

Muslim women living  
in a westernized  
society theology  
religion essay



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The following research report was requested and granted by Philip Broster, The Business Communication lecturer at the Tertiary School in Business Administration, for 8 October 2012.

Permission was granted by Philip Broster to conduct research on the debate regarding the wearing of hijab and the western pressures of this felt by Muslim women who study at TSiBA Education.

His specific instructions were to:

Compile a research report based on the previous research proposal to research the debate regarding the hijab and the pressures felt by Muslim women at TSiBA.

Present a literature review as well as findings in a written document and to conclude by identifying a relationship, if any, between the literature and the findings of the research.

The report is to be submitted on the 8 October 2012.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Subject of the research**

The Debate Regarding the Hijab, Investigating the Pressures Felt by Muslim women living in a Westernized Country: A TSiBA case-study.

#### **Background to the research**

Literature on this topic is abundant as research has been conducted globally on the topic of the hijab as to the reasons why women should and should not

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wear the hijab. The research conducted was made possible through the use of surveys, interviews, questionnaires and observations. Katherine Bullock in particular, a Canadian community activist, author and lecturer did extensive research on the topic of the hijab and published her findings in the form of a book called *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* which challenges “Historical and Modern Stereotypes”. She has also published articles on Muslim women and the media, and Islam and political theory.

## **Purposes of the research**

The objectives of the study are to examine if the dominant negative Western perception affects the reasons why the Muslim community is divided on the subject of hijab.

This research addresses the concern for a dialogue that could inform westernised societies about the personal reasons why some female Muslim students wear hijab and why others do not. I want my research to be meaningful, relevant to local communities and to open my mind and that of others by being taught through research and personal interviews about the subject.

## **Scope and limitations**

This study was conducted in a very short period of time with a very small sample group as the pool of participants was limited to the Muslim students at TSiBA Education. The data set is meaningful, but not representative of the vast range of Muslims in different contexts. It will however show a diversity of views within a common theology and faith. A more sizable sample within the target group would have provided a larger and more conclusive amount

of data. This can have a bias that favours the educated and the youth of Cape Town. Another limitation of my study was that all of the participants belonged to one ethnic group being from the race regarded in South Africa as Coloured. This was due to the fact TSiBA Education is a relatively small university whose Muslim female population is a fraction of the total students of which there were no Muslim women from a different race or culture. The research conducted could have benefitted from a more diverse pool of applicants.

## **Plan of development**

This research report was compiled in the following manner. Firstly I provide my literature review which I put together for the purpose of exploring what has previously been written on the topic so that you and I may learn from it and be aware of it as we go about this research. Secondly I made a survey form of 3 pages long that contained relevant questions which I derived from the process of compiling the literature review. Thirdly, At random I selected 10 Muslim women studying at TSiBA to be my participants and followed through by conducting my survey about each one of them. Lastly, I analyzed the data obtained from the surveys and make this information available to you while also comparing my research findings to the findings derived from my literature review.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Literature review**

The first piece of work I did was conducting research on the topic of the hijab in order to compile a literature review. My literature review took a significant

amount of time in relation to how long the actual research demanded.

Information was abundant regarding the topic of hijab, modernization, the dominant Western perception and the media's role in the portrayal of Muslim women that I found it particularly challenging to sift out important points from the all information available. My literature review saw two sessions of editing with my Communications lecturer who helped me construct and organized the important information once I identified it.

## **Participation**

The target group for the research was initially 20 South African Muslim women between the ages of 18 and 40. This age group was the target of this study because they were the current generation of TSiBA students and were experiencing modern South Africa in a time when it seemed there was an ever increasing influx of Western culture after Apartheid. The age group is also likely to include married women who might be inclined to think differently about the hijab as their marriage might have changed the way each looks at the hijab. The participants of my research were all female as I had hoped, but unfortunately all of them belonged to one ethnic group being from the race regarded in South Africa as Coloured. There were 2 married women, and 8 unmarried women. 5 of them wore hijab and 5 of them were women who choose not to.

## **Method of data collection**

One method of obtaining data was employed. The research draws on qualitative data from comprehensive surveys conducted on 10 Muslim students regarding hijab. The survey was constructed in a manner that it took students approximately 5 minutes to complete.

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After many different drafts of the survey I went to the Tertiary School in Business Administration (TSiBA) Education to distribute the final version. My survey included the opinions of both young women who wear the hijab and those that do not. I did not ask for names in any section of the survey to ensure the anonymity of all my human subjects. In the end I collected 10 surveys in total which was a smaller sample group than I had initially hoped. After gathering the surveys, I analyzed the results manually.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

The debate regarding the wearing of religious garb in public, specifically coverings worn by Muslim women has increased over the past few years resulting in a lot of controversy among those who agree with the practice and those who do not (iqraonline. net). Hijab is seen all over the world, especially in places with a high concentration of practicing Muslims. The hijab has resulted in severe media disputes and now denotes the difference of cultures. The French, along with the west expected that the hijab would pass away into history as westernization and secularization took root. However, in the Muslim world, especially among the younger generation, a great wave of returning to hijab was spreading through various countries. This current resurgence is an expression of Islamic revival (Nakata, 1994).

### **The Topic of Hijab External to South Africa**

#### **The views of feminists**

The Western media and feminists often portray the hijab as a symbol of oppression and slavery of women (www. al-islam. org). A theory of

Orientalism has been in existence since 1978 which argues that the Muslim population is deemed backward, uncivilized beings who are outcasts in Western society (Said, 1978). Many feminists, both Western and Islamic argue that the hijab is a symbol of gender oppression and that the Islamic veiling of women is an oppressive practice. Fadel Amara, an Islamic feminist and Muslim female member of French government describes the burqa as a prison and a straightjacket which is not religious but is the symbol of a tyrannical political project for sexual inequality (King, 299.).

Feminists argue that public presence and visibility is important to Western women. This overlaps sexism and racism as well as there are two arguments made by feminists who are divided on the topic of the hijab.

### **a) The argument of oppression**

One argument is for hijab to be banned in public as they encourage the harassment of women who are unveiled and because public presence and visibility represents their struggle for economic independence, sexual agency and political participation. In the Western culture, celebrities are regarded as trend-setters defining what is acceptable. The hijab is therefore also seen as a problem because it poses challenge to the view of unconventional visibility and freedom of self-expression. (www. theage.com). Although it is true that many women do choose to wear the hijab, it is not the case for all women. In many Middle Eastern and North African countries women are forced, persecuted and abused for noncompliance with the hijab. This was demonstrated in Pakistan where an extremist killed a women's activist and government minister because she refused to wear the hijab. King states, " From Afghanistan to Algeria to Sudan, Pakistan and Iran-  
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women are systematically brutalized and caught in a deadly crossfire between the secular and fundamentalist forces.”

Some Islamic feminists argue that although the statement in the Quran about women covering themselves was not meant to oppress women, the interpretation of those verses by Islamic societies does in fact oppress women. Although it can be argued that the hijab is a symbol of the oppression that occurs against women in Islam, many Islamic women don't agree. It is true that under some Islamist rule, specifically in some North African countries, Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia women are oppressed and forced to wear the hijab, but in an international context, this is the exception to the rule regarding women's practices of wearing the veil.

Salma Yaqoob, a Muslim woman who chooses to wear the hijab explains the veil is not only an oppressing force in Islamic countries that require the veil, but also in Western countries that ban the veil. Yaqoob adamantly contends that by infringing laws that restricts women's choice on whether or not to wear the veil, they are also being oppressed. “ I am opposed to the Saudi and Iranian governments' imposition of the veil and that of the Taliban previously. But this is also why I oppose the ban on wearing the hijab. In both cases the woman herself is no longer free to make a choice. In both cases her dignity is violated.” Yaqoob explains that more women are currently banned from wearing the hijab, than are required to wear it.

## **b) The argument of liberation**

It can be argued that rather than oppressing, the hijab is liberating. The second argument made by feminists supports the argument of



fundamentalist Islamic leaders who argue that Muslim women have the right to choose to wear or not to wear a hijab as it is part of a Muslim woman's duty to wear a hijab. These feminists demand that the French ban be withdrawn because they believe the oppressing force behind the veil is when authority figures, both Islamic and Western, take away a woman's right to choose. They defend the veil as a mark of agency, cultural membership, and defiance. Tayyab Bashart, a feminist scholar and Muslim who teaches in France explains her beliefs " A woman in hijab, who is a functioning member of society, symbolizes an empowered, independent woman, rather than someone who lacks self-determination and is a puppet of society" (Basharat, 2006). The veil itself is just a piece of cloth. Human beings interpret the hijab according to social and religious constructions. Through the Western discussion and banning of the hijab in public schools, the Muslim school girls of France lose their freedom to express their spirituality. The desired effect of the 2004 law is to fight gender oppression and inequality in the public school system, but as a residual effect, it actually diminishes women's freedoms rather than enhancing them. The ' law on the headscarf' supports the oppressing Western discourses about veiled women and attempts to Westernize French Muslim schoolgirls.

## **Western Governments**

In Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Iran, the full covering, more commonly known as the burqa, has been made compulsory upon female citizens. In contrast to this, the unwillingness to understand the religion and culture of Muslims has resulted in traditional clothing such as the burqa and the hijab being banned with the hope of Westernised societies

achieving secularism in Islamic countries. Katherine Bullock shines light on the differences in judgment over hijab by having identified themes from her research on women and the religion of Islam. She divides these themes into the descriptions of those who are for and those who are against the hijab. According to Bullock, critics of the veil rely on secular liberal assumptions about society and human nature and therefore the veil is supposed to be and described as a symbol of oppression because it:

Covers up (hides), in the sense of smothering, femininity

Is apparently linked to the essentialized male and female difference (which is taken to mean that by nature, male is superior, female is inferior);

Is linked to a particular view of woman's place (subjugated in the home);

Is linked to an oppressive (patriarchal) notion of morality and female purity (because of Islam's

Emphasis on chastity, marriage, and condemnation of pre- and extra-marital sexual relations);

Can be imposed; and

Is linked to a package of oppressions women in Islam face, such as seclusion, polygamy, easy male divorce, unequal inheritance rights.

Western countries has developed this view and disregarded other views of what public visibility may be to different women with differing beliefs. (www.theage.com). An example of this is that France has decided upon the

banning of the hijab to be worn in schools. France's 2004 law, popularly referred to as the 'law on the headscarf', reveals the difficulty of respecting conflicting ideas between diverse communities, especially when one community, in this case the Muslims of France, is a minority. According to this law, female students are banned from wearing the hijab as well as all other openly religious symbols in public schools. France bans women from wearing the hijab in public schools because many feminists and lawmakers argue that veiling women serves as an oppressing force, a force that silences women. Alia Al- Sari states in her article "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis" many feminists see the headscarf "As a symbol of Islamic gender oppression that ...should be banned from public schools, a space where gender equality is presumed (or desired)." Supporters of the law believe it fights gender oppression and gives equality to women in the school system.

### **Media attitudes in reporting Islam and hijab**

While the media cannot be the only party held accountable or blamed for societal attitudes towards smaller cultures and religions, these media moguls create "the lens through which reality is perceived" (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). Western media sees itself as a democratic powerhouse and therefore is frequently answerable for legitimising and distributing racism and bias against religious communities such as Muslims (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). The media in Westernised societies portrays Muslims as "tricky, sleazy, sexual and untrustworthy", as uniformly violent, as oppressors of women, and as members of a global conspiracy (Bullock & Jafri, 2000).

For example, in 1998 a shift was noted regarding the European media's depiction of women who wear the hijab. Veiled women were no longer portrayed as exotic but instead as a threat to society (Macmaster & Lewis, 1998,). This highlights the contrasting representations of Muslim women as concurrently being oppressed and threatening.

In 2005 Begum argues that these images of Islamic dress were increasingly used in the media as visual shorthand for treacherous extremism, and that Muslims living in Europe were suffering from the consequences of these associations (Begum, 2005). The increase of these media portrayals and political deliberation has segregated the Muslim community and had a further disruptive effect on society and feminism at large. (Begum, 2005)

Since then, the media in France reported on a women who was suspended for wearing a hijab under her hat while working as a meter reader, a fashion show of veiled women that was banned, the hindrance of hijab-wearing mothers from volunteering in schools, the refusal of cafeteria service to a student wearing a hijab and the banning of a witness to a civil service wedding from signing the documentation based on the argument that hijab prevented her from proper identification.

Many authors on this topic dispute that because of the media's cultural fascination with Muslim women's dress as symbols of oppression, Muslim women often have to resort to focusing on that facet of their identity as well, even if they would rather discuss something else. These authors state that even cases of responsible journalism have a propensity to devalue Muslim women. This is because Muslim women are primarily depicted as 'exotic',

victimised, or threatening outcasts rather than your ordinary peaceful next door neighbours. (www. reportingdiversity. org.)

It is evident that the hijab remains a hot topic in Western countries and that the wellbeing and identities of Muslim women in Westernised societies are related to the wearing of the headscarf as a consequence.

## **Hijab within the Muslim Community**

The opinions of Muslim women vary in their decision about whether or not to wear the hijab. The hijab, according to many Muslims, has multiple uses and meanings. The hijab is a symbolic of modesty and morality. According to Islam, the hijab functions as a shield for a woman against the lustful gaze of men. The hijab also serves as a cover to preserve the modesty and piety of the woman, as that is her main role as stated in the Qur'an.

The most basic debate over the hijab is over the requirement of the hijab. This is an issue that is debated by many Muslim scholars. First in order to understand why there is an issue it is important to understand the power of the Quran. The Quran is the word of God brought to humanity by his last messenger the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Islam is the religion of total submission to Allah (God the Father) and obedience to Allah. As the Quran is God's word then it also means total submission and obedience to Quran. The first issue with the requirement of the hijab comes from whether the hijab is in the Quran or not. There are two sides to this argument; there are those who say that the hijab is a requirement because it is in the Quran and those who say that it is not because it is not part of the Quran

## **Reasons why Muslim Women wear the hijab**

### **The laws of the Qur'an**

Amr Khaled's, a popular Islamic scholar, layman, and highly influential Muslim speaker, represents the school of thought that considers the hijab to be directly in the Quran and thus a requirement for Muslim women. He quotes these Qur'anic verses that make the hijab obligatory to Muslim women. " O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies. That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not to be annoyed. And - ALLAH - is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful (Surah 33: verse 59)". In this verse women are told to cover their bodies so that they should be known as modest women and are not harassed. According to Amr Khalad's lecture " Al-Hijab," the hijab also serves the purpose of forcing men to not sexually objectify women but to see her as a vessel of intelligence and high moral values. Khalad says that the hijab reinforces the fact that Islam has placed the beauty of a female on a higher value in the eyes of men by providing protection of her beauty from uncontrolled lusts and desires, and instead ordering men to respect greater the inner beauty of her soul. Thus, the real value of women is associated with the degree of her modesty and her abidance by it (Khaled " Al-Hijab"). Yaqoob states her personal reasons why she wears the veil, " For me, the wearing of the hijab denotes that as a woman I expect to be treated as an equal in terms of my intellect and personality and my appearance is relevant only to the degree that I want it to be, when I want it to be.". This is the traditional Islamic rationale for the hijab and why it is important in Islam (Khalad " AlHijab").

## **A symbol of resistance**

A study about hijab in the West also provides another theory that I believe can also be applied in South Africa because it is a country heavily influenced by the West. The idea of the hijab as a symbol of resistance is explored by Tarik Kulenovic but not necessarily one that is strictly political. Tarik Kulenovic's theory suggests that the hijab in the West is a matter of identity, a physical symbol of a woman's Muslim identity. This symbol also carries a message of religiosity in a modernizing society which encourages a secular life style and scorns tradition. Kulenovic asserts that " the modern identity of Muslim women, which includes the wearing of the veil, is primarily the identity of resistance to the values that individuals find foreign to them and as such imposed on them" (Kulenovic, page 717). Thus, in modern society, the hijab can be thought of as a means of retaining a religious life style while assimilating to the demands of the modern world. Another reason women choose to wear the hijab is that they find that the hijab serves as an empowering factor.

## **The Interpretation of the hijab by those who wear it**

Katherine Bullock, through her research, provides some reasons why women wear the hijab. The hijab to these wearers:

1. Does not smother femininity;
2. Brings to mind the ' different-but-equal' school of thought, but does not put forward essentialized male-female difference;

3. Is linked to a view that does not limit women to the home, but neither does it consider the role of stay-at-home-mother and homemaker oppressive;
4. Is linked to a view of morality that is oppressive only if one considers the prohibition of sexual relations outside marriage wrong;
5. Is part of Islamic law, though a law that ought to be implemented in a very wise and women-friendly manner, and
6. Can and should be treated separately from other issues of women's rights in Islam.

## **Spirituality**

Some women have a deep spiritual and religious connection to the veil and firmly disagree with the view of it as a sign of oppression. Many Muslim women feel uncomfortable without wearing it because the hijab is deeply-rooted in their personal values and religious tradition. A main reason women choose to wear the hijab, is as expression of spirituality. Bashart states in his book that " Muslim women carry with them their sacred private space into the public space by use of the Hijab". In this view of the hijab, the veil is not simply an article of clothing; or a symbol of oppression it is a tool of spirituality for women.

Fadwa El Guindi, author of *The Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, says " veiling patterns and veiling behaviour are.... about sacred privacy, sanctity and the rhythmic interweaving of patterns of worldly and sacred life, linking



women as the guardians of family sanctuaries and the realm of the sacred in this world”.

## **Reasons why Muslim Women do not wear the hijab**

In the Qur’anic this verse although it says to draw the cloak all over their bodies, it does not specifically say the hair. In addition, it does not specify in what way, to what extent, and in what manner women should cover themselves. There are many modern alternative views to this idea that the hijab is compulsory because it is in the Quran. For example, Dr. Reza Aslan, an internationally acclaimed writer and scholar of religions, the founder of AslanMedia. com and also one of the leading scholars in the alternative view, considers the hijab not an obligatory aspect of being a Muslim woman. Aslan claims that the hijab is shockingly not compulsory upon Muslim women anywhere in the Quran. Instead he claims that the veil was an Arab culture before the arrival of Islam, through contact with Syria and Iran, where the veil was the sign of the upper class women. According to Lelia Ahmed and those who fall in the second school of thought like Aslan, the only places that the hijab is applied to women is when it is addressing the wives of Prophet Muhammad. Thus the veil was only associated with the prophets wives and his daughters not all women of Islam. This school of thought does not deny that modesty was expected of all believers. Believing women are instructed to ““ guard their private parts... and drape a cover over their breasts”” when in the presence of strange men (Surah 24: 31-32)” as quoted by Aslan. Here specific parts of the body are named that women should guard and cover including the private parts and the breast but the hair is not mentioned. Thus those in this school of thought like Leila Ahmed and Reza Aslan do not

believe that the hijab is mandatory for Muslim women because it is not mentioned in the Quran.

## **Conclusion of Literature review**

This research investigates the reasons why the Muslim community is divided on the subject of the veil and if the dominant negative perception of hijab (as the hijab being oppressive) has affected, if at all, the wearing of hijab in TSiBA Education. In the attempt to answer this question, the research has presented two hypotheses:

- (1) Living in South Africa, a country with great Western influence, causes some Muslim women to fear wearing the hijab and to abandon it all together
- (2) Muslim women choose to wear the hijab for spirituality reasons despite constant the pressures of the West

## **5. RESULTS OF OBSERVATIONS**

While analyzing the results, I was interested to see if there would be a correlation between the findings in my literature review and the results of my research.

My data collection was a result of 10 surveys this research revealed that my two hypotheses were in agreement with a majority of this small sample of subjects. The data collected represents the opinions and beliefs of a total of 10 human participants which is 50% of the total intended target group. Thus, the data collected must only be interpreted as speculative and cannot be assumed applicable to all Muslim women or all Muslim female students.

The results were as follows:

5 of the 10 participants wore the hijab. 3 of those 5 said that they strongly agree to wearing the hijab for religious reasons while 2 participants said they agree that they wear it for religious reasons but that religion is not the main reason why they wear the hijab.

3 out of the 5 Muslim wear the hijab even though the hijab makes them feel like they don't fit in with their peers.

1 person however does feel that she fits in with her peers and in her community because she wears the hijab.

The hijab makes all five participants who wear the hijab feel protected and safe in public. 3 of them strongly agreed while 2 agreed.

5 participants said that all Muslim women should wear hijab when asked if they believe all Muslim women should wear the hijab, the opinions were 50/50. Interestingly, Out of the 5 participants that wear the hijab, 1 person said that she does not believe all Muslim women should wear hijab; 1 woman who does not wear the hijab said that even though she doesn't wear the hijab yet, she believes all Muslim women should wear the hijab.

When asked if women who do not wear the hijab can be good Muslims: 8 women agreed that Muslim women can be good Muslims if they do not wear the hijab, 1 participant had no opinion saying "one shouldn't judge, if you judge, what kind of Muslim does that make you?", 1 said Muslim women cannot be good if they do not practice the hijab.

When asked for their definition of hijab, 60% defined it as covering with loose fitting clothes, 20% said all forms acceptable and 20% just covering your hair.

The rating (1= no influence, 5= influenced but not explicitly forced, 10 = I had no choice) of influence of family on participants choice to wear or not to wear hijab:

From the 5 participants who wear hijab, 1 rated a 5, 1 rated a 6, 1 rated an 8 elaborating that her parents are religiously strict, 1 rated a 2, and 1 rated a 7 saying that the sudden death of her aunt influenced her choices in life and her consideration of the hijab.

From the 5 participants who do not wear the hijab, 2 participants rated 5; 2 rated the influence of their family as a 1 and 1 participant rated 9 saying that her family allows her choice not to wear the hijab.

The limitations section showed that all participants felt free to drive a car, study at a university, find a job, travel freely outside of Cape Town, own a computer and have access to the internet.

5 participants felt that they were not hired for a job because they wear the hijab while 1 participant said that she is new to wearing the hijab so the question is not applicable to her

No participants felt that they were not hired because of NOT wearing the hijab

TSIBA Women's view on the issue/view of hijab in the West

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9 participants agree that the West (Europe and America) has a dominantly negative view on hijab. 1 participant had no opinion

When asked their opinion of the Western perception and the West should continue not to encourage women to wear the hijab. 4 participants strongly disagree, 3 disagree, 3 had no opinion and 1 participant said she strongly agrees.

When asked if they thought the West is ill-informed and should make more of an effort to understand the hijab and why Muslim women wear it: 6 participants said they strongly agree, 3 agreed and 1 participant said she had no opinion.

6 participants have friends from the West while the remaining 4 do not.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research investigates the debate regarding the reasons why some Muslim women wear hijab. Hypotheses were confirmed in a majority of this small sample group. In the attempt to answer these questions, the research has presented two hypotheses suggesting that:

(1) Living in South Africa, a country with great Western influence, causes some Muslim women to fear wearing the hijab and to abandon it all together.

(2) The main reason Muslim women choose to wear the hijab is for spirituality reasons despite the constant pressures of the dominant Western perception.

## **Defining the hijab**

The point of view unknown to me before starting my research was that there are Muslim women who did not know that there were differing interpretations about what the hijab is tangibly. In fact, from the surveys it is evident that amongst Muslims there is a concept of a correct hijab and an incorrect hijab. Before my research commenced, the purpose of the research was not intended to identify whether my target population was aware that many Muslims have differing beliefs the hijab.

My research revealed that within the Muslim community there exist different interpretations of what the hijab is tangibly. 60% of participants claimed that the “ correct” physical hijab is a head scarf and long loose fitting clothing that conceals the shape