

# Femininity and the hijab essay



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An individual's identity can differ depending on several different physical and biological factors including sexuality, gender, age and class. Throughout Ruby Tabassum's article entitled *Listening to the Voices of Hijab*, identity is related to gender in a number of ways. I have decided to discuss this specific article because the idea of how femininity is portrayed is a significant aspect of Canadian culture nowadays. I am also interested in focusing on how the identities of Muslim women are recognized in society and how individuals interpret the meaning behind wearing the hijab.

Throughout this article, I have distinguished several different reasons for wearing the hijab, as each individual interviewed provided the author with their own personal reasons and explanations. Tabassum (2006) discusses the controversy over whether the hijab is a symbol of oppression or liberation upon Muslim women as well as how the hijab can be seen as an indication of beauty, fashion, to hide identity, personal protest, and/or personal identity (p. 35).

Several Muslim women discussed the importance of embracing the hijab as a representation of their religion and culture (Tabassum, 2006, p. 39). As a Muslim woman, Sima explains the positive and negative aspects about wearing the hijab and how it influences her identity in her culture (Tabassum, 2006, p. 39). Sima discusses the challenges that she is faced with, with wearing the hijab, she states " nothing else tells them that I am a Muslim, just my hijab.

And...if they have the idea, oh, Muslims are terrorists..." (as cited in Tabassum, 2006, p. 29). Since the September 11th attack in the United

States, Muslims have been negatively stereotyped as rebellious (Tabassum, 2006, p. 42). Individuals in society automatically assume that all women wearing a hijab are Muslim and label them as terrorists or bad people. However the hijab also helps to liberate and allow women of the Muslim community to stand out or become visible in a non-Muslim community (Tabassum, 2006, 39).

This is a significant aspect of the course because the article examines the strengths and weaknesses of femininity through a cultural Muslim perspective and the reading is a prime example of how ideologies regarding race affect those involved. In class we have discussed the significances of social constructs and how assumptions are made on the basis of physical characteristics. In this situation, identity is related to gender as Muslim women are categorized as both good/respectful and rebellious/evil individuals because they are apart of a culture where they are both oppressed and liberated simultaneously.

The hijab used as a symbol of the Muslim culture is just one characteristic of how it can be perceived; the hijab is also a sign of life, safety and personal identity (Tabassum, 2006, p. 37). Tabassum (2006) interviews an individual by the name of Raheelah who identifies the hijab as not just a piece of clothing that covers a Muslim women's face, but also as a portrayal of themselves as a person (p. 37). I think that this is an important aspect of Canadian culture for feminine identity to be recognized appropriately and respectfully rather than being looked down upon.

There are several stereotypes within society which makes it difficult for any female to portray themselves as decent and demonstrate morality; thus the hijab is one way for Muslim women to take advantage of its purpose and be recognized as proper as the hijab somewhat symbolizes “modest behavior” (Tabassum, 2006, p. 37). Throughout the article, there are also several references claiming that the hijab “offers them respect, dignity and protection” from others (Tabassum, 2006, p. 8).

In my opinion, I am in agreement with Almas who believes that wearing the hijab does offer Muslim women a type of safety and security which helps reduce the chances of sexual abuse and/or harassment (Tabassum, 2006, p. 38). I believe that when women dress appropriately and do not fully expose their sexualized feminine attributes such as their chest, stomach and/or midriff, they are less likely to attract negative attention.

Therefore, the hijab is a practical way of maintaining a positive image among Muslim women. Identity is related to gender here because in Canadian society, the media has a significant impact on the way that females dress. However, depending on the outfit, individuals can interpret different meanings from the way that it is worn. If a female is wearing a short skirt or a tight dress, that could be seen as “bringing attention to oneself” (Tabassum, 2006, p. 37).

Whereas, a Muslim female who is embracing the hijab may be looked at more respectfully because they are dressed more conservatively rather than revealing and scandalously. The article examines several aspects of femininity specifically femininity as a Muslim woman; however I find that the

article portrays several stereotypes and ideologies regarding the 'proper' image of how a woman is suppose to look. Although I may contradict myself a bit here, I will state my opinion anyways.

I do believe that the ideologies portrayed through the media have some truth on the appearance of women, for example women should not go to church wearing a mini skirt or women who have children should dress more respectively than a single teenage girl would. However, I do believe that everyone is their own person with their own sense of style. Some women dress scandalously in order to attract men because they enjoy the attention. The ideal image of a 'proper' woman in the media is an individual who dresses conservatively, without showing too much skin; but who determines what 'too much skin' is?

A woman, who displays more skin than usual, is considered 'trashy' whereas a woman who covers up completely is sometimes considered insecure of her body. It all depends on the person, their morals and how they were brought up. This thought relates well with Tabassum's article and the idea of identity because Muslim women are basically given the choice to wear the hijab, and their reasons for wearing it are diverse, this is similar to the idea that it is any woman's choice to wear any outfit they choose without being ridiculed.

One of the major strengths that I found throughout this article was how the women interviewed all had different views and opinions regarding the hijab. Before reading this article, I did not have any prior knowledge in relation to the hijab; I assumed it was a piece of clothing that Muslim women were entitled to wear under all circumstances. However, I am now well aware of

the fact that the hijab is worn by choice; and the reasons for embracing it are different for each individual woman.

This article has given me more insight on the hijab as well as the Muslim community. Identity is a major theme throughout Tabassum's article *Listening to the Voices of Hijab*, and it is related to gender in a number of ways. Identity is related to gender through feminine structure and appearance, ideologies, stereotypes and culture. The identity of Muslim women can be seen as either oppressed or liberated depending on how they look at the hijab themselves; it is the women who give the hijab meaning.