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Hijab and the Malay-Muslim Woman in Media

Nurzihan Hassim^{a*}

^a*School of Communication, Taylor's University, 47500 Subang Jaya, Malaysia*

Abstract

The globalization of Islamic countries worldwide inadvertently changed the representation of Muslim woman and the hijab. Displays of Islamic modesty in print, broadcast and social networking channels create opportunities for Muslim women to experience empowerment and diminish oppressive stereotypes. This communal experience penetrated Malaysian media and influenced Malays that represent a large majority of the country's Muslims. This paper explores the role of Malay-Muslim women in creating a renewed perception upon the hijab in the Malaysian public, pursuing a more liberated, Islamic identity whilst offering a renewed social construction of the Malay society through the evolution of mass communication.

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1. Introduction

The veil or more commonly known as the hijab is worn among Muslim women as enforcement of Islamic values based on Quranic teachings and is largely associated to masculine views that intend to safeguard women and their honour. In the last century, veiling trends proliferated in media following global Islamic resurgence in the Middle East from the 1970s up until the wave of Islamophobia that surfaced after 9/11. Two types of research patterns emerged during this period; the first is centred upon the hijab as a dominant factor in religion-ethnic discrimination, whilst another focused on the growth of a consumption culture stemming from recursive imageries of the hijab on print, television and internet that stimulated public interest in Islamic modesty, heightening awareness of its purpose

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-035-629-5694; Fax: +6-035-629-5705.
E-mail address: nurzihan.hassim@taylors.edu.my

among both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. The latter revealed that the appearance of contemporary, stylish veiling by female Muslim bodies in mainstream media sparked a radicalization in the representation of Islamic modesty. Largely influenced by market forces and consumer trends, reformation of the hijab as a cultural identity is fused with Western paradigms that blur the lines between protecting Muslim women from the male gaze and increasing her opacity for public display. Göle (2000) argued that this is a resistance to religious conservatism where Muslim women are more inclined towards “cosmopolitanism” offered in contemporary hijab styles. Female modesty is susceptible to transnational flows of the modern hijab shaped by a variety of themes, merchandise and communication technologies that stray from true practice of Islam as compared to traditionalist “Wahabbism” ideology.

While heightened social mobility and improved education standards were achieved in Malaysia, the process of building national identity and development was predisposed to western imperialism that encouraged self-expression among female bodies. In Malaysia, women are similarly affected by issues concerning the hijab and are inclined to choose media that links it to beauty, fashion and self-image. The main purpose of this paper is to give insight to the assimilation of the hijab through history, progress and shifts in Malaysian media whilst correlating these changes with globalization and the development of media. This paper also explores the role of Malay-Muslim women that inspire the transformation the hijab within the development of Malaysian socio-economics and politics in negotiating their faith.

2. Global hegemony on modesty

The criteria of newsworthiness in Western media reporting have persistently positioned hijab issues on lower priority thus limiting opportunities for the Muslim community to gain public acceptance of Islam. In an example, Islam was deplorable in Canada and the Americas during the late 1990s because the practice of veiling is considered backwards and associated to underdeveloped nations, mainly due to the Gulf War and the struggles of the Middle East. Popular Hollywood media such as films and television programmes further distort perception of media audiences with power relations that put the Muslim groups in “weaker” or “flawed” positions that indirectly affect a sense of inferiority within a hijab wearer, whilst amplifying a domineering construct of terrorist Islam through textual discourse and general conversational currency even before the occurrence of 9/11 (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005). Ironically, emergence of Islamic dress debates such as the banning of the hijab and burqa in France, UK, Turkey and the Netherlands instigated public appreciation for veiling. Audiences are able to decipher subjective meanings of Islam with visuals and textual discourse available through media. In Australia, Muslim women are highlighted in press photos and television news in settings belonging to Islamic centres or mosques which will become the visual cue that establishes a story and despite the stereotyping, viewers are able to recognize them as Muslims. The hijab have helped women who wear them obtain confidence and pride from belonging to a shared religious community. As such, the hijab pulls Muslim women who wear it into a closed and more privileged status, whilst those who do not would feel compelled to be a part of the movement.

In Muslim-majority countries better versed in veiling issues such as Turkey and Egypt, the hijab became a tool for transnational empowerment and popularization of political Islam that projects a civilized identity through advertisements and fashion-related materials more superior than the West. Al-Jazeera, the international news network based in Qatar approached the issues of hijab bans in France since mid-2002 by crafting a vision of imagined transnational Muslim community with emphasis on “Islamic chic” among female news anchors that all wore hijab and produced repetitive hijab-inclined content in its programmes (Cherribi, 2006). By way of conditioning, Al Jazeera encouraged the public to participate in the controversial modesty debate through expression of moral judgment. The process of modernization in Egypt welcomed the rise of international trade zones that penetrate enhanced media and entertainment technology that shaped a “state hybrid” of globalized Arabic identity while maintaining a stronghold in its existing Islamic religious ties.

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