

A CONCEPTUAL PAPER ON MODEST WEAR FOR MALAYSIA MUSLIM WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY HIJAB FASHION

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Abstract: *The Hijab style is ubiquitous for female across the Muslim community that has created new styles of Hijab that has shrunk the gap among Muslim women in the Muslim community. In today's modern time, Muslim women utilize modern Western fashion and styles of the Muslim fashion as a standard to look trendy and of course to meet the requirements of the religion. In other words, Muslim women wear the hijab with the intention not only to fulfil the religion requirement but also to look like fashionable Muslimah. In recent years, there are growing numbers of Malaysian Muslim entrepreneurs that focus on Muslimah fashion and have made it at the global stage such as Naelofar Hijab and dUck. Hijab symbolizes a woman's commitment to her faith by covering oneself as a means self-respect and self-protection in Islam. This paper attempt to describe the hijab trend among Muslim women in Malaysia. In the current time hijab has been worn not only to reflect one's religious beliefs but at the same time it is also to keep up with the current fashion trend.*

Keywords: *Hijab, Western Fashion, Modesty, Religion, Islamic Fashion*

Introduction

Hijab portrays a vital symbol of a Muslim female identity. It is an epitome of modesty, virtue and respect. However, the rise of fashionable hijab style has segregated traditional and modern hijab wearers. The increase of modern representation of hijab wearers open up two significant issues. First, concerns were raised whether the fashionable hijab is meeting the standard hijab wearing as per required by the Quran and Sunnah. Islam signifies veil as a tool to protect one's modesty. Veiling enables woman to cover herself whenever she is the public space as well as away from those that are not related to them directly (Siraj 2011, p. 732).

Secondly, query on the intention of fashionable hijab wearer in promoting modesty of a Muslimah image or the trendy outlook. For that reason, it is debatable that fashion set by popular hijab style may not entirely suitable on religious ground in order to uphold image of a Muslimah concurrently defying divine scripture (Nurzihan & Nur Leila 2015, p. 33).

The issue of modesty in Islamic clothing which viewed and physically is connected with the concept of *awra*. *Awra* is an Arabic term meaning 'inviolable vulnerability' or 'what must be covered' and consisting of the private body parts of a human being (El Guindi 1999, p. 142). Women's concept of *awra* is more extensive compared to men. A woman's *awra* that consists of her entire body such as the back, abdomen, thighs and two private parts, with the exception of her face and hands cannot be disclosed to men outside her *mahrem*, i.e., family members and those forever ineligible for marriage to her as well as non-Muslim women (Al-Qaradawi 1995, p. 160). Three Quranic references discuss the ruling of hijab which is compulsory to all Muslim female along with its appropriate hijab styling.

The first reference in Surah An-Nur (24) ayah 31, the Quran uses the Arabic word *khimar* to refer to women's headscarves says that "And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers that you might succeed."

The second reference states the outer garment or in Arabic known as *jilbab* must be loose-fitting and non-transparent clothing that covers the whole body, maybe with the exception of the hands and face as mentioned in Surah Al-Ahzab (33) ayah 59, "O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful." While the third reference mentions, women are not to vaunt their accessory as stated in the Quran using the Arabic word *zinah* to refer to their "finery," Surah Al-Ahzab (33) Ayah 33 says that "stay at home, and do not flaunt your finery as they used to in the pagan past; keep up the prayer, give the prescribed alms, and obey God and His Messenger. God wishes to keep uncleanness away from you, people of the [Prophet's] House, and to purify you thoroughly."

Quran promotes wearing of hijab as a form of honoring and protecting women's beauty instead of suppression. Quran highlights several verses on the importance of Hijab or covering of Muslim women. First is modesty and respect. Hijab signifies an expression of chastity and modesty therefore hijab wearer will be recognized as a respectable woman when she covers herself (Taimur, 2012). Surah al-Ahzab ayah 59 clearly says that "O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies (i.e. screen themselves completely). 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."

Second is purity. Hijab becomes a tool to protect the heart from vices where it blocks the sight from succumb to evil actions or thoughts. Hijab serves as a tool to protect women from

world's evil (Mahfoodh, 2008, p. 42). Surah al-Azhab, ayah 33 mentions that "And stay in your houses, and do not display yourselves like that of the times of ignorance, and perform As-Salat (Prayers), and give Zakat and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah wishes only to remove Ar-Rijs (evil deeds and sins) from you, O members of the family (of the Prophet P.B.U.H), and to purify you with a thorough purification."

Third is honorable. Hijab is a part of a woman's voice therefore she should observe honorable behaviour, manner and speech. Woman humbleness portrays via her etiquettes and morals which complete the importance of hijab (Tariq-Munir, 2014, p. 15). Becoming an honorable woman via wearing hijab is indicated in Surah al-Azhab ayah 32, "Be not soft in speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease (of hypocrisy, or evil desire) should be moved with desire, but speak in an honorable manner."

Fourth is righteousness. It is commanded by Allah for a Muslim woman to safeguard her body instead of showing it off. Hijab enable to lessen the risk of male harassment. It is because when Muslim women wear the Hijab, they tend to attract less attention of men lustful eyes compare to the non-wearers. Also, Muslim women have lesser chance to be sexually objectified or exploited for her beauty (Samir, 2013). Surah al-Araf ayah 26 says that "O Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover yourselves (screen your private parts) and as an adornment; and the raiment of righteousness, that is better."

Fifth is success and believe. Modesty of clothing is a form of worship in Islam. Hijab is not force upon women in Islam. It is more on the basis of individual and independent decision in order to yearn Allah's will. Women veiling is a way to adhere the manifestation of God's order and obedience. Therefore, veiling herself is considered as successful Muslim woman simultaneously strengthening her religious believe (Pervez, 2015). Surah al-Nur Ayah 31 shed light on the above point "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and protect their private parts and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent and to draw their veils all over (i.e. their bodies) and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband's fathers, or their sons, or their husband's sons, or their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sister's sons, or their (Muslim) women (i.e. their sisters in Islam), or the (female) slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants who lack vigor, or small children who have no sense of feminine sex. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And all of you beg Allah to forgive you all, O believers, that you may be successful."

These days wearing headscarf or Hijab are portrayed as a new trend in fashion industry. In 2016, luxury fashion houses like Dolce and Gabbana embarked on producing its first collection of Hijabs and abayas for Muslim women. Fashion week is another platform for Hijab to be an exquisite taste of high-end fashion (Yotka, 2016). For an Indonesian Muslim designer Anniesa Hasibuan, her collection was showcased at the 2016 New York Fashion Week. Her collection was the very first collection where every model struts down the runway donning a Hijab. The event not only gave her place in the fashion industry as a fashion designer, it also shifted the Hijab to mainstream fashion (Rodulfo, 2016).

In Malaysia, where most Muslim women wear headscarf, modest wear has swept the Malaysian Muslim fashion market. Two brands have taken Malaysia by storm namely dUCK and Naelofar Hijab. Naelofar Hijab hits RM50 million in the first year of operation in 2015, and sales in 2017 continued to rise by 30 percent compared with 2016 (Nadirah Rodzi, 2018).

In recent years, Malaysia has emerged as one of the global trendsetters in modest wear (Nadirah Rodzi, 2018). Muslim fashion has become the latest sensation that signifies the changing dynamics of traditional and modern culture on the Islamic hijab. It is crucial to understand how Muslim women in Malaysia balance modesty but at the same time staying relevant to the current contemporary Muslim fashion. The interest in modest wear has increased with the widely popular use of social media amongst Malaysians which recorded 18.62 million social network users and is projected to increase to 20.42 million users in 2020 (Statista, n.d.). Muslim women are becoming more fashion-conscious and choose fashion which represent themselves.

Literature Review

The Symbol of Hijab

In 2017, a huge setback occurred when the European Union court rules that employers are allow to ban employees from wearing visible religious symbols to work (Nihad, 2017). In addition, certain European countries have also imposed a national ban on Muslim women donning the veil, for example France imposes fine on women who wear Burqa in public and even a heavier fine if someone forces women to cover their face. While in Belgium, women can be jailed if they are caught veiling (Radhika, 2017).

World Hijab Day falls on the 1st of February every year. On this eventful day, women regardless of religious backgrounds are encourage to don the hijab to support Muslim women around the globe (Keegan, 2017). The movement stems from the creator's own experience. As an immigrant from Bangladesh, Nazma Khan- experienced discrimination when she was growing up in Bronx, New York ("About Us", 2018). Such movement seems like a noble way to unite women from all walks of life. There are differences between the few types of veila that Muslim women use to cover themselves. Those veils, namely - the Burka, Hijab, Chador and Niqab. According to Sinwan Zahid (2016), how Muslims don the veil differs from one country to another and it also reflects in the cultural practice and traditions of the country.

A Burka is a veil use by Muslim women to cover their full body as well as their face. Only the eyes are visible through a piece of mesh that acts as a window for wearers. Burka is worn by Muslim women in Afghanistan as it is mandated by law during the regime of the Taliban ("A Brief History of the Veil in Islam", 2017). On the other hand, a Niqab is very similar to the Burka. However, a Niqab wearer doesn't cover her eyes with any form of materials (Vyver, 2017). Chador is usually worn by Iranian women and it is a full body veil that looks like a cloak. It covers the entire body, including the head and the arms but the face is left visible (What's the Difference Between a Hijab, Niqab and Burka?", 2015).

Lastly Hijab, whether it's in the west or in the east, is the most common form of veil don by Muslim women. A Hijab is a headscarf that covers the head and the neck of the wearers, except for the face ("A Brief History of the Veil in Islam", 2017).

According to Horchel (2013, p. 40) "a piece of fabric has become a powerful and divisive symbol worldwide." This piece of fabric known as a veil or commonly named as Hijab is being donned by Muslim women around the globe and its part and parcel of their daily life. However, not every society agrees that the Hijab represents the same symbolic meaning. Horchel (2013, p. 40) adds, "To some it symbolizes piety, to others, oppression. To some it is a rejection of western morality, to others, a rejection to modernity. To some, it is a religious

statement supporting Islam as a way of living, to others, a political statement supporting violent Islamists.”

Muslim women are taught and expected to be modest; in view of that the hijab is defined as a garment that covers the body and helps in reducing the visibility of silhouette and the attraction of the body (Rafidah Khalid & O’Connor, 2011). While Zulkifli Abdul Latiff and Fatin Nur Sofia (2013) define hijab as a fabric that is worn by women of the Islamic faith that helps in covering the hair and neck and at times the face is also concealed except for the eyes. Nurzihan Hassim (2014) adds the Hijab carries a unique representation of women in different roles and also to differentiate them from males.

Most important, according to the Quran, “it is mandatory for a Muslim woman to cover herself from strangers and distant relatives with a veil or Hijab, this includes hair, arms, bosom, feet and other parts of the body” (Abdullah, 1999 p. 40). Islamic fashion can be understood as women wearing loose, non-hugging clothing that doesn’t reveal the shape of your body, long sleeves, descending to the ankle with high neckline, and head covering. In Malaysia, adult Malay women are still expected to dress modestly in the company of men who are stranger to her family. However, wearing Hijab remains as a choice to them as it is not punishable by law if a woman opts not to veil herself.

Hijab in the Fashion Industry

According to DeSilver and Masci (2017) of Pew Research Center, as of 2010 Islam is the second largest religious tradition after Christianity and by the year 2050 the world population would be made up of 2.76 billion or 29.7% of Muslims. With such large numbers of Muslims around the globe, it does make sense for multinational brands to take the opportunity to expand into the growing segment of the market (Salva, 2017). For example, local and global designers are designing modesty, one of it is Mimpikita, a Malaysian brand founded by three sisters which made debut at the London Fashion Week in 2015 featuring fashion in chic and modest clothing

Uniqlo has a steady line of Muslim wears, ranging from head scarves to tunics. These collections are made with the collaboration with British fashion designer Hana Tajima (Sharkey, 2016). Nike, the world-famous sports brand has also embarked on the Islamic clothing as well, designing sportswear for female Muslim athletes (“Nike launches hijab for female Muslim athletes”, 2017). Even luxury brand like Dolce & Gabbana has started to produce Hijabs and abayas especially for customers in the Middle East. Not forgetting, other luxury brands and high street fashion houses like DKNY, Oscar de la Renta, Tommy Hilfiger, Mango and Monique Lhuillier has also made collections targeted at Muslim wearers (Yotka, 2016).

Hijab in Malaysian Context

Malaysia remains as a moderate Muslim country whereby women have more freedom compare to their counterparts in the Middle East, this is due to Malaysia being a multicultural society. The country Constitution states that religion freedom is given to non-Malays. Moreover, Malaysia has dual legal system. One that follows the British Common Law and the other follow the Shariah Laws that only govern any proceedings that relate to Islam (Salva, 2017).

In general, fashion is important to both men and women as it's able to convey information as well as a tool that leads to others forming perception of the wearer. Despite that, Muhammad Tahir and Kalthom Abdullah (2015) state the fashion market for women are much stronger and larger compare to men as women are more fashion conscious. Wearers like to dress up exclusively to look different from others and this implies each person unique characteristics. Hijab can help in playing role of enhancing one's look. Muslim's women in today's society are not only constantly checking out the latest fashion in clothing, they are also checking out the latest trend in Hijab designers and the trendiest ways to don a Hijab (Muhammad Tahir & Kalthom Abdullah, 2015).

In the recent years, Malaysian women have been seen to wear fashionable headscarves in bright colours and creative designs. Consequently, modest fashion is quickly turning into a lucrative industry. Thomson Reuters reported in 2015, US\$243 billion spent by Muslim consumers worldwide on clothing and apparel, whilst an estimated \$44 billion was earmarked for modesty (Nadirah Rodzi, 2018). Bloomberg reported that by the year 2019, Muslim consumer globally will spend an estimate US\$484 on clothing and footwear (Boo, 2015).

As society moves towards modernity, Hijab wearing does not only reflect one religion beliefs. It also reflects in one's fashion choice. When this happens, Muslim women are stuck in a state of uncertainty as they themselves might be muddled on what is the main motive in donning the hijab at the first place. Chen, Akat, Xin and Song (2014, p. 208) state "This dilemma comes from the contrast between the traditional modesty style Muslim women are asked to show and the modern stylish hijab style that fashion industry demands."

In Malaysia, most Muslim women choose to wear a Hijab and yet at the same time, some choose not to do so. According to Nurzihan Hassim (2014) the practice of hijab wearing begun in the 1980s when the trend of covering ones *awra'* and the *Muslimah* couture were introduced to the society. Nurzihan Hassim (2014) adds as time passes by and the *Muslimah* fashion industry grew bigger, Muslim women are constantly bombarded with marketing of Hijab fashion. This eventually creates a Hijab wearing culture whereby Muslim women no longer wear Hijab just because of the requirement of the religion but also as a fashion statement. The selections of Hijab expanded from different fabrics, designs, colors and so forth.

As the Hijab industry further widens, the media industry takes the opportunity to introduce Hijab fashion magazines as well as websites. Media tools like these not only play the role of the informant on what is in trend, it also teaches Muslim women on how to mix and match their Hijab with their clothing like "baju kurung", blouse, shoes and purse (Zulkifli Abdul Latiff and Fatin Nur Sofia (2013). Not only that, Nurzihan Hassim (2017, p. 3) states, "urban Hijab representations in Malaysian media today are encouraging young Malay women to be liberated and experimental with their veiling choices in the emphasis to appear modern and unique."

Hassim (2014) posited the majority of South East Asian nations including Malaysia has allowed *Muslimah* to express their personalities and styles however they stray away from the norms of a conservative *Muslimah*. This is furthered affirmed by the imageries seen in lifestyle and fashion Muslim women magazines which celebrate modern take in modesty trends. This trend, however, may not necessarily comply with the true meaning of wearing Hijab. Woldesemait (2012) mentions the modernized style of hijab do not meet the standard of Islamic modesty requirement. Modesty clothing is supposed to defer attention and not to

attract man's attention. The transformation of hijab wearing in magazines could reflect how hijab wearing is redefined in the current modern society, providing social cues to Muslim women on how to dress in this modern life without renouncing their faith.

Conclusion

All in all, wearing of hijab and covering of oneself are meant for Muslim society to function in an appropriate manner rather than restriction imposed upon woman. Islamic guidelines to modesty uniquely to uphold the highest standard of Muslim identity in terms of chastity, righteousness, moral uprightness as well as protection and safeguard the individual behaviour in the society. Hijab enable for women to be appreciated for their knowledge and contribution to the society. Therefore, women can be judged based on their intellect rather than their physical traits (Irfan, 2017). In Malaysia, the trend of Islamic fashion is a relatively new phenomenon and more research should be done in understanding the Muslim women balance the need for modesty with modern hijab trend.

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