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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Atasoy, Y. (2006). Governing women's morality: a study of islamic veiling in Canada. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 203-221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549406063164>

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# Governing women's morality

## *A study of Islamic veiling in Canada*

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**ABSTRACT** The veiling of Muslim women is subject to strongly contested ideas about whether the veil is a symbol of women's subordination to an oppressive tradition or a means of emancipation from that tradition. This article suggests that women's own personal reasons for veiling must be analysed. Data collected from published documents from Muslim organizations allows for demonstration that the veil is configured as central to an Islamic moral code of female modesty. A further analysis of findings from interviews conducted with veiled Muslim women in Winnipeg shows the nuanced ways in which women enact this code.

**KEYWORDS** *Canada, gender, Islamic culture, Muslim organizations, veil, women*

**This article provides** an analysis of women's personal veiling practices and the Islamic construction of women's morality in Canada. By examining published written materials collected from the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and Muslim Students Association (MSA), this article demonstrates that these organizations configure Islamic normative standards for women's veiling. Through an analysis of interviews with 18 veiled women it explores their appropriation of such standards. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how the tensions and complexities of veiling practices are played out, an in-depth analysis is offered of two women's experience. For the women in this study, the 'veil' refers to a woman's headcovering.

### **Literature review**

Feminist research on women's veiling evokes emotionally charged and divergent reactions. For Afshar (1998) and Moghadam (1991), who focus on state-sanctioned and 'compulsory veiling' in Iran, the veil is both a symbol of the subordination of Muslim women to men and a cultural element that restricts women's personal freedom and individual human



rights. However, in considering 'voluntary veiling' in Egypt, Hoodfar (1997a) and Macleod (1991) show that young and highly-educated women in particular adopt the veil as a personal strategy to assure others that they can be active in the public arena and maintain their honour at the same time. These scholars also argue that lower-class women are wearing the veil to gain access to cash income and resist a gender ideology that opposes their education and paid employment.

While veiling cannot be understood as specific to lower-class women under financial pressure to work, the significance of research done by Hoodfar and Macleod lies in recognizing the veil as a site of women's agency. Veiled women appear to be conscious and purposeful actors who deliberately negotiate the dominant gender ideologies in their societies to advance their own interests and agendas. El Saadawi (1999) rejects this perspective and argues that the veil can be understood only from within a women-subordinating Islamic discourse that defines female sexuality as dangerous to men's morality.

Such arguments run the risk of framing women's veiling by reference to an ahistorical cultural essence attributed to Islam. For Mernissi (1991), the problem lies not in the religion of Islam but in the political dominance of a particular understanding of Islam held by a religious-political male elite, which has reconfigured gender relations in such a way that women are required to be obedient, subservient, modest and humble. Thus, Mernissi (1996) argues, Muslim women's 'agency' presupposes resistance to a male-dominated hegemonic discourse that views women as subordinate.

Ahmed (1982, 1992) also argues that the veil has no innate meaning inimical to women's interests. She suggests that it is an historically specific symbol of women's oppression and inferiority constructed during the colonial encounter between Muslim societies and European powers. These powers structured a discursive tradition of essentialist cultural dichotomy between Islam and the West. The values and practices of Islam were seen to embody a backward culture which required women's passivity and submissiveness; European cultural norms, loosely identified with the liberal tradition, presupposed freedom in favour of individual autonomy and self-realization. Many western liberal feminists, perhaps unwittingly, back this discourse, portraying veiled women as indifferent, largely unaware of their oppression and docile toward the subordinating practices of Islam (Ahmed, 1982). To be free, Muslim women must resist Islamic norms and practices that privilege men. However, for Mohanty (2003), this attempt at liberation politics is ethnocentric. It results from 'western feminists' generalizing their particular perspective as universal while categorizing non-western women as tradition-bound victims of patriarchal cultures.

The post-colonial feminism of Ahmed (1982) identifies a potentially liberating symbolism in the act of veiling. The veiling of women signals a



distinct cultural experience embedded in an indigenous Islamic culture and is representative of Muslim anti-colonial resistance to western domination (Ahmed, 1992). This article argues that this overgeneralizes the political concerns of Muslim women and risks reproducing the cultural essentialism attributed to Islam. It also reduces Muslim women to a uniform category who autonomously articulate a liberation discourse for themselves from within anti-colonial independence movements by uncritically adopting Muslim cultural practices.

Post-colonial feminist scholars (Ahmed, 1992; Lazreg, 1994; Mohanty, 2003) have provided an important corrective to a single identification of feminism with a 'western' liberal discourse by arguing that feminist theory must be responsive to the local diversity of women's lives. Ahmed and Lazreg locate the veil as a site of women's agency and an embodiment of an authentic Muslim culture that resists western models. For Ahmed, this can empower women in their resistance to structures of subordination. For Lazreg, it may undermine women's attempts to achieve an independent self that transcends the moral boundaries of a dominant Islamic discourse. Regardless, both views reproduce a binary certainty about women's liberation.

A binary view also informs research on the veiling of Muslim women in non-Muslim societies. According to Bloul (1997), French commentators believe that veiled women are required to veil by Muslim men who wish to demonstrate publicly that Islam exists as an opposing force to secular French values. According to Shakeri (2000), Canadian commentaries depict the veil as a sign of the subordination of Muslim women to norms constructed by men. These viewpoints portray Muslim women as passive and submissive and Islam as a religion of women's oppression. According to Hoodfar (1997b), this image of oppressed Muslim women is intertwined with the racism that veiled Muslim women face in Canada. For Hoodfar, veiling should be understood in relation to women's agency in resisting racism. Immigrant women who are subject to racism often uphold the veil as a sign of identity, symbolizing resistance to the dominance of Euro-Canadian cultural codes in their everyday life. By veiling, women register their role as central in the public expression of Muslim cultural difference. I argue that this perspective tends to naturalize women's agency in enacting Muslim cultural values. It assumes that a permanent Muslim cultural identity exists by reference to which women's veiling can be explained as a product of women's own choice.

The notion of culture as a unified, non-conflictual force has long been challenged in cultural scholarship. Abu-Lughod's (1986) work on Bedouin women in Egypt shows the complexity of the process through which women embrace the moral ideals of a culture, yet their actions are not necessarily reflective of a political consciousness aimed at maintaining it. Their cultural practices are not subordinating and their resistance, expressed through their poetry, is not subversive either. Similarly, the work



of Read and Bartkowski (2000) on Muslim women living in Austin, TX, demonstrates that women are social actors with individual differences, playing out the uncertainties and complexities of their lives as they don the veil. These examples refute suggestions that locate Muslim women's agency within their own efforts to embody the normative standards of a homogeneous culture.

The question of women's agency is a troubling issue in feminist theory. An emphasis on agency assumes that women are active, rational subjects who desire autonomy and self-realization by struggling against the dominant norms and institutions that oppress them (Lovell, 2003). This liberal emphasis within feminism belies the reality that women also actively adopt dominant norms that systematically constrain their options. According to Davis (1993), women's acceptance of the dominant cultural discourse does not necessarily reflect their subordination by men. As cultures enter into everyday lives, women's engagement with dominant gender norms varies from individual to individual. Therefore, an analysis of the nuances in women's experience of dominant ideology should ensure that women do not become 'cultural dupes' in studies of gendered power relations. This article contends that we should not ignore the possibility that women pursue constraining ideals and practices and actively support religious traditions that might sustain principles of female subordination – a possibility that cannot be captured by binary registers of cultural enactment and subversion.

It would seem that women's participation in, and support for, veiling is not as straightforward as feminist thought often assumes. The women in this study see the veil as a powerful symbol of collective identification with Islam. They also conceive of the veil as central to their cultural definition of personhood. Their veiling narratives fuse a search for cultural belonging with the pursuit of selfhood. This opens up space for a much more nuanced understanding of the veil as linked to women's life stories. Although they embrace and uphold the dominant normative Islamic position with conviction, this does not negate the uncertainty that these women may have in the context of their personal lives. The women that were interviewed hold the dominant Islamic position that frames the veil as an identity symbol of cultural difference. But one of these women has very ambivalent feelings towards a single identification with the dominant Islamic cultural standpoint. This woman faces personal difficulties in dealing with the realities of racism, xenophobia and anti-Islamic sentiments. Although she wants to act collectively with moral conviction, she also seeks to act according to dominant normative standards that are consistent with 'girl culture' in North America today. These standards include individualism, self-determination, autonomy and assertiveness (Adams and Bettis, 2003). Such narratives reveal variation which does not produce a single, unified story for women's veiling with political and analytical clarity. This opens up the possibility of unsettling the essentialist



binary generalizations about the enactment of Islamic norms and their subversion which are made often in feminist scholarship, especially in relation to the subordination and empowerment of Muslim women.

## Data

Two types of data were used: information gathered from published documents and information gained through interviews with 18 veiled Muslim women in Winnipeg, Canada. The first type of data is drawn from Islamic periodicals, newsletters and pamphlets published and distributed by ISNA and MSA. These organizations provided their journals, *Islamic Horizons* and *Muslim Voice*, published between 1994 and 2000. The data drawn from these publications include public statements, comments and evaluations made by reporters and editors. A textual analysis of these statements enabled a general picture of dominant Islamic views to be drawn. The statements may reflect the personal and conflicting opinions of writers, reporters and editors on global politics and women's veiling. This article does not dwell on such references, neither does it examine the specific form in which these materials are presented. Its goal is to show the publicly-made general normative position on the veil's symbolism. It does not examine the degree of influence of ISNA–MSA on women's views, it only offers a general description.<sup>1</sup>

The second type of data consists of interviews, all transcribed and then analysed. The sample of veiled women includes students studying at the University of Manitoba and highly-educated professional women in Winnipeg. Participants were recruited through personal contacts in the community and snowball sampling. Face-to-face, open-ended interviews were conducted with each of the participants, which were approximately two hours long and recorded on audiotape. Approval was received for the interview process from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of Manitoba and the participants' consent to be interviewed was obtained. All the participants have been given pseudonyms.

## Sample

The student sample includes 13 undergraduates and two graduates studying architecture, biology, engineering, English, philosophy and psychology. All were born and raised in Canada. The high proportion of undergraduate university students in the sample is due to the snowballing sampling method. The undergraduate students are in their twenties and of diverse ethnic origin. All have close friendships with other female members of MSA in their age group and all are members of the MSA. They first covered their hair during high school or as they entered university. In addition, three professional women who are recent immigrants were interviewed: a doctor, a nurse and a professor of



engineering. The doctor is from Pakistan and began veiling after immigrating to Canada. The nurse and professor are from Iran and were brought up under compulsory veiling.

All the women in the sample defined themselves as religious, regardless of their actual observance of daily prayers. None of them were educated in religious schools but all were brought up as Muslims by their parents. None had a strictly religious family background. During the interviews it became clear that the decision to veil for these women involved a long process of personal deliberation. The interviews enabled an exploration of their religious sentiments, personal hopes and doubts regarding veiling. First, the findings from the analysis of published material will be examined, followed by an analysis of the interview results.

### **Findings: ISNA-MSA and women's morality**

ISNA and MSA are the largest Muslim institutions in North America. Founded in 1983, ISNA is an umbrella organization for all North-American Muslim associations. Founded in 1963, MSA serves Muslim college and university students. Both ISNA and MSA are concerned with the question of what it means to be distinctly Muslim in Canada.

ISNA's view of the veil is organized around the belief that Islam is a universal faith that connects all forms of Islamic culture. Its ideological guidance comes from the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928 (Esposito, 1987) and the Jama'at-I Islami, founded in Pakistan in 1941 (Nasr, 1993). These movements encourage Muslims to separate themselves from non-Muslims and organize to eradicate un-Islamic governments. However, the immediate concern for Muslims living in non-Muslim societies is not the elimination of un-Islamic governments – which would be virtually impossible – but the social and political empowerment of the Muslim community. Empowerment can be achieved by living as a unified community in Islamic enclaves, insulated from outside pressures that threaten Islamic values (Haddad, 2000). ISNA argues that segregation is necessary because North America has deviated from a moral life ordained by God (Atasoy, 2003). In this context, veiling becomes a mark of identity within a distinctive community of Muslims.

In promoting Muslim community as a unified entity, ISNA demands that Muslims show their commitment to a 'true' faith in Islam and distinguish between 'true' believers and 'less sincere' Muslims (ISNA, nd). There is no difference between the 'truly faithful' based on sex. In fact, the Islamic belief that 'sovereignty belongs to God' is conducive to equality between men and women. Nevertheless, ISNA's emphasis on the family as a unit of gendered relations undermines such a possibility (Hamideh, 1998; Hofman, 1999; Nadir, 1998). As the head of the family, a man's sphere of activity is in the public realm of paid work, providing for women and children. Women are defined as auxiliary to men, although as mothers



and wives they are pivotal to the community. A mother's role is to educate future generations of 'true believing' Muslims who are committed to the formation of an Islamic society. This implies women's exclusion from the public sphere of paid employment and underscores the limits of women's participation in society.

It is against this ideological background of gender segregation that Muslim women seek to position themselves in Canada. While this may prompt a feminist vision of gender equality, MSA and ISNA do not support feminism. In fact, they criticize it for having a negative influence on the Islamic principle of female modesty. In an interview with the *Muslim Voice*, the director of the International Union of Muslim Women suggests that:

I see some of our sisters who think that in order to be accepted by the men as equal, that they must force their way in, and they become aggressive and really vexing in their behaviour. They are not being *ladies*. . . . And a Muslim woman above all else is a lady. (TMV Staff, 1995: 1)

This preference for 'ladylike' behaviour links good manners and moral respectability to stereotypically feminine traits ('HCI Invites Michael Coren', 1999; Murad, 1997). Although it is not exactly defined in terms of what it involves, the notion of a 'lady' frames the social position of moral respectability through the performance of domestic social norms. This identification of Muslim women with a homemaker-mother image can be seen as a kind of Victorian Islamic thinking. Women should be allowed to pursue a professional career only if their dignity, modesty and morality remain intact. And a woman's paid work should not hinder the fulfilment of her role as a mother and wife.

MSA promotes this normative discourse among university students. By providing an organizational forum for learning to live in accordance with Islamic moral standards, Muslim students are 'educated' on the 'dangers' of 'mixed' social activities on university campuses. These dangers include drinking, smoking, drug abuse, extramarital sexual activity and date-rape (Siddiqui, 1995; Zine, 1998). The MSA believes that parents are unable to prepare their children for the dangers of living in a university environment (Hamdani, 1995). To avoid these dangers and maintain Islamic moral integrity, the MSA explicitly advises students to cultivate their friendships exclusively within the organization and to minimize contact with non-Muslim students.

Men operate these organizations; women are excluded from the decision-making and planning process. The political participation of women is restricted to fundraising through food, T-shirt and poster sales and organizing seminars, conferences, fairs and social activities on university campuses. Despite being marginalized within the MSA, women do not raise major objections to male domination. This is because they are





committed to the MSA's vital role as a forum for learning Islamic normative standards. In this learning process, the notion of modesty assumes a central place. The Koranic concept of modesty provides a universal basis for Islamic regulation of behaviour (Watson, 1994). From the vantage point of the politics of gender relations, the MSA regards female modesty as an important Islamic norm and expects women to uphold it by conforming to a gender-typed Islamic dress code, although it is not imposed as a formal requirement. While male students dress casually in 'western' style pants and button-down shirts, female students experience strong normative pressure to wear the veil and resist various un-Islamic behaviours such as dating or wearing revealing clothes ('The Perception of Hijab', 1999).

### **The veil and cultural belonging**

The participants stated that, similar to the use of the turban by Sikhs who wish to fashion a sense of cultural difference, the veil has helped them to gain greater self-confidence, dignity and cultural recognition and has contributed to a sense of Muslim community. All the participants expressed the desire to be connected with other Muslims in their schools, thereby separating themselves to a large extent from Canadian youth culture. As Esma asserted, 'We are all involved in spreading the word of Islam,' and Sahin added, 'We have all kinds of Muslims from Pakistan, Malaysia, Africa, the Philippines, even England. We must keep together as Muslims.' Zeynep even considered quitting her chosen field of engineering to enrol in a less challenging programme:

I am pretty occupied with organizing Muslim events that take a whole lot of effort. I think it is very important to keep the community together. I wouldn't mind if I gave up some of my professional engineering ambitions to do this.

Sahin explained:

You have to act as though they are your family. That is how you keep each other strong. We are surrounded with everything we are not supposed to be doing. Schools are terrible places: smoking, drugs, drinking, pre-marital sex.

Nusret stated that 'if you cannot get away from a society that is un-Islamic, you can move away and form your own separate community that follows Islamic rules'. For Selma, 'some girls are stronger in practising Islamic rules and some aren't. It is much easier to practise Islamic rules when you are together, united.'

The respondents talked about veiling in terms of cultivating close-knit peer-group relations. According to Farah, 'If you are not covered, you feel isolated from other Muslim girls. They don't socialize with you. They think you are doing bad things.' Siddique explained:



I can't spend much time with my non-Muslim friends, it is totally legitimate because they are at a university and now and then they want to go to the bar. I can't participate in that. I've gone to movies with them but again they want to go with their boyfriends. In Islam there is usually no interaction with men unless it is necessary.

For these students the veil offers cultural membership and religious strength. Sahin states:

It is hard as a young women not to have a boyfriend in this society. In Islam you don't do that because it will just ruin your sense of faith. The veil reminds you that this isn't allowed.

For Parvin, 'If you have it on your head, it is more of a bookmark, a reminder of what I shouldn't be doing.' And for Hesma:

The veil reminds me that I submit to Allah . . . If I don't wear it, people might take it as I'm doing something wrong. Say I'm talking to a guy or some Muslim brother walks by and then he sees and then, maybe they'll make [up] a story. With the veil I know I keep my distance from others and am part of my own community.

Sarah believes the veil keeps her away from doing

stupid things like dating a guy. When I am hanging around with [non-Muslim] girls my own age, a large aspect of their head is who is looking at them, what they should be wearing and, how they should be looking and how to attract them. That is not part of my life, definitely not, that whole energy that I don't lose to keep me away from my studies, my religion.

These women are deliberate in their veiling activity. The interviews with Aisha and Fatma demonstrate that, in addition to a desire to defend the cultural distinctiveness of their community, veiling is a part of Muslim women's struggle to realize selfhood. In the case of Aisha, the veil helps her to deal with an eating disorder. But the question of whether or not it matters to defend Islamic distinctiveness through veiling also increases her anxiety over issues of sexuality, romantic love, marriage and success. Fatma's story is different in that it is rooted in her experience of emigrating to Canada with the hope of embracing Islamic principles in her daily life. She aims to reposition herself in Canada as a professional Muslim woman who wears the veil.

Aisha's story is examined here in greater detail. This is because her narrative reveals a woman who has difficulties in drawing the symbolic boundaries of her behaviour and thus goes back and forth between the ISNA-MSA politics of cultural separation on the one hand, and the politics



of engagement with Canadian ways, on the other. She seeks to construct a self, although she is not sure how to fashion it. Fatma's story signals a more active internal dialogue, fusing a western-liberal account of individualism with an 'Islamic' culture. Nevertheless, both narratives turn around the yearning for autonomy. They also produce paradoxical outcomes that simultaneously involve cultural estrangement, contestation and coexistence in the shaping of a personal life in Canada.

### **Aisha's story: self-esteem**

Aisha is a 25-year-old, third-year undergraduate student. She was born and raised in a small mining town in Canada. Her parents are well-educated Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, but neither of them is particularly religious. Aisha's mother was a teacher in Pakistan who became a housewife in Canada because she could not get employment as a teacher. Her father is a blue-collar worker at a mining company.

Aisha had a very difficult time during high school. Her parents wanted her to be raised as a Muslim and demanded moral responsibility from her. She often clashed with them over the proper conduct for a young woman in a Muslim family. Aisha was not allowed to smoke, drink, date or socialize in mixed groups, unlike many of the other students in her school. This contributed to her treatment as an outcast by other children at school. Aisha's status as someone 'different' was reinforced further by being a teenager of colour in the only visible minority immigrant family in town. The tension between her parents' expectations and Aisha's desire to be accepted by her peers created considerable frustration and anxiety for her. While the values of her family had directed her sense of self-esteem toward high academic achievement, the focus of her peers was on physical beauty and the sexualized body. The more she experienced this tension, the more her self-esteem fell.

Aisha was convinced that her low self-esteem was due to the fact that other children at school perceived her as an outsider, largely because of her skin colour. Aisha and her family experienced the racism of a small town whose residents were predominantly white or aboriginal – the latter group also being highly marginal in the community. Aisha wanted to look 'white': blonde and blue-eyed. In order to overcome her low self-esteem she focused on her physical appearance. Obsessed with her body weight, she became bulimic:

I was a very heavy girl. I was probably like this. But, [when] I look back, I was average. My teeth weren't straight. I was bullied very badly. I had a hard time. Like, 'Oh, look at her' or 'Look at this'. Growing up we were called 'Paki', we're a different colour. It was difficult. There we would do anything to fit in, trying to change the hair colour, have blue contacts and hair, just to fit in. The children could be quite mean. Locker room: they just push you aside, like



physically push you. In classroom seats: 'This is my seat, what are you doing here?' I am, like, 'I was sitting here first.' As the years went by my self-esteem declined. Teachers weren't helping. I wanted to quit. I'm like, I can't handle this; I just want to die.

Aisha believed that she was incapable of earning the recognition of her peers at school. It was at some point during this period of conflict between her parents' moral convictions and peer pressure that she began to demand personal recognition – a demand which turned into an identity project. Although Aisha was born and raised in Canada, she now wanted to go to Pakistan and become immersed in Pakistani culture.

### **Aisha's veiling: bulimia and cultural belonging**

Aisha did not take up the veil until her second year of university. Her younger sister, who chose to veil upon high-school graduation, presented Aisha with the idea of veiling. Aisha's sister had experienced similar problems with self-esteem at school. A family friend of a Bosnian immigrant introduced her sister to the veil. According to Aisha, the veil helped her sister find 'serenity'.

Aisha's first experience with veiling lasted only a month. The veil triggered a very negative reaction and Aisha experienced even more racism:

People would be screaming through the windows, 'Go back home', 'What are you?' It was very, very nasty and it killed her [sister's] spirit and it killed mine. I took it off. I'm like, I can't do this. 'F' this.

Her friends at the MSA encouraged Aisha to wear the veil again and she began to see the veil as a means to cultivate new values that could make her life more congruent with her religion:

[The veil] helped me. My faith has gotten stronger, because I had gained my self-esteem. Like I can do things and people are telling me you're cute. It helps. People appreciate you. You are cute. That is surprising. I've never heard that before in my whole life. It helped me with my bulimia. I would not be eating because I was so paranoid about my weight. I was getting very sick. So it was, if you don't have the hair flowing, if you don't have a certain walk, a talk, you're not attractive, you're a freak. But now, I'm thinking superficiality doesn't matter. It's the essence of the human being, the soul that matters.

In trying to cope with her bulimia, Aisha adopted the view that physical beauty is irrelevant to personal well-being. She appears to benefit from the Islamic ethos cultivated by ISNA–MSA that encourages women to conduct themselves with modesty. The body, in this context, is viewed as



a sexually-threatening object that must be controlled (Watson, 1994), and the veil is symbolic of a disciplined and virtuous mind that aspires to higher spiritual beauty. This recalls the Cartesian dualism of body and mind. While the body represents biological spontaneity, the mind acts to condition consciousness through a disciplined will. Aisha's bulimia is located within this split and she explains her veiling as a means of self-control over the body. However, the veil here does not represent a 'frozen' embodiment of Islamic culture, but becomes anchored in the ISNA–MSA regulation of religious sensibilities around the issue of Muslim cultural separation and consolidation. Aisha situates her problem of bulimia within Muslim claims for cultural distinctiveness and becomes part of the Muslim student movement to advance claims of collective cultural recognition.

Aisha experiences veiling from the position of a visible minority woman. Although she believes that the veil helps her to deal with bulimia, it is also instrumental in exposing her to further racism. Aisha relates the following:

We're all in university for higher learning but I'm telling you, people don't care about my opinion. When they look at me, they're thinking I don't know English or I have nothing to offer in the discussion. I have the same ambition and desires and motivations. But, people see me as less intelligent. They'll always ask, 'Where are you from?' First question, I'm from here! 'No, where, your background?' I was born here. They're shocked: 'You're born and raised here?' Very frustrating. Constantly proving myself everyday just to be a human category is frustrating.

Aisha gains a sense of self-worth when she wears the veil, but she is perceived also as an 'outsider' to the rest of Canadian society, which makes her feel lonely, depressed and disappointed. As a result, she has removed her veil several times. Her parents also want her to take it off. Aisha's only support for veiling comes from her friends at the MSA. This creates real tension between her commitment to the veiling movement within MSA and her feelings of isolation and loneliness:

We got to join this alliance. We got to put the veil on and show people that we are normal and it's for our own selves, for inner growth. So if I take it off, I'm rejecting my friends. I don't want to reject them.

Aisha is obviously deeply ambivalent about veiling. In the case of Fatma, discussed below, there is also a clear desire to cultivate Islamic virtue, but Fatma's story is very different.



## **Fatma's veiling: the valorization of individuality and collective identity**

Fatma is a 36-year-old medical doctor from Pakistan with an upper-middle class family background. She emigrated to Canada after graduating from medical school, following her marriage to a Muslim immigrant student pursuing his PhD in engineering at a Canadian university. Her mother is a housewife and her father a businessman. Her parents are Muslims but not strictly religious and they oppose the veil. Fatma had contemplated wearing the veil many times while in Pakistan, but never did, knowing that her parents and friends would not have welcomed it. Here is Fatma's story:

I had a little bit of family pressure. I was afraid that if I start this, people are going to ask me stop it. I didn't even try wearing it there. I had also pressure from my relatives, friends and my other social circles and the social circle my family moved into. But I wanted to wear it. Because, it is something that is said in religion that we follow, it is clearly said that you wear it.

She began to wear the veil after immigrating to Canada:

The first day, when I arrived at the airport, I put it on. My husband had never seen me with the veil before. And I asked my husband, 'How do I look?' He said, 'You look great!' I bought the scarf in Pakistan. I just put it in my purse. I said, I will wear it during the flight, but I didn't because of some people in the plane, my relatives. They would have definitely objected it if I wore it there, so I said why offend them, just wait. I put it on just after leaving the plane in the airport.

Fatma explained that her reason for emigrating to Canada was to enjoy greater personal freedom, something that she felt she had never been able to experience in Pakistan when it came to realizing 'God's will' in the organization of her daily life:

Back home you have to face opposition, not only from family but also from friends. And you may not be strong enough to face it and if you fail once, you will lose confidence.

Fatma values assertiveness and independence as desirable traits and regards the veil as a 'right' that validates her personhood:

In Canada, you can wear any kind of clothes you want and you will not find any opposition and that's their individual rights. [There] may be just a few incidences, my driving licence incident. They had to take my photo. They asked me to take it off. They said, 'We want to have your face clearly there.'



I said, 'My face is already clear. I'm just covering my hair, not my face. And I'm always wearing it, so why take it off now?' She said then, 'I can't have your photo.' I said, 'Okay, if you can't have it, let your senior know it and then just write it down for me that you can't take it.' And then she talked to her senior and then she said, 'Okay, we'll take it.' I was offended. Why should I take it off? It is my right to wear it.

Fatma understands individual rights in terms of a belief that a person has a culturally distinctive self that sets one apart from others. She thereby extends personhood to membership in a larger community of Muslims. This constitutes the basis for her definition of collective moral standards as human rights:

If we just want to cover ourselves, why would you object? It is a human right. I am following a religion that I believe, it's a religion from our god and it's widely accepted throughout the world. So, there is something that should be enough to make us do it. Even if somebody just personally wants to wear it, others should not object. Personally, I look better when I cover my hair. I like covering my hair.

Her belief in God valorizes her realization of selfhood through individual rights: 'I believe in God and whatever God said, I just have to follow. He has to say to do this and I will do this.' While the veil expresses her selfhood as a culturally-distinct individual, for Fatma, the expression of individual rights presupposes membership in the Islamic community. Identification with the Muslim community shapes a virtuous self and solidifies Islamic values as rights central to cultural identity:

There are many [ethnically] different Muslims in Canada. They speak different languages. If we believe that we are Muslims, Islam is the first thing that should make us unite together. In North America, Islam is not the religion of [the] majority. We have to make recognition of ourselves. We have to protect our identity. If we don't, our children who are born and raised here are going to forget and then slowly, a time may come when people won't know much about Islam. Living here, you are prone to influence from non-Muslims. You have to be strong. You have to unite.

Fatma relates her inability to wear the veil in Pakistan to her lack of self-confidence. But immigration to Canada gave her the opportunity to gain strength. Fatma's narrative reflects engagement with both an 'Islamic' and non-Islamic cultural ethos:

There were people in Pakistan who wear the veil and I always look at them with appreciation that they have the courage to do it. Why not me? I am also Muslim. I pray five times a day, I read the *Koran*, I follow Islamic values, I



speak the truth. I respect my parents. But with the question of the veil, I felt a lack of confidence in Pakistan for not being able to fulfil my religious duties. This was not something related to my education. It is just this feeling that I didn't do things that I wanted to do. I did not have the courage. Now I have gained confidence. I am doing something that Allah likes.

While Aisha and the others share Fatma's belief that Muslim women wear the veil to realize God's will, Aisha's veiling is self-referential, a means through which she tries to capture a sense of self-worth. The veil integrates her personal challenge of low self-esteem into the moral politics of Islamic groups. Fatma's engagement with 'individual rights' also involves equating self-realization with Muslim community-formation in Canada. These women's narratives are tied to the moral politics of ISNA and the MSA within which they reconfigure their search for personhood.

### **Female domesticity: Aisha and a middle-class woman, Hava**

All of the women that were interviewed except Aisha agreed with ISNA's position tying women's personhood to domesticity. An emphasis on female domesticity heightens the social class dimension of Islamic morality. One of the women interviewed, Hava, explains:

Being a mother is a responsibility, a trust from Allah onto you, taking care of your children, educating them, becoming good Muslims. If a woman's work is somehow being compromised, in terms of, let's say, cooking or cleaning, then it becomes obligatory for the husband to provide a maid or a servant to the wife. Even if a woman is poor, her rights are protected as a Muslim woman. The husband will have to provide her with the clothes, with the food and the children with clothes and the food. I understand being poor, you might have to and you might want to help the family, bringing money, but it's not her obligation. And whatever money she earns, the husband has no right whatsoever onto it. It's a sweet deal, I'll sit back and I'll get all your money. I work and my money is my money. Your money is mine too!

Hava promotes a version of domesticity that includes motherhood but excludes other aspects of reproductive work. She suggests that middle-class women should disengage themselves from the physical, dirty aspects of domestic work and focus solely on the spiritually rewarding role of motherhood. This would seem to amplify social class differences between Muslim women. For Hava, the financial protection offered by men within the patriarchal family is a survival strategy for lower-class women. Kandiyoti (1988) states that this can be conceptualized as women bargaining with patriarchy. Women receive financial protection and security from men in exchange for submissiveness to male authority.





Aisha is ambivalent about her commitment to the idea of female domesticity and about relying on a man's capacity to support a household: 'They're all wealthy. Their fathers are paying for [their education]. There's no man taking care of me. My father cannot.' Aisha feels unable to strike a bargain with a man. Because she has to earn her own living, she believes that she must manage her body and conform to the dominant beauty ideal:

I have taken the burden of being independent and living on my own. The hair's got to be fixed and then also the weight, all of a sudden in taking [the veil] off, I have to look the part. I have to look nice, I'm 50 pounds bigger than I was before. The thing is, though, I gained the weight because of [the veil], because it didn't matter looking good anymore.

Aisha's desire to rely on her own financial means links her sense of personal worthiness to the much-advertised ideal of female beauty and sexuality. Her narrative reflects a fear of falling short of the cultural expectations of sexualized identity:

I guess I have this idealized thing, this Hollywood thing in my head. Once in a while a nice Muslim guy wouldn't hurt. If you are beautiful, you will get hooked faster. It is just the way marketability works. My issue is who I am going to attract. You are out there. You are showing your stuff. I would be dressed in dress pants and my hair done, cut short probably. I want to fall in love.

Aisha wants to establish an image for herself as a physically attractive woman who is pursuing a professional career. Her desire to be thin, have short hair and wear pants also has symbolic significance for her as someone who wants to move outside the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, beneath this desire is Aisha's experience of low self-esteem and the anxiety arising from her prospects for paid employment.

## **Conclusion**

In the light of Islamic principles, the veil symbolizes the recognition of Allah's sovereignty over humans and submission to that sovereignty expressed through the virtue of female modesty. How do women's actual veiling practices fit into this account of the veil? Do the participants aspire to submit the body fully to divine authority? Some do, while others do not.

This research demonstrates that, rather than conceptualize the veil as a frozen embodiment of a particular culture or its subversion, the women here see their veils as symbols of cultural engagement in the struggle for selfhood. This struggle is located within an Islamic cultural ethos, yet it is one in which women connect veiling to their own particular life stories.



understanding of themselves. It is anchored in the complex intersection of a claim for cultural adherence to an Islamic moral code of modesty and the quest for self-assertion. The narratives of Aisha and Fatma point to even more complicated ways of thinking about the enactment of the code. On the one hand, Aisha embraces the veil with self-referential notions of personal worth, but as she struggles with racism and xenophobia, she is uncomfortable with the ISNA–MSA-framed cultural politics that link the virtue of modesty to the practice of veiling. Aisha's story is an expression of ambivalence toward the veil. On the other hand, Fatma presents a case for women's veiling as an expression of the valorization of personhood and individual rights firmly attached to the formation of a unified community of Muslims.

These narratives suggest that the experiences of Muslim women do not necessarily converge on a certain embodied behaviour of dominant Islamic norms. Although there is no divergence in their understanding of virtuous action, women's varied veiling practices problematize whether or not the veil solidifies into a unified Islamist position. Within this context, women's narratives diffuse the rigid boundary between empowerment and subordination which is assumed in much of feminist theory about the role of Muslim women's embodied attachment to Islamic veiling practices.

### Note

1. More details on ISNA–MSA and their formulation of a distinct Muslim culture in Canada appear in Atasoy (2003).

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