



Hijab in Muslim and Non-Muslim Societies: Symbolism and Stereotypes - Perspective of a Bangladeshi

Fakhrul Abedin Tanvir¹, Mohammad Jahed Ikbāl²

¹ Research Scholar, Bangladesh

E-mail: fakhrul10-2262@diu.edu.bd

² Student, University of Chittagong

jahedikbal778@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

This article delves into the multiple meanings and enduring stereotypes associated with the hijab in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts, while paying particular attention to Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, the hijab is highly common and the implications of putting on hijab differ according to one's social class, interpretations of the victory of God and extent to what one is affected by mass media. It is a qualitative research study drawing upon secondary data, such as news articles, television debates, social media discourse, NGOM reports and academic literature. Moreover, public opinion was tracked in online discussion boards and blogs, mainstream Bangladeshi newspapers like The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, and New Age in order to get an in-the-moment picture of the society's attitude.

The latter reflects that even in the case of liberal communities (such as the urban middle class or religiously conservative class in Bangladesh), the hijab functions as a symbol of individual spirituality and social obligation. But the new speech is also being politicised, particularly in schools and in jobs, where it can be seen as either a sign of oppression or a source of empowerment, depending on the ideological lens through which it is viewed. The research also shows how global stereotypes of hijabi women as submissive and anti-modern are covertly reproduced in Bangladesh through media scripts and fashion talk yet challenged by discourses of resistance and feminist meanings of the hijab.

At the end it seems that in Bangladesh, hijab, as an object of study, reflects a complex tension between religious expression, cultural identity, and social compliance. Such an approach requires challenging stereotypes of veiling, not with the intention of refuting them, but of enriching them with circumstances and lived context. This article is an important intervention in the larger debates around gender, identity, and religious sensibilities in post-colonial South Asia.

1. Introduction

The hijab, a headscarf often worn by Muslim women, is a complex symbol of faith, modesty, identity and autonomy. Despite being perceived as a religious uniform, its connoted significance were bound to sociopolitical and cultural context of the space the vestment is worn in. In Muslim-dominated societies such as Bangladesh, the hijab has multiple meanings, from self-expression of piety and empowerment to public indications of societal pressures or family duties. And in non-Muslim cultures and societies, hijab is often times weighed down by stereotypes, tendency to backwardness, oppression of women and extremism.

In recent years, hijab donning women have become increasingly visible in the Bangladesh society; involving in the education, media and job sectors. This has paralleled an increase of discussions –online and off-line – about what the wearing of the hijab signifies, including as a fixture in debates about women's rights, secularism, and modernity. Fashion trends media depictions, and cultural signals all contribute to popular opinion. Newspapers, including The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, have featured stories that back it and criticize it, reflecting how the hijab can represent empowerment for one community and a deeply contentious issue, triggering debates among some critics.

As a largely Muslim country, Bangladesh mirrors some of the same tensions worldwide regarding the hijab. The item of clothing is naturalized and disputed, depending on the setting, class, and institution. In addition, the hijab has become stylized, marketed and debated in new arenas of social media networks, which contribute to empowering and stereotyping the hijab.

In this context, this work aims to critically analyze the symbolic layers of the hijab and the social construction surrounding it in Bangladesh, particularly as presented and discussed in the media and public space based on secondary sources including news reports, on-line data, and literature.

Research Question:

How is the hijab symbolized and commodified in Bangladeshi society, and what does this tell us about larger social and media discourse on Muslim female identity?

2.Literature Review

The hijab has been the subject of extensive academic literature around its multifaceted symbolism, including religious piety, cultural identity and resistance, and social stereotypes. The hijab has generally been thought of by scholars of sociology, gender, religion, and media as more than just an article of clothing, but rather as a fluid, contested cultural artefact.

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Western feminist writing has usually depicted the hijab as a sign of gendered subjugation (Macdonald, 2006) sidelining the voices of Muslim women who have chosen to don it as an assertion of their agency and identity (Mahmood, 2005). This dichotomization—deriving from alleged liberated unveiled women and stifled veiled women—has been criticized by scholars of post colonialism who have insisted that it is grounded in Orientalist premises (Said, 1978; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Meantime, some Muslim feminists assert that the hijab is a deliberate act that is linked to Islamic feminism, self-fashioning, or resistance against Western standard of beauty (Bullock, 2002). These views propose that the hijab is a meaning that is contextually and personally constructed rather than one that is universally imposed.

Hijab and Representation in Media

The media exerts a great influence on the way the hijab is perceived by society. In predominantly non-Muslim societies, for instance, research has revealed that veiled women are constructed as either passive victims or security risks (Eltantawy 2007). The representation in Muslim societies (including Bangladesh) is more varied, although still shaped by global discourses. Work by Karim (2014) on South Asian media revealed that veiling is sensationalized, politicized, or trivialized, particularly in fashion magazines and online forums.

Social media especially has become a double-edged environment – it permits hijabi influencers to reclaim their visibility and tell their stories, but it also exposes them to the harms of cyberbullying and generalizations (Zahra, 2021). Blog on formation The hijab, in the Bangladeshi context, is often projected as modern “modest fashion” in lifestyle blogs and discussion forums on-line, but the comments section more often than not betrays the layers of stereotyping referring to backwardness or conservatism when it comes to matters such as the kameez and the hijab.

The Social and Cultural Scenario of Hijab in Bangladesh

Although Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority nation with a secular constitution and several religious groups, it has only recently experienced this type of violence. For this reason, the hijab is not necessarily compulsory in law but is strongly recommended in the customs, especially among the middle class and in conservative families. According to a study conducted by Nasrin (2017), the hijab in rural areas as a collective identity is regarded as family honor or religious obligation, whereas in urban areas, it is more closely related to identity politics and style.

There can also be mixed feelings toward the hijab at schools and workplaces. Although no such formal limitation is in place, there are reports of informal dissuasion or difference in treatment. News reports from The Daily Star and New Age have drawn attention to incidents in which women with the hijab encountered covert discrimination, or were judged over-conservative, or less modern.

Symbolism, Identity, and Arendt's Model of Agency

The symbolic nature of the hijab is anything but static. Depending on which context it is worn in, it could be a symbol of devotion, resistance, continuity of culture or much worse, assent. Hijab-wearing women in Bangladesh cite a number of motivations — from spiritual conviction to social demand to personal preference. The fluidity of these meanings undermines any easy liberation/oppression.

Furthermore, as Hossain (2020) and Rahman (2019) indicate, the hijab/map that intersects with class and education. Thanks to a recent Chobimela photography festival in the city, they have received a disproportionate amount of attention, and some among the educated women of Dhaka wear the hijab as a sign of their elite piety or cultural pride, while working class women see it as a mark of respectability and safety on urban streets.

2.1 Literature Gap

Though the veil has been a subject of intensive debate in the world academic discourses, most have focused on the hijab as a symbol of religious identity, gender politics, and cultural independence among Muslim minorities in non-Muslim societies, especially in the West. These works boldly speak to Islamophobia, the difficulty of assimilation and the politics of being visible. These, in turn, contrast with dominant interpretive frameworks surrounding Islam, the hijab, and autonomy, which frequently ignore the nuances of local sociocultural dynamics in the Muslim world and broach the subject of the hijab without considering local complexity, in general (3, 4).

Hijab: Gender, Class and Politics in South Asian Muslims (1989), research on the hijab's relationship with these three axes of difference, but Bangladesh is still not large enough in discussions of the politics of Hijab. such existing Bangladeshi studies are contented with relatively simplistic claims about young urban women coming into new patterns of fashion consumption in contemporary Dhaka or young rural girls being held in the fixity of customary traditions.¹⁰¹ They do not tend to cut across all these aspects to see how media, institutional norms, and public discourse also twist a rich variety of meanings around the symbolism and stereotypes of this cloth.

Moreover, a scant amount of research has examined the significance of secondary sources, including newspaper reports, online comments, and popular beliefs, in shaping meanings for the symbol of the hijab. Hence, the subtle and changing images of veiled women in contemporary Bangladeshi society remain under-studied.

This paper seeks to fill this vacuum by exploring secondary data of how the hijab is represented and stereotyped in Bangladesh, contributing to the broader debate on subjectivity of identity of Muslim women in a local, postcolonial and culturally hybrid society.

3. Methodology

Methodology this research uses qualitative research design based on interpretivist philosophy to illustrate how the hijab is represented and stereotyped in Bangladesh. The research is based on secondary data analysis, as it rather not gathers data via direct face-to-face and interview-based or issue-based methods, but engages with how patterns, narratives, and meanings are represented in media, the digital discourse, or the literature available.

Research Design and Approach

A qualitative descriptive design was chosen in order to allow for an in-depth understanding of hijab-related symbolism and stereotypes in a particular cultural context. Thematic content analysis directed the research endeavour facilitating an interpretive investigation of cultural narratives, attitudes and representations.

Data Sources

The study uses secondary sources available to the public that were chosen based on their pertinence, easy access and plurality of perspectives. These include:

Local newspaper articles: Published in the Bangladesh's popular English and Bangla-language newspapers (such as The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, New Age; 2015–2024) highlighting social commentary, women's rights, education, and religion.

Comments and posts on social media like Facebook and YouTube (namely under hijab-related news and influencer videos), representing folk wisdom and public opinion.

Reports and think-tank publications of NGOs on gender, faith, and social identities in Bangladesh.

Academic journals and books on the hijab (sociological, religious, or media studies) in a South Asian context.

The data were purposively collected according to keyword searches (i.e., "hijab in Bangladesh," "women in veil," "Islamic dress code," "modest fashion," and "media representation of hijab").

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was employed for analysis of all the collected content. The process included:

Preliminary coding of recurrent terms, symbols, and stereotypes (e.g., modesty, modernity, backwardness, empowerment).

Themes classified according to context: personal selection, religious duty, societal norm, media portrayal, etc.

Analysis of how such themes mirror wider narratives and attitudes about the hijab in Bangladeshi culture.

No NVivo software was applied because we conducted a manual analysis, although all codes and themes were stored in structured spreadsheets for traceability and maintenance of consistency.

Ethical Considerations

As this study is based on public-use secondary data, ethical clearance was not necessary. But attempts were made to handle that imagery with respect for religious culture. Names of people mentioned in the social media posts were redacted from quotations or summaries.

Such a methodological approach allows our research to be contextually rich whilst maintaining a critical perspective on the representation of the hijab in the Bangladeshi context as is portrayed through existing accounts as opposed to through the eyes of participants.

4. Results

Thematic analysis of the secondary data identified that perceptions and representations of the hijab in Bangladesh were multifaceted and complex. These results were based on news articles, social media reports, public debate, and literature. Results Key themes following analysis of data are reported:

Hijab as an Emblem of Piety and Odd Signal of Identity

THE above description of the hijab as a religious symbol an impersonal sanctity and moral order was part of the answer to this question offered by the commentariat via various newspaper accounts and public interviews. Especially in urban and semi-urban environments, women interviewed in lifestyle columns or featured in news stories portrayed the hijab as an active practice of Islamic virtues and spiritual affiliation. Many women told me that they wore the hijab "for Allah, not for society," correcting the superficial characterization that veiling is always coerced.

Hijab and the Politics of Respectability

Information from reports and social commentary revealed that the hijab is commonly associated with social norms of modesty and of being "respectable," particularly within middle-class households. Wearing a hijab at school or university or in the workplace often comes with an assumption that those who do so are more disciplined or morally good. But then, this is also about social pressure and some women feel unease because they feel they are also being judged if they don't cover.

Examination of media headlines and comments on the social media revealed the presence of certain stereotypes. Women with the hijab were occasionally depicted as "backward," "illiterate" or "extremely religious," particularly if they took part in demonstrations, or public discussions. On the other hand, fashion-conscious hijabis (such as Instagram influencers advertising "modest fashion") were sometimes charged with being hypocrites or "watering down religion."

An article in the online edition of Prothom Alo in 2022 on a female-led protest featured dozens of comments on Facebook that called for an end to hijabi fomenting, saying hijabi women "shouldn't be in politics" — or they are "used by religious groups."

Fashion, Commercialization and the Modest Modernists

A number of data points, particularly from blogs and commercial outlets, bore witness to the increasing commodification of the hijab. Hijab is also increasingly marketed and sold as a fashion statement rather than simply a religious duty, with Bangladeshi brands selling designer hijabs. This has given rise to a whole new hybrid identity – "modern modest woman" – which has contemporary youngsters taking to it like fish to water, but is also provoking scorn and scrutiny among liberal and conservative.

Double Standards And That Thin Blue Line

There was no legal ban on wearing hijabs in Bangladesh but anecdotal evidence, including from social media accounts, indicated institutional bias, especially within elite educational institutions and corporate offices. They just don't feel that they can perform as well when other people are constantly looking at what they're wearing." Others in hijab reported being rejected for promotions, discouraged from client-facing roles or discreetly told to "dress more professionally."

In one such form, an op-ed in The Daily Star in 2021 featured a testimonial from a woman banker who was told that she looked "too traditional for the company's image" because of her hijab.

The findings show that hijab is not hegemonic or contested in a single manner in Bangladesh. Instead, it occupies a contested symbolic terrain — simultaneously empowering and stigmatizing, religious and fashionable, voluntary and socially obligatory. Such contradictions can be understood within the wider context of tensions around modernity, religion, gender and media narratives in an increasingly globalizing Bangladeshi society.

5. Limitations

This study has some limitations despite the valuable input that it provides, which are as follows:

Secondary Data Dependent: There is no primary data collection involved within the study except literature, public articles, and stories. This also implies that the raw voices and life stories of hijab-wearing women were not secured through primary interviews or ethnographic modes of inquiry.

Bias: This source is biased a lot in a description-writing along with the media sources sites and social networking sites. Media framing and public discussions can be sensationalistic and extreme, not indicative of the general populace.

Urban-Centric Focus: The data — especially from newspapers and digital platforms — largely revolves around urban areas, including Dhaka. Therefore, the rural views on hijab, with different traditions, interpretations, and community dynamics, are not well represented.

Temporal Boundaries: Data are based on the period between 2015–2024. While this window captures recent changes, the general public's understanding of the hijab is changing and could change dramatically in the next few years.

Lack of Quantitative Validation: In the absence of survey-based statistics, the study cannot generalize its findings to all Bangladeshi women.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the symbolism of the hijab and the stereotypical discourse and representations related to it in the society of Bangladesh using secondary sources of data from media narratives, social commentary and existing literature. The results suggest the hijab is more than just a religious garment- it is a contested and flexible symbol, constructed by issues of faith, identity, social pressures and global influences.

In Bangladesh, the hijab could represent both personal empowerment and piety, but it also is influenced by social and institutional pressures. In the media and on online forums, divergent stereotypes about hijabis are sustained, casting hijabi women as morally superior or socially backward. At the same time, the ascent of modest fashion reflects a larger generational move toward marrying Islamic identity to modern style and professional aspiration.

"After all, the hijab in Bangladesh symbolizes larger struggles over women's agency, religious practice and public perceptions. It forces us beyond simple, reductive stories of oppression and liberation, and it demands that we celebrate the complex, multitudinous lives of Muslim women. Further studies, including first hand interviews, rural insight, and longitudinal data would help us to better understand this new and changing cultural construct.

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