

Palestinian students and multiple meanings of the hijab

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Muslim women around the world perceive the wearing of a hijab as a means for the protection of Islamic values and the value of modesty. The present study explores the behavioural phenomenon of the wearing of the hijab by female Palestinian Muslim college students attending Palestinian universities and seeks to respond to the following research question: “How do these female students justify their choice to wear the hijab?”

Introduction

The discussion of the subject of the wearing of a hijab by Muslim women has undergone several changes in recent years. Some perceive the wearing of a hijab as an expression of religious devotion and as a device to protect women from male oppression. The decision to wear a hijab is also a product of social, cultural, and political factors, such as fashion consciousness, mobility, and peer pressure. Some scholars believe the hijab embodies religious values and the value of modesty, some feel it limits women’s mobility in public spaces, and some see the hijab as a means by which women can move freely in public spaces. A number of scholars, who distinguish the hijab from the shawl, attach great importance to the behaviour one can expect from a woman who wears a hijab and even believe that it is possible to predict their behaviour in different situations (Mizel, 2020; Koura, 2018; Karaman & Christian, 2020). According to some research studies, the wearing of the hijab is a long-standing cultural phenomenon. In other monotheistic religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, the head-covering for women has historically been regarded as a sign of dedication to religious and moral commitments. In Islam, the hijab is regarded as a cultural and spiritual regulatory instrument that ensures respect for the woman who wears one and which preserves her integrity and protects her livelihood (Brooks & Ezzani, 2022).

Many individuals are troubled when they see hijab-wearing women, and there are differing viewpoints on the subject, with some seeing the hijab as an impediment to a woman’s liberty and her rights as a human being. In contrast, there are those who see the wearing of the hijab as the adoption of a religious position that must not be challenged and do not regard it as something that limits a Muslim woman’s freedom.

Those who adhere to the first viewpoint and who see the hijab as an obstacle claim that it belongs to a specific period in the Prophet Mohammed’s life. During that period, the hijab was mandatory not for all Muslim women but only for the spouses of prophets. A refusal to wear the hijab was regarded then as a minor offense that was forgiven by God, rather than as a grievous sin that led to hell (Mussap, 2009; Swami, 2012).

Proponents of the second viewpoint can be classified as belonging to one of two groups. The members of the first group believe that one must adhere to religious principles, and they regard the wearing of the hijab as being in strict accordance with what God

commands in the Quran. For a variety of reasons, the members of the second group are hesitant to follow God's instructions and are unable to carry out His commands (Mahfoodh, 2008), for one or more of the following reasons:

- (1) Lack of faith in God and in divine providence;
- (2) Lack of knowledge of Islam's religious ideology and precepts;
- (3) Intellectual misconceptions regarding customs and traditions (Sheen et al., 2018).

According to sociologists, the hijab is a culturally significant cultural tradition, and, according to some scholars, the hijab is essential for the attainment of social unity and safety in Muslim countries (Swami, 2012; Jordan et al., 2020).

Over the past few years, the hijab has made a dramatic comeback in the Palestinian community in Israel. The fact that many female students in universities and colleges wear the hijab underscores the dramatic nature of this comeback. As a result of the increased percentage of hijab-wearing women in the Palestinian community in Israel, there has been a surge in interest in research on this topic. Some past research studies (Latifi, 2006; Shawish, 2002) have shown the existence of two separate rationales behind a woman's decision to wear a hijab. The first rationale is the view that the wearing of the hijab is in compliance with Islam's precepts; the second rationale is centred on individual choices based on cultural, psychological, economic, and other factors.

Faisal (2004) noted that the wearing of the hijab is important in several ways. Whereas some scholars see it only from a religious perspective, other scholars point to an entirely separate range of parameters that, while reflecting a commitment to Islam's religious principles, are primarily of a political nature (Faisal, 2004).

According to Faisal (2004), a social context has developed for the wearing of the hijab, particularly in recent years. The shape and quality of the hijab have been influenced by social factors, resulting in the traditional and religiously mandated hijab, the modern hijab, the trendy hijab, the political symbol hijab, the tribal hijab, and so forth. The arguments presented for the wearing of the hijab for various reasons, including—but not exclusively—religious ones, arise from a philosophical point of view: All these reasons express a deep respect for humanity, namely, a commitment to the survival of human beings, as well as the importance of values, beliefs, customs, and tradition (Khan, Watson & Habib, 2005).

Other societal dimensions of the wearing of the hijab have to do with marriage: One of the most common reasons for hijab-wearing among unmarried Muslim women is a desire to be considered marriageable on religious grounds (Phillips, Chambers, Ali, Pande & Hopkins, 2020). Latifi (2006) explained that “[m]arriage became an ambition for several girls who were competing to find their future husbands.” Thus, according to Latifi, the hijab can often be regarded as representing a young woman's or an adolescent girl's high moral standards and profound religious commitment. As Al Hufi (2006) viewed it, there is another factor involved in hijab-wearing: a social aspect, related to the issue of poverty. In many cases, the hijab is a simple and convenient way for a young woman or an adolescent

girl to cope with her financial inability to purchase new and attractive clothing (Al Hufi, 2006; Witkowski, 1999).

Empirical research has been undertaken in the Arab world to determine why the hijab has become popular among female Muslim university students. Shahba Khazal (2006), who conducted research in Iraq, found that female Muslim university students in that country wore the hijab mostly for social reasons, rather than religious ones. According to Khazal, parental involvement and the desire to be admired by one's social setting were among the most important social factors, and only a small number of Iraqi Muslim women wore the hijab out of moral considerations, out of a religious commitment, or because of a determination to hide their beauty from public view.

Khazal (2006) observed that the hijab is an expression of Islamic ideology and that it is used to emphasise the difference between the message of Islam and the message of secular Muslims. In his study, he pointed out the hijab is worn not only by Muslims but also by non-Muslims. The Assyrians were the first to require women to wear the hijab. According to Khazal, other monotheistic religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, also demand that women don a head-covering when participating in religious events.

To sum up, the approach to hijab-wearing among Muslim women has undergone several major changes. Some people have understood it exclusively as an expression of religious devotion, others as a means for protecting women from male oppression, while still others not only as an expression of religious commitment but also as the product of social, cultural, and political factors, such as fashion trends, the desire for social mobility, peer pressure, etc.

There is no agreement among scholars regarding the hijab. Some see it as a means for ensuring modesty and for expressing one's religious motivation, while others claim it limits women's mobility in the public sphere, and still others see it as a means for allowing women to move about freely in public spaces. Several scholars distinguish between the hijab and the shawl, concentrating on the behavioral symbolism of the hijab; in other words, according to these scholars, it is possible to predict how a woman who wears a hijab will behave in various social contexts (Mizel, 2020; Droogsma, 2007).

The increasing adoption of the hijab by Muslim women in the public sphere has given rise to tacit or explicitly stated expressions of concern in Western states in North America, Europe, and Australia, as well as in Israel (Droogsma, 2007; Bhimji, 2009).

The West's fixation with regard to the hijab has a long, complex history, and, although that obsession will not be discussed here, it continues to strongly impact contemporary discourse in the West on the hijab, as the number of female Muslim university students who decide to wear this traditional Muslim head covering is steadily increasing in Western countries, including Israel. The question that must be asked is what factors are behind this growing trend? Although the answer to that question is complicated, it can be said that essentially the hijab is a religious symbol. However, in certain instances, the hijab has been, and is today, also a political symbol.

In Iran, the hijab has undergone various stages in the development of its significance. Displaying a hostile attitude toward the hijab, in 1925 Iran's ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi, forbade Iranian women from wearing any form of headcover—hijab, veil, scarf, etc.—in public. Although his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, who succeeded him in 1941 as the Shah of Iran, did not ban the wearing of the hijab in public, he regarded the head covering as a primitive element of Iranian culture. In the late 1970s, when the political demonstrations against the Shah grew more intense, the hijab became a symbol of the struggle against the country's secular regime and against its pro-Western policies. The wearing of the hijab continues to generate serious disagreements in Iran and, in recent months, the hijab in Iran and the discourse regarding that subject have been transformed from a domestic issue to one that is being discussed throughout the world. The recent round of public demonstrations in that country was sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in police custody on 16 September 2022, after having been arrested for not wearing her hijab properly. In Turkey, the hijab was banned in public institutions after the 1980 coup; that ban was lifted less than ten years ago, in the wake of demonstrations by Muslim women who insisted on their right to wear this head covering and who protested against the ruling AK Party's secularist agenda (Mancini, 2006).

Similarly, in Palestine, the hijab has become more than just a religious symbol when it confronts colonialism. In a political-religious conflict as seen in Palestine, the hijab has turned into a symbol that has both religious and political significance: Its role in that particular context is to build and preserve a national identity, and thus the wearing of the hijab in Palestine symbolises Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

Context and literature review

The theoretical framework for the current study is primarily symbolic interactionism. The term “symbolic interactionism” was invented by Blumer (1962), who argued that human beings act in response to things based on the interpretations they assign to them:

- The interpretations of things originate from social connections.
- These interpretations are shaped and improved through an explanatory social process.
- The hijab is a social communication tool that has both visual and verbal value.

Mustafa @ Busu, Tasir, and Jusoh (2018) claimed that, in Islam, the human body is regarded as a source of shame that must be covered and hidden, and clothing has the power of sexually arousing men; therefore, the hijab's role is to protect women's modesty in the spirit of the Qur'an: “And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty” (Qur'an, 31:30:24). The hijab is meant to prevent men and women from sinning (Mustafa @ Busu et al., 2018). Muslims believe that men and women must be separated in the public sphere to protect the social order and that women's penetration of the public sphere could disrupt that order (Mizel, 2020).

Mernissi (1996) supported a positive approach toward the hijab; he maintained that the hijab's main role is to assure separation between men and women, and added that the wearing of the hijab is perceived by many Muslim women as a sign of religious

commitment and as an assertion of identity. According to Mernissi, the hijab provides an unmistakable connection to the wearer's homeland and culture. The wearing of the hijab, especially in the West, permits Muslim women to assert their religious identity in response to their feelings of exclusion and invisibility in the public sphere.

The wearing of the hijab is inseparable from the issue of the place of Muslim women in society, and is connected to the subject of identity in the community and to a determination to protect Muslim women's purity (Mahmood, 2011). The hijab's entry into the public sphere expands the borders of the Muslim community and allows women to maintain their identity outside their private space and outside their home. While it is customary to designate private spaces in the Muslim world, a private and separate space for Muslim women does not exist in the West; therefore, by wearing the hijab, they can attain greater mobility and will encounter fewer impediments.

According to Goffman (1959), there is a distinction between private and public places in a Muslim woman's life. She has a private place when she is at home with her husband, her children, her parents, and so on; in her own home, she can dress as she pleases. In the public sphere, she must wear a hijab in order to maintain conservative contact with others.

Whereas a Muslim woman who wears the hijab may see it as her way of preserving for herself a space of purity, piety, and dignity, those who see her wearing it might interpret that practice in a variety of ways, in addition to regarding the wearing of the hijab as a tool for the establishment of a clear boundary between a Muslim woman and those with whom she interacts in the public sphere (Alvi et al., 2003; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013; Ali et al., 2015). The stereotypic approach according to which Muslim women wear the hijab to protect themselves from male oppression is false, and most research studies refute this assumption. Muslim women and their hijab have come to represent a symbol of antagonism felt among members of Western culture toward Muslim extremists in Western society after the events of 11 September 2001, an event wrongly associated with extremist Islam (Badr, 2004: 335). According to studies conducted by Western scholars, this presumption is incorrect and does not represent the truth (Ali, 2005; Alvi et al., 2003; Al Wazni, 2015).

Some researchers (Williams & Vashi, 2007; Rinaldo, 2013) argued that Muslim women freely choose to wear the hijab and that no one forces them to do so. Hijab-wearing women respect their religion as well as the feelings of others, and they invariably receive much praise from those around them (Droogsma, 2007). Other academics maintain that the hijab acts as a kind of safety device, allowing Muslim women to move freely in public without fear of criticism, and that it also improves feminine communication in mixed workplaces, signalling to men that they cannot gossip about them or view them as sexual objects (Omair, 2009; Bullock, 2002). In other words, the hijab can be seen as a social instrument that tacitly informs others how they should behave.

The hijab can have another kind of impact on the surroundings that Muslim women find themselves in. According to Gurbuz and Gurbuz-Kucuksari (2009) and Al Wazni (2015), hijab-wearing among academic Muslim women in America frees them from being

subjected to its oppressive “beauty culture” and from unnecessary and often annoying male women-watching (Alvi et al., 2003; Bullock, 2002), forcing men to focus on women’s personalities and ideas rather than on their sexuality. Generally, the hijab generates a form of behaviour in the spirit of Islam; thus, people constantly scrutinise hijab-wearing women to see whether their behaviour is consistent with the values of Islam.

Many experts wonder why Muslim women in Western nations wear the hijab, even though they are not required to do so and are free to dress as they please. The answers are likely to be found in theories on multiculturalism and in pluralist thinking that allows hijab-wearing Muslim women to express their ethnic and religious identity in public without fear of being judged (Ali, 2005; Aytar & Bodor, 2019). In fact, it can even be argued that the wearing of the hijab is more of a personal statement than a reflection of the society in which Muslim women live.

The Palestinian context

In 2019, there were 49 academic institutions established in the Palestinian Authority, including 11 state institutions, 17 public and 17 private institutions, and four operated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The number of students attending these institutions was 220,000 in 2020. A third of these students were between the ages of 18 and 24, a high percentage compared with global statistics. Most of these institutions are coeducational, with student bodies consisting of both males and females, unlike the situation in the Palestinian Authority’s secondary school system, which is mostly characterised by a strict separation of male and female students (Higher Education Council in Palestine, 2019). Although most of these academic institutions are under Palestinian control, the Israeli occupation is visibly present in the establishment of checkpoints, the imposition of lockdowns, and the conducting of arrests. These actions on the part of the Israeli authorities encumbering of the daily lives of the Palestinian population, including students who almost daily travel to institutions of higher learning in Israel and Palestine.

It can be said that the politicisation of the hijab has taken place within a colonial context. A woman whose body is covered by a hijab is considered a challenge to Western civilization because of the Western approach toward the hijab according to which this article of clothing represents primitivity. In Fanon’s (1959) view, Western males regard the hijab as an open challenge to the colonial system and therefore believe that Muslim women should be liberated and should no longer be required to wear it.

Israeli colonialism has unique characteristics. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the strategy of every Israeli government not to annex it are intended to preserve a Jewish majority in the State of Israel, while the military control of the territories enables Israel to impose a military colonial regime on them. Prior to the First Intifada (December 1987 to September 1993), the wearing of the hijab was considered the required dress code for mature Palestinian women, symbolising their modesty and respected position in Palestinian society and signifying an end to their pursuit of the latest fashion trend (Dakkak & Mikulka, 2012).

It could be argued that, on the one hand, the wearing of the hijab conveys a message of defiance in the face of the Israeli soldiers and settlers in the occupied territories, while, on the other hand, the hijab is also a visual message signifying the presence of the Palestinian people in its homeland before the era of the Israeli occupation.

Markedly different from the ideal of a civic society, the colonial context in the West Bank is expressed in complex and frequently tense situations, such as the establishment and operation of Israeli checkpoints and the intrusion of Israeli soldiers into Palestinian homes. Thus, the Palestinians regard Israelis as occupiers and not as representatives of a properly functioning democratic society.

In the present study, I argue that the oppressive regime of the occupation directly impacts the attitude of Palestinian Muslim women toward the hijab. In the interviews I conducted with female Palestinian Muslim university students, I found that these women considered the wearing of the hijab not only as a commitment to the principles of Islam but also as a political act and a symbol of Palestinian society's durability and its opposition to colonialism. Thus, the Israeli occupation necessitates an updating of the professional literature on women who wear the hijab under occupation. In light of the above, the present study constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of the motivation of Muslim women to wear the hijab, especially the motivation of Palestinian Muslim women living under the Israeli occupation, and to our understanding of their perceptions and attitude toward this Western colonial occupier as expressed in the decision to wear a hijab.

The hijab and resistance to occupation

A number of scholars have discussed the subject of the hijab as a symbol of resistance to occupation (Sidi, Geller, Abu Sinni, Levy & Handelzalts (2020). The hijab played a pivotal role in the struggle to liberate Algeria from colonialism. French colonial culture sought to assimilate Algerian Muslim women into secular French culture, and it was easier to assimilate women who did not wear the hijab. Thus, the hijab was the main obstacle in Algeria to assimilation into secular French colonial culture, and the French authorities there sought ways by which they could persuade Muslim women to cease wearing the hijab and to sever their cultural ties with Islamic tradition, and by which they could establish control over the colony's entire population.

In the eyes of the French colonial regime, the hijab was a strategic tool of resistance that it sought to overcome; thus, the regime used various methods intended to encourage Muslim women in the colony to stop wearing the hijab. For example, a special ceremony was instituted to celebrate a Muslim woman's decision to cease wearing the hijab (Fanon, 1959). The Algerian Muslim women who agreed to go through this ceremony often felt guilty about their having turned their backs on Islamic culture and tradition. However, most importantly for the battle for Algerian independence, the hijab became a symbol of resistance that helped strengthen the resolve of the Algerian liberation movement in its struggle against the French colonial regime (Fanon, 1959).

In Islamic society in general, women play a key role in safeguarding harmony within their society and in protecting family values as well as religious and national values. Muslim women who wear the hijab symbolise the cultural world of their family and their society. Attempts to discourage Muslim women from wearing the hijab undermine the harmony of Muslim society.

In a report that appeared in *The New York Times* in March 1958, Hal Lehrman wrote that the hijab was an instrument of resistance around which the Algerians could unite in their struggle against the French colonial regime. El Guindi (1999) also described the hijab as a rallying symbol for the Algerian liberation movement and noted that, the more aggressively the French occupation attacked the hijab, the more defiantly the Algerian nation defended the hijab.

In Palestine, like Algeria, the hijab is a key instrument in the resistance to occupation, namely, the Israeli occupation, although the Palestinian struggle against occupation is being carried out in a markedly different context (Alayan & Shehadeh, 2021). Before the First Intifada, the percentage of Muslim women in Palestine who wore the hijab was lower than what it is today, and there were many different kinds of hijab, especially in Gaza, in accordance with the wearer's social class and geographic setting, and in accordance with the religion of the wearer's non-Muslim setting. The late 1970s saw the rise of new Islamic movements, the most prominent of which was Hamas. All of these movements tried to encourage Muslim women to wear the hijab and attached great importance to the return of the hijab to the Islamic public space (Hammami, 1990).

The return of the hijab to the Islamic public space is today expressing itself in almost every social class and in the academic world.

An overview of the research conducted for this study

Research method

The academic institution in which the present research study was carried out is a Palestinian university, chosen for two reasons. First, the fact that the students attending it were Palestinians meant that, more than any other contexts in Palestine, this university reflects the many facets of Palestinian society. Second, there was the issue of accessibility, which was greatly facilitated by the fact that I taught an elective course there on culture that was attended by Palestinian students who represented a wide variety of lifestyles.

The present study is a follow-up to my previous research study (Mizel, 2020), which focused on the views of female Palestinian Muslim students attending an Israeli university. In the present study, I based my findings on interviews with a sample group of female Palestinian Muslim students attending a Palestinian university who decided to wear the hijab. I discovered that these female Palestinian students wore diverse and unique types of hijab, and I was interested in learning how they view the hijab. I employed a qualitative approach as my research method.

The research tools

The current study is based on in-depth interviews, the goal being to find out how the female students who were interviewed perceived the hijab. The assessment of the interviews showcased the students' experiences with the hijab. The employment of the in-depth interview method is ideal for qualitative research because it aids in the discovery of the whole picture, helping researchers to comprehend the perspectives of the people interviewed and providing underlying meanings. In this kind of research method, the interviewees each speak at length about their personal stories (Lieblich et al., 1998). By using the in-depth interview or story method, researchers acquire a deeper perception and a greater understanding of the interviewees' attitudes (Polkinghorne, 1995). The assessment of the interviews (stories) can help researchers to understand the phenomenon or phenomena they are studying better, more deeply, and in an objective manner (Stake, 2006).

The research participants

The study involved interviews with 38 female Palestinian Muslim students, all of whom were attending at the time a Palestinian university and who had similar social and cultural characteristics. All of the participants were students in the university's Department of Education, and were between the ages of 18 and 23. All of them were third-year students studying toward a bachelor's degree in education, and who had previously attended an all-girls secondary school. At the time that the research study was conducted, they were students in a mixed environment attending a university whose student body consisted of both female and male students, and their undergraduate years represented their first encounter with men outside the family environment.

The research question

The research question in this study was: How do female Palestinian students justify their decision to wear the hijab?

The significance of the research

The topic of hijab-wearing emerged in a discussion in one of the courses I taught. That discussion, where hijab-wearing students and non-hijab-wearing students talked about the religious aspect of the hijab, increased my interest and the students' interest in how female Muslim students view the hijab, its importance, and reasons why Muslim women decide to wear it.

Procedures

The study was conducted between 2018 and 2019 when I was hired as a lecturer at the above mentioned Palestinian university. A similar study that I had undertaken and in which I interviewed female Palestinian students who were Israeli citizens (Mizel, 2020) inspired me to examine the issue among Palestinians living in a different context, namely under Israeli occupation and without Israeli citizenship.

I asked 81 female Muslim students participating in a culture course to make an anonymous statement about how they felt regarding the hijab and why they wore it (if they decided to do so). An assessment of their written responses revealed that they connected the hijab with a variety of topics, not just religion, such as, for example, social, cultural, and political issues. Their responses were of a general nature and did not go into detail. The participants were asked whether they would be willing to take part in my study.

Forty of the 81 students attending this culture course, all of whom wore the hijab, agreed to take part in my research study. As things turned out, 38 of these 40 students participated in the interview procedure. The idea for a formal research study—in addition to my conversation with the hijab-wearing Arab woman at the above-mentioned conference—arose during the class discussion previously referred to surrounding the hijab and what it signifies. The class did not reach a consensus, and I asked the students to express their thoughts in writing anonymously and to answer in detail how they perceived the hijab.

After I collected the answers, I documented them, identifying the major topics that emerged. Once I had set up the basic infrastructure for my research study, I conducted interviews in the classroom during the lunchtime break between lectures (between 12:00 noon and 2:00 pm), when the women were taking time off from their intensive academic activity. I purposely chose to conduct the interviews in a classroom because I wanted to make the students feel comfortable in a familiar environment that would encourage them to talk openly. I interviewed five students each week, and the entire process took three months. I benefited considerably from the interviews with the first ten women because they presented points of view with which I had not previously been familiar. After updating the interview format with the new insights I had gained from these initial interviews, I produced a different version for the subsequent interviews. Because of the sensitivity of traditional Muslim society, the 30-minute interviews were documented only in writing; they were not recorded. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, the mother tongue of both the researcher and the students. Being Muslim myself, I was sensitive to the students' feelings and their religious orientation. Since I was the students' lecturer, many of them felt comfortable talking to me and were thus able to speak freely and share their feelings of distress with me.

The code of ethics applied in this research study

The participants were informed of the study's importance, its goals, and its methodology. I also promised to keep the identities of both the students and their university confidential. The interviewees were given the chance to review their transcribed interviews and to hear the researcher's thoughts on these interviews. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Findings

An effective way for getting a sense of a specific research population is interview methodology, which is regarded by many scholars as the best method for gathering

significant amounts of data on a certain topic. Because of the unique nature of each case, interview methodology is a highly useful tool for anyone desiring to study the fundamental incentives of the individual members of a given research population and to identify the common causes for the conduct of these members (Lieblich et al., 1998). I employed the focused individual interview method, which enabled the creation of an interview format that could effectively uncover relevant information. The participants in the present study, who were hijab-wearing female Muslim college students, were interviewed individually. Thus, I was able to obtain relevant and important information on each of the participants and to learn how she interacted, spoke, and behaved in different contexts.

The students had different styles of dress. For instance, Samira, 21, from Jerusalem, wore jeans with her hijab, Ola from Bethlehem wore a long skirt, and Nadra from Hebron wore a veil in addition to her hijab. The data on the students were evaluated in accordance with the primary categories that had been derived from the interviews with the participants.

Prevalence of fashion and modernity

Only three students reported that they saw the hijab primarily as a fashion accessory, rather than as a religious requirement. Describing themselves as conservative but not fanatical regarding religion, they regarded the hijab as part of their personal identity. All three students noted that they wore the style of hijab that was currently in fashion, especially the Turkish hijab, which is identified with new fashion trends, and they made a point of mentioning the existence of accessible fashion shops where hijabs can be purchased. The three students lived in a primarily Christian community and were influenced by its liberal environment. Although they considered themselves religious, they said that it was important for them not to be very different from the other women in the area where they lived.

The area where we live, especially the shopping malls, gets a lot of clothing made in Turkey, and I see that at the malls. I liked what I saw, so I bought a hijab. On the one hand, it protects my religion, while, on the other hand, it upgrades me to someone who is more liberal and who has fashion savvy, and it helps me show people that I am beautiful without exposing myself too much. (Amira)

A possible explanation for the fact that a minority of the participants in the present study perceived the hijab as a fashion accessory is that this category of hijab represents materialistic culture, as noted in Karin's (2008a) research study. Since the participants' social context was conservative, only a few were bold enough to adopt this type of hijab.

Religious issues and modesty

Twenty-two students reported that they wore the hijab for religious motives. They stated that they believed in the importance of wearing it and that they felt that it protected them and preserved the values of Islam.

I wear the hijab for religious motives. Religion empowers me, as does the hijab. For me, the Holy Qur'an is the law, and it guides me when to wear the hijab and when not to wear it. (Latifa, 21)

For Latifa, the hijab symbolises limits: when to wear the hijab and when not to. She wears it when she is at her university or when she goes shopping, that is, in public spaces, but in the privacy of her own home and with the members of her family, she does not wear it.

Su'ad emphasised the religious context of hijab-wearing:

According to the principles of our religion, men and women should not mix. The hijab is meant to prevent men from looking at us and admiring our beauty. Our beauty belongs to, and must be saved only for, our future husbands.

Samia, 21, was more insistent on the spiritual aspect of hijab-wearing and expressed profoundly religious sentiments:

What is life? It is a fraud. This world is meaningless. We do not live for ourselves; we live to implement the rules of the Holy Qur'an. The next world is the important one for us; it will bring us happiness. The hijab, for me, is the means to achieve happiness in the next world.

Fatma, 23, articulated a similar viewpoint:

Apart from the religious aspect, the hijab protects our modesty as women and keeps us safe; when we wear the hijab, we are perceived as respectable women in our community.

In the explanation she gave for wearing the hijab, Samah, 21, provided additional religious components:

I am very proud to wear the hijab. It symbolises my religious identity, especially when I go to pray at Al-Aqsa. I experience the pinnacle of my pride when I pass through the Israeli police checkpoint before the mosque.

Space and identity

Nine of the participants reported that the wearing of the hijab expressed their national and cultural identity. They stated that it was important for them to be seen openly in public and to move about in the public sphere without fear. Lama, 21, described what the hijab did for her in the public sphere:

I never used to wear the hijab. Many Jews and settlers in our area live near our house. In the past, I was afraid to wear it, because I feared I would be harmed or detained. Now I proudly wear it in order to show them that my identity is Muslim-Palestinian.

Nadima and Salma differentiated themselves from the other participants:

The moment I go out to non-Muslim spaces, everybody is surprised to see the hijab, and I become an immediate suspect. I used to be afraid, but not anymore. The surprised looks only strengthen me and increase my self-respect. As someone who wears the hijab, I feel that I am controlling not only my own body but also the space where I am. (Nadima, 20)

When I go to the university, I must pass through an Israeli Army checkpoint. Before reaching the checkpoint, I used to take off my hijab so as not to be detained, and I sometimes succeeded. I had a long discussion with myself, and my conscience bothered me. In the end, I decided to wear the hijab despite the checkpoint in order to show the soldiers my identity and who the owner of the hijab was. The hijab can contribute a lot to one's emotional wellbeing, and it makes me feel that I have won. (Salma, 21)

Three interviewees referred to the hijab as a means for mobility that helped them go out into the public sphere. They believed that Muslim society had laws and religious norms that addressed men and women differently: Men could move about the public sphere freely, but not women. According to these three participants in the study, the hijab enabled women to protect their honor because the hijab was perceived as a protecting device. A Muslim woman who wore a hijab would not be harmed; thus, she could leave her private space and move about in the public sphere relatively freely with certain limitations. This attitude was expressed in some of the participants' replies. For example:

I have a sister who lives in another village, and she does not wear a hijab. However, she told me that her public space was more limited, in comparison with Muslim women who wore a hijab. Her husband told her that she could leave the house to go on errands or to go shopping, etc., only if she wore a hijab. My situation is different because my parents allow me mobility: They believe, and so do I, that the hijab protects me. I can go out into the street without fear. (Magda, 21)

I never leave without my parents' consent. I find it is easy to go out in public, and I do not need to negotiate with my parents, because the hijab protects me, and my parents trust it. (Gada, 22)

The issue of marriage

Two of the students claimed that the wearing of a hijab sped up the marriage process. They maintained that Muslim men respected a hijab-wearing woman more than one who did not wear a hijab. Nadima, 19, said that she had a friend who became religious and started wearing a hijab, and that, not long after that, she was already married. Nadima added, "I see that most of the unmarried women in our society do not wear a hijab."

Health issues

Two students reported that they began wearing the hijab because of health problems that they experienced or that their family members experienced. Haya, 20, recalled:

I started wearing the hijab when my mother was diagnosed with cancer, and I was afraid she would die. So, I turned to religion and began wearing the hijab.

The many facets of hijab-wearing

The discussion concerning the wearing of the hijab is never-ending. Some scholars perceive the hijab as a symbol of women's oppression and subordination, while others (Mizel, 2020; Ruby, 2006; Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014) view the wearing of the hijab as a religious and cultural act that enables the maintenance of religious and national identity. The present study found that most female Palestinian students perceived the wearing of the hijab as an expression of religious and national identity and definitely not a symbol of oppression. This attitude is different from that of Palestinian Muslim female students who live and study in Israel (Mizel, 2020).

Conclusions

In recent years, the hijab has become the most visible symbol of Muslim identity, both religious and national, especially in Western cultures and in conflict zones, such as the Middle East, where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a dominant presence. Modesty is an important value in Islam, and the hijab is a major symbol related to that value. The significance of wearing the hijab differs from one community to another and depends on the cultural, social, and political space in each community. The hijab also aids women, particularly in conservative societies, to move about in the public sphere.

The research for the present study was carried out in a colonial context—that is, in the occupied West Bank—and points to the motivation of female Palestinian students to wear a hijab: namely, a desire to express their national and religious identity. The interaction of the Palestinian students with Israeli society is limited to encounters with settlers and soldiers at the checkpoints. Therefore, the wearing of the hijab, beyond being an expression of religious devotion, also serves as an act of defiance in the face of the Israeli occupation, because it instills pride in female Palestinian Muslim students with regard to their identity. The students I interviewed told me that both the fact that they reside in the Holy Land and their living in such close proximity to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem greatly influenced their religious and national understanding, and the wearing of the hijab was an expression of this understanding. There are, of course, Palestinian Muslim female students with different approaches, but they are few in number. A very different attitude was found among Palestinian students living in Israel and studying at Israeli institutions: The religious identity component was less significant in their lives.

In the present study, I examined the motivation behind the decision of Palestinian Muslim women who live in the West Bank under a regime of occupation and oppression to wear the hijab. Although the wearing of the hijab is perceived primarily in religious terms, politicisation and resistance to colonialism have penetrated this perception and have transformed the wearing of the hijab into a practice that, in addition to being motivated by religious sentiments, expresses resistance to the occupation. Thus, the wearing of the hijab and its visibility can be seen as having highly significant implications for the status quo and as bearing a prominent element of resistance to the Israeli occupation.

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