with the hijab but even those didn’t help her to connect the dots between Muslims and the hijab. All of the participants expressed that it is this type of exclusion and/or

separation of information by media and academics that creates a barrier in social interaction. It disconnects many people from understanding Muslim customs like the modesty of the hijab. They all stated that they began learning about Islam and the hijab after they met Muslims. They had to directly ask questions to get answers.

Social Interactions

All of the participants in the study had different explanations to what made them learn about Islam and the hijab; however, they all strongly expressed that their attraction came from their social interactions with Muslims and how they observed their religious practices. These interactions were both positive and negative, yet they remained curious to learn why Muslims fast during the Holy month of Ramadan, why some men have beards, and why some women wear the hijab.

Fiona began wearing the hijab this year. Her first encounter with Muslims made her think that Muslim women were oppressed because they were quiet. Muslim men appeared rude, because they didn't look her in her eyes while she talked to them. She also found it frustrating when many of them called in sick during the month of Ramadan. Even though she thought that these were negative experiences, it made her want to learn more about why they behaved in such ways. She explains, "Studying religion always interested me. So I said to myself that I haven't studied these peoples' religion yet, and it's something I should do to find out why they behave so strangely. So I started to read the Quran which brought me to Islam."

Cindy saw a foreign exchange student working at her school cafeteria. She thought he had an interesting hat and beard. When she approached him, he was very shy.

She was straightforward and asked him, “Why do you have that hat and beard?” And to that he simply said, “Because I am a Muslim.” All of the participants felt that without such social interactions, it’s likely that they would not have looked into Islam or became Muslim, let alone wear the hijab.

Social Identity

Four of the five participants initially felt that even if they became Muslim, they wouldn’t ever wear the hijab. Susan started to wear hijab after two years of being a Muslim. Cindy wore the hijab so quickly that to this day, she doesn’t know which one came first, becoming a Muslim or wearing the hijab. Regardless of when they chose to wear the hijab, they all felt that the challenges caught them off guard. Cindy expresses this by stating:

Before becoming a Muslim, I took pride in dressing, but now I felt like I was covering up myself, my expression. I felt like an old lady, a nerd. I felt embarrassed to be wearing clothes that didn’t look like me or feel like me. And it was very hard.

Feelings of social exclusion made the participants look for support groups. More importantly, they started to seek other women who could understand and comfort them. Susan explains, “I ended up meeting some girls... They wear hijab... came from the same type of experiences and they actually made me want to wear hijab.” All of the participants’ decision to wear the hijab was independently made. In some cases they kept their conversion private until others saw them with the hijab.

Conformity

Another problem that the participants faced was to figure out a style of the hijab. They wanted to properly cover themselves while feeling good about their appearance.

Brianna expresses this frustration by stating:

Islam is new in America, so we don't have a look yet. Iranian women wear long jackets. Egyptian women wear colorful hijab. Bosnian women wear denim a lot. So I had to try all of them and hope one day we will have an American look that relates to our clothing style in America.

A process of finding the hijab that met their needs took effort. Cindy explains, "It took some time to figure out what I was comfortable wearing and what is acceptable in public... I remember last year I wore long abayas (long, flowing dress) and it does affect your lifestyle. Before I realized that I needed to get them hemmed at the bottom, I use to trip on them all the time and get them caught in grocery carts." Once the participants learned how to work around the fabric details, they all felt that they are now able to participate in sports and other recreations, similar to the way did before the hijab.

Loss of Privileges

All of the participants felt that since they began wearing hijab, they were not categorized "white", because their own society will not let them be. Jennifer explained this best by stating, "Never really experiencing prejudice, especially because of where I grew-up at and my skin color. So when it comes back to you, you don't have a comprehension for it or know how to respond." The participants also felt that even their college experience did not prepare them for the experiences they went through wearing

the hijab. They were unaware of the stigma that comes along with being a Muslim. Brianna and Fiona are not married. They commented that it was harder for people to accept that it was their personal choice to wear the hijab, verses one of a husband. It was described like salt to a wound, that a woman chose to be Muslim on her own. Fiona shared this story:

People right away know that I am American born when I start talking...Most people assume I am married. As if I am married, and became a Muslim, and he told me to wear the hijab... People get shocked that, 'Hey, you're not married? Then what are you doing? Why are you doing that?'

Societies' attempt to define these women, echoed throughout the participants interviews, and they all felt that these experiences were likely to be intensified, because they don't fit the stereotypes that were usually associated with women that wear the hijab.

Cultural Shock

While three of the participants have been wearing the hijab for many years, Fiona and Brianna have only been wearing the hijab for a few months. Fiona who considers herself to be a very outgoing person, suddenly felt excluded and disregarded at work as she started to wear the hijab. She stated:

I think I had to earn respect at work all over again. Because I am in the Information Technology industry, I had to go through the process of proving myself as a woman in I.T. And then as a woman that's a supervisor. Now I had to prove myself as woman that wears hijab... I think they expected me to back

down. They thought that now I would be quiet... If I asked them to do something they would say, 'No, I am not.' And I was like, 'Actually, yes you are.' Even now it's still kind of hard.

Feelings of exclusion were mutually expressed by all of the participants. They all described similar experiences for the first year of their wearing the hijab. All of the participants told the negative experiences that they have had from strangers. They felt that the strangers' reactions were part of the growing resentment towards minorities and immigrant communities. They said that this resentment was directed towards them, even though they are not previously minorities. Cindy mentioned a time when she sat down on a public token message chair. Next to her was an old white man. She said that, "(He) started to sing a song... 'They come to America and take our job, go back home!' He was screaming at the top of his lungs." They explained that simple interactions with people became hurtful, because they chose to dress differently.

Family Norms

Brianna, who has been wearing the hijab for less than six months, has hidden her hijab and her new faith from her family. She explains, "When I go back home, I take off my hijab, because I feel that my father will be hurt." Brianna has very fond memories of her childhood. Since her mother died of cancer, she feels that she cannot tell her family or she would betray or taint her childhood memories.

All of the participants felt similar fear and responsibility to their family, coworkers, and friends upon the decision to wear the hijab. Jennifer stated, "My brother was getting married... I felt that I couldn't go to the wedding wearing a hijab, and since I

didn't start wearing the hijab yet, I waited till after the wedding.” Fiona also did the same when considering how the hijab will affect the men that she works with in the Information Technology industry. She waited until the New Year to wear it, so everyone would see it as a New Year's resolution.

Awareness

A common theme among the participants described feelings that before wearing the hijab, it was as if they were asleep. Since they began wearing the hijab, they have been awakened to the American culture that now considers them an outsider. Separation of visual norms, that these women were now being a part of, has also brought them to the realization that they are now a part of a social change. They have inadvertently become the spokespersons for the rest of the women who wear the hijab. Fiona stressed this point saying, “Hijab tells me that I have a responsibility and restricts my negative habits. And so if I smoke at work, then everyone has seen a Muslim woman smoke.” Cindy explained that, “Hijab is about attitude and modesty, and you have to learn how to move differently. Before Islam I would not have thought (twice about) bending over on the sidewalk, but now I just bend down differently. So hijab made me aware of such things.”

The importance of setting an example was the top concern for all the participants. Also, the participants in my study, had expressed that the hijab has heightened their awareness of the price many other minority groups pay for inherently being different or choosing to be different from the social norms. Jennifer stated, “You're only limited in your own mind ...I felt that I couldn't go swimming anymore and I really limited myself.... I just didn't see the possibilities, but now I am starting to see them.” They

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came to the conclusion that they are not going to limit themselves to please others that don't approve of the hijab.

DISCUSSION

Although none of the participants sought to construct a different social identity after wearing the hijab, data suggests that it took anywhere from six months to a year for the participants to connect with an identity of the hijab with which they were comfortable. Brianna, participant, had mentioned numerous times that she wondered if she had done enough research to be a Muslim. Further studying of data suggests her conflicting answers were due to the indication that her family does not know that she is a Muslim. When asked about her family and the hijab, she added, “I wonder if I did enough research.” When asked about how she came to wearing the hijab, she said, “I researched for four years and clearly saw that Islam is from God.”

Three of the participants have been wearing hijab for many years and describe how after the start of the Iraq War, people are now more open and volatile about discrimination than before the Global War on Terrorism. Cindy stated:

I was at the post office, and I was in a long line. My son was doing what two year olds do, and the man behind the counter (employee) kept looking at him angrily and telling him to get back in line. When I approached the counter, he happened to be the one that ended up helping me. As he got done, he said to me that, ‘I have to tell you that I have a problem with your religion.’ I asked him exactly what he disagreed with, and he says, ‘Your religion tells to kill people and blow up their countries.’ I stood there in shock. And being a new Muslim, I didn’t really have any idea on how to defend myself. I stood there while everyone watched a federal employee insult me.

The participants shared their stories of discrimination, while appearing to hold strong to the decision of wearing the hijab.

This study was conducted throughout one semester. Conducting a research project in a span of a few months limited me to interviewing five participants. A larger

sample, including women from other areas would be needed to add validity and reliability to this research. I also wished that I had added the concepts of White Privilege and Male Privilege to my literature and interview questions. Such addition could have elicited more data from the participants. The experiences of these white women is important to my findings; however, it is equally important to expand this research to see if there's any correlation between white women, women of color, and other ethnic groups that choose to wear the hijab.

In the course of my research, I had concerns that my findings might appear as a deflection from the struggles of women in majority Muslim countries or might be disregarded as a political statement by a Muslim male. Based upon these thoughts, I feel that this research could be more widely accepted when performed by a researcher without religious affiliation and/or with further credentials.

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APPENDIX

Where were you born? What's your heritage?

Is anyone else in your family Muslim?

- Did they become Muslim due to your conversion?

At what age did you become a Muslim?

How long have you been a Muslim?

At what age did you start wearing the hijab?

How long have you been wearing the hijab?

Education

- High school diploma? GED? AA/AS? BA? Higher?

What's your occupation?

Are you married? Do you have any children?

Where did you spend your childhood/teenage years?

- Did you have certain things that your family did together?
- Did you participate in sports or extra curricular activities at school?

You're background before Islam?

- Lifestyle, hobbies, activities
- Relationships with parents, siblings, family, friends and at work/school.
- Religious or spiritual beliefs.
- Life goals, etc.
- Dating.

What did you think about Muslim women/ the hijab before your learning of Islam?

- Were they oppressed?
- Did you have any opinion/ stereotypes?
- On individual basis when you saw a Muslim woman?
- From political or media stance?

How did you come to Islam?

- Was it friends?
- Some one in family became Muslim?
- Something to do with your prior faith or belief?
- Something happened that made you learn about Islam?

Please tell me about the process of becoming a Muslim, in terms of your clothing/dress and the wearing of the hijab.

- Were you already a modest dresser in respect to Islam?
- Was dressing modestly easy but hijab was hard?
- Were you convinced of Islam but not of hijab at first?
- Were you convinced of hijab but felt it to be difficult due to family, friends work or school?
- Did you only have it on at certain places at first?
- Did you have it on for a period of time and then found it hard and took it off? If that was the case then what made it a hard?

How does wearing the hijab affect your lifestyle?

- Things like hobbies or sports you played etc?
- Your daily works or things you did for fun?

How do others react to your hijab?

- What did your close relatives think?
- Your school or work?
- People on the street?

How do you feel after observing the reaction of others to your hijab?

- Do you feel stronger or does it affect your faith?
- Is it even a thought in your mind?

Please tell me how wearing the hijab has effected daily interactions with others?

- Things like hand shaking or hugging etc
- Getting upset in public or complaining about bad service or food etc
- Do you avoid certain people or friends etc?
- Do you avoid certain places that you didn't before the hijab?
- With women
- With men

If you had to do it all over again, would you do it anything different?

- Like how you told your parents, sibling or friends about it?
- How you changed your lifestyle?
- Changes that you have done in your personal life?

Would you like to add anything else regarding this experience?

- Advice for others that might be considering wearing hijab and becoming Muslim?
- Anything that I might not have asked?