

The uncertainties and anxieties of veiling amongst British Pakistani women in Sheffield

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In this paper, I add to the ethnographically informed discussions on veiling amongst Muslim women in the UK (see Tarlo 2010; Tarlo and Moor 2013) through exploring the concerns and apparent contradictions that arise for young, British-born Pakistani women in Sheffield (UK). I argue that these quandaries are shaped by the raced and classed discourses that pertain to a narrative of belonging to multicultural Britain and I support this suggestion with two ethnographic arguments. Firstly I outline the importance that my young interlocutors place on creating a hijab style they feel to be 'tasteful', and secondly I explore how the narrative of good intention allows for the negotiation of veiling practices.

My paper is developed from a section of my recently completed PhD thesis, in which I explored perceptions of beauty, practices of beautification, and the popularity of beauty work amongst British-born Pakistani women in Sheffield, a medium-sized city located in the north of England.

As widely documented within the anthropological literature, Islamic veiling is not a monolithic practice that is reducible to a symbol of allegiance or even a straightforward reflection of belief. Instead, veiling today is read as a diverse, ambiguous, contextual, and temporal practice that, for many, assists in the cultivation of a desired inner belief as much as reflecting a solidified piety.

Whether or not they choose to wear the garment themselves, all my young informants consider wearing the hijab to be an obligation for Muslim women. Furthermore, they agree on the form of veiling they feel to be correct: a scarf that covers the hair, ears, neck, and chest, a style of veiling readily associated with Arab women. However, as I shall demonstrate, practices of wearing and removing the hijab are far from uniform.

In keeping with the findings of recent ethnographic studies of fashion and revivalist Islam in Europe and North America (most notably Tarlo and Moor's 2013 edited collection, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-fashion*), the young women I met are rejecting the textiles and garments associated with their mothers' and grandmothers' generations and non-Muslim South Asian women in favour of outfits that merge high-street trends with the latest styles emanating from the Middle East. The emergence of these new fashion trends adopted by young Muslim women across Europe and North America has been widely attributed to the high level of interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim people of different backgrounds in a variety of contexts and through an array of media (Tarlo and Moor 2013).

For my interlocutors, an important element of hijab styling is creating a look that will be thought of as tasteful, stylish, and sophisticated, descriptive idioms that are often reserved for the fashion tastes of the 'upper-class' White British people with whom my young interlocutors associate at university. Furthermore, women enthusiastically explain that they are unlike 'the majority' of Pakistani women, who, more often than not, take veiling 'too far'. For my interlocutors, going 'too far' means either creating an overly voluminous or embellished hijab style or wearing the *niqab*, the Islamic face veil. Both these forms of veiling are considered indicative of 'uneducated' Pakistani woman, whose 'over the top', 'attention seeking' veiling practices indicate an inability or unwillingness to be part of multicultural Britain. Although it was clear that the young women I

met were keen to embrace Euro-American/Arab trends, there appeared to be little or no mixing between Pakistani women and Muslim women of other racial or ethnic backgrounds. For example, Pakistani women do not appear to be incorporating or experimenting with Somalian garments or fabrics, even though the Somali community constitutes the second-largest ethnic-minority group in Sheffield after the Pakistani community. As such, I suggest that whilst certainly a product of interaction, everyday hijab choices are also based on the ordering of 'cultures' in terms of raced distinctions, often articulated through classed distinctions.

To my second point . . .

Many of my informants stressed that a few women wore the hijab not 'for the love Allah' but to receive undeserved praise and admiration. In addition, some of my interlocutors, such as Insha (Slide 3 – a quote from Insha expressing her concerns), expressed concern and guilt that their inner faith and Islamic knowledge did not live up to an externally pious appearance. Having said this, expressions of such concerns were relatively rare, and initially I was surprised to find that despite my informants' insistence that all Muslim women should wear the hijab in the presence of non-*mahram* men, many removed their hijabs during celebratory occasions (which were often segregated by gender in name only) or only wore their hijabs when outside the perceived boundaries of the Pakistani community.

Discussions of the (im)permissibility of removing the hijab or not wearing the hijab in certain contexts were dealt with through explorations of 'good intention'. Tarlo and Moor have argued that the popularity of Islamic revivalist movements amongst young European Muslim women is in part due to the promotion of a particular rhetoric of Islamic piety that fuses 'liberal notions of individual autonomy [. . .] with the Islamic notion of intentionality' (Tarlo and Moors 2013: 9). In Sheffield, possessing 'good intention' is entwined with narratives of 'knowing myself', 'knowing my boundaries and limits', and beautification in order to 'feel good about myself', proclamations that are often set within a wider rhetoric of female empowerment and community progression.

Possessing good intention is often coupled with an understanding of faith as a personal self-progression and tied with the importance of kinship relations. Ideas of the boundaries of the Pakistani community also play a part in hijab-wearing practices for young women, with some women I met only wearing their hijabs when considering themselves 'outside' the neighbourhood Pakistani community. Sophia, for example, wore her hijab only when attending her beauty course held at Sheffield City College and not when assisting her family at their Asian fashion clothing store, even though the beauty course was an almost exclusively female environment whereas her family's business was run by a large number of male staff and had a mixed client base. I suggest that women such as Sophia feel that within the Pakistani community, they are surrounded by kin and tightknit community associations, meaning that it is not necessary to rely upon symbols of respectability and morality such as the hijab. Conversely, a number of my informants only wore the hijab in order to 'fit in' with the expectations of Muslim bosses. Alicia, for example, a gym instructor at the recently opened ladies-only gym in Sheffield, put on her hijab in her car, which she parked behind the gym, in order to walk the few yards down the street to her place of work, where she removed her hijab, and at the end of her shift, made a show of replacing her scarf under the watchful gaze of her elderly female Muslim manager.

What I have attempted to show here, in perhaps a roundabout way, is that everyday concerns and anxieties about hijab wearing in Sheffield are moulded by cosmopolitan contexts that are not neutral but favour a perception of White British tastes to which Pakistani women are compared and which rejects interactions with Muslims who are non-Pakistani. What is more, I suggest that the means of negotiating hijab wearing are embedded within a narrative of self-determination that has a distinctly Euro-American feel, which, coupled with a focus on community kinship interactions, is particularly unique to the localized context. I hope that my work goes some way toward exploring the contradictions and reflections upon everyday Islam in the context of the UK.

Tarlo, E. (2010). *Visibly Muslim: fashion, politics, faith*. Oxford, Berg.

Tarlo, E. and Moors, A. eds. (2013). *Islamic fashion and anti-fashion: new perspectives from Europe and North America*. Edinburgh, A&C Black.