

**“My hijab reflects my identity rather my religion”
 Perspectives towards wearing the hijab by a sample of Palestinian
 university female students in Israel**

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Abstract:

At almost every phase, the question of the hijab resurfaces as different parties raise this issue and its relationship with Islam and the other. Issues like liberty, terrorism, persecution, fanaticism, democracy and others are also addressed. It has been recently noticed that the number of Palestinian university female students (PUFS) wearing the hijab is on the rise. The researcher took notice of this phenomenon and decided to find the reasons behind such behavior.

The purpose of the study is to understand how PUFS wearing the hijab view Hijab; it seeks to answer a central question, “How do these female students justify their choice of wearing the hijab? and “How do these justifications differ according to their socio-educational context?”

The study consists of 25 in-depth interviews with female students studying at a mixed Arab and Jewish College.

The study revealed that the perception and justification of wearing the hijab is not only a religious one. In fact, it is a social, cultural, economic and political perception as well. The notion of traditional Hijab, as an act of suppression of woman freedom, no longer exists. In fact, it is quite the opposite since PUFS indicate that wearing the hijab harmonies with modernization and contributes to Moslem woman adaptation wherever she is found for it is an essential factor for engagement into the society.

Key words: Hijab, University, Palestine, Israel, Islam

Introduction:

Several studies indicate that the phenomenon of woman the hijab is one of the ancient social phenomena since the hijab in both Judaism and Christianity was an expression of commitment to religious and moral obligations. In Islam, the hijab is considered a social and moral regulator that gives a woman respect, protects her chastity and livelihood. It has become a social value, a cultural symbol and an identity dimension. Undoubtedly, wearing the hijab was a religious obligation and a moral necessity and commitment before it became a social behavior and a cultural practice. It is absolutely nonnegotiable and irreplaceable in terms of form and fashion as the case may be for contemporary fashions. Even if it undergoes some modifications, it still abides by the general framework dictated by religious regulations and teachings. However, it is recently noticed that the hijab became a space to promote different fashions and tastes as well as modern fashions. Such practices often push

the hijab towards becoming a simple and plain commodity.

Woman the hijab resembles a huge dilemma for many people; there are varying views regarding this topic. Some consider it a barrier before women to attain their liberty and humanity. Another party views it from a religious standpoint that makes it impossible to reject or give an opinion about it. The first party indicates that the hijab was linked to a specific period that ended with the end of the Prophet’s time. In addition, it was not required of all Muslim women, but it was limited to prophet’s wives. They also argue that not wearing the hijab is not considered a grave sin that leads to hell, but rather it is a minor sin forgivable by God the Almighty. (Abdallah 2011, Mussab 2010, Swami 2009).

Supporters of the second party were divided into two groups: the first one completely believed Islamic teachings and strictly wore the hijab in observing God’s verse, “Wama kana limuminin wala muminatin itha qada Allahu warasooluhu amran an

yakoona lahumu alkhiiyaratu min amrihim waman yaAAasi Allaha warasoolahu faqad dalla dalalan mubeenan” (It is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Messenger to have any option about their decision: if any one disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he is indeed on a clearly wrong Path) (Holy Quran, Al Ahzab Chapter, Verse 36). As for the second group, they are reluctant to abide by God’s teachings and are unable to implement his orders for a number of reasons: (Mahfoodh 2008)

- Weak belief in God the Almighty
- Ignorance of religious teachings and orders
- The concept of the hijab is associated with intellectual misconceptions resulting from customs and traditions. (Abdallah 2011)

This research within this context will define some basic terms for the research subject; such terms may not be comprehensible to someone outside this context.

Al-Hijab: It is a piece of cloth worn by a woman to hide and cover her forbidden parts from strangers and non-Mahram. The hijab covers all of the body parts from top to toe. In the social concept, it is basically defined as the garment which noticeably shows woman’s head cover. It differs according to the social and geographical requirements. The hijab, as viewed by sociologists, is one of the social traditions which are considered part of the social and cultural elements. Some researchers see that the hijab is very crucial for the fulfillment of social belonging and security in Muslim societies (Swami 2013, Siraj 2011).

There are other concepts which are inter-related with the significance of hijab.

Khimar: Its linguistic meaning refers to what the woman uses as a head cover. The Khimar is in general a head cover; the woman’s kihmar is on her head. The Holy Quran stated that, “walyadribna bikhumurihinna AAala juyoobihinna walayubdeena zeenatahunna illa libuAAoolatihinna” that they should draw their veils over their

bosoms (Holy Quran, Al Nur Chapter, Verse 31).

An Niqab (Veil): It is the mask fitted on the nose; it only shows the eyes. In the past, one of the eyes could be seen while the other is hidden. It is also called Burqu (Ibn Manzur part 14, p. 252).

This research will not address the Niqab (veil) since it is not the appropriate word to convey the actual meaning of hijab. Once more, I reemphasize that the hijab means cover, conceal and hide. It has complicated significance which includes the action of wearing the hijab and the hijab clothes at the same time. The hijab is used nowadays to refer to a piece of cloth which people use to cover their hair and they tie it down the neck or use pins to fit it, but they keep their face uncovered. This research once again uses the hijab as a concept for protection. The term head cover is related to women who cover everything except face and hands.

Theoretical framework and literature

The recent two decades witnessed a strong return of the hijab in the Palestinian society in Israel. This return is distinguished by the fact that many university and college female students wear hijab. Wearing the hijab has become a salient feature of the Palestinian society. Consequently, interest in studying this phenomenon increased. Some studies (Latifi 2006K, Shawish 2002) indicate that there are two attitudes towards wearing hijab. There is the religious attitude and second is related to individual decisions which might be social, psychological, economic ...etc.

Abdel Wahab (2003) explained that wearing the hijab does not carry a single significance. Some subject it to religious matters while others refer it to completely different variables which are mainly political but wrapped in religion. (Al Faisal 2004). Al Shathili (2002) claimed that there was a social dimension for wearing the hijab especially in recent years. Al Khadrawi (2006) indicated that the social aspect influenced the shape and quality of hijab. There is traditional religious hijab, modern hijab, fashionable hijab, political symbol, tribal the hijab and others. This kind of wearing the hijab comes from a

philosophical perspective since it gives a value to humanism that is originated in the existence of the human being as well as taking into consideration the significance of values, principles, customs and traditions (Al Khadrawi 2006, Khan 2005).

Other social aspects of wearing the hijab relate to marriage which became one of the important causes why unmarried girls wear hijab. Latifi (2006) explained that, "Marriage became an ambition to several girls who were competing to have their future husbands". Accordingly, we understand that the hijab signifies the high morals and commitment of the woman or the girl who wears it. Al Hufi (2006) indicated that there was another social aspect for wearing hijab; it is linked with poverty. The hijab in many cases would be a simple solution to make up for the girl's inability to keep up with new and fashionable clothes (Al Hufi 2006, Wikwski 1999).

In the Arab world, some empirical studies were conducted in order to identify why the hijab spread among university female students. One study, conducted in Iraq by Shahba Khazal, concluded that the cause why students wore the hijab was mainly for social reasons rather than religious reasons. The social aspect included parents influence and physical beauty to attract admiration. A very low percentage wore the hijab out of decency, chastity and to conceal their beauty. Window shops also had a great impact on making girls wear hijab. The percentage of those influenced by this variable reached 45% (Khazal 2006).

In a study conducted by Abdallah (2011), it was found that the hijab represented one of the manifestations of Islamic thought; it was applied to show the borderline between the message of Muslims and that of seculars. The study stressed that the hijab was not confined to Muslims; in fact, other peoples used it. The most ancient people who subjected women to the hijab were the Assyrians (Syriacs). The study emphasized that monotheistic religions Judaism and Christianity required using the hijab for religious matters.

In a field study, Akhras (1967) conducted her study on a sample of 400 males and females from Damascus city and its surroundings. The study showed that 44% of married women

wear the hijab when they go outside their homes while 7% of them wear religious hijab; 28% go out dressed in casual dresses and 2% go out without wearing hijab. The study also indicated that 65% of those wearing the hijab were illiterate, and the percentage of non-hijabs reached 85%. In Egypt, the researcher Radwan (1984) conducted a study to identify the causes why Egyptian university female students wore hijab. It found that the majority of Hijabs come from middle class families. Hijabs are lesser believers in woman right to education and work. 94% of Hijabs reject woman work outside her home country because of prevailing customs, traditions and the requirement of having a Mahram with her.

The hijab and West

The topics of Islam, fundamentalism, terrorism, extremism and woman status preoccupy the minds of a considerable number of scholars. The common discourse in the midst of the public domain talks about retardedness, violence and barbarism. As woman suppression, it is for granted. This position confronts the western stereotypical image of the hijab as a symbol of suppression of Muslim women. It is more like a soldier fighting a battle as he is climbing a hill. The situation became worse due to the events that took place by the end of the twentieth century in the Arab World. (Bullock 2013, Abdurraquib 2010, Unkelbach 2006).

As for Muslims, who live in the West, there is an urgent need to change the negative stereotypical image of the hijab as a manifestation of suppression. There are cases that scientifically and objectively proved that Muslims are harmed by the negative image about the hijab and Islam. In the year 1995, a number of Muslim female students were expelled from their schools in Quebec County in Canada under the pretext that they refused to take off their hijab. The hijab wearing teenager studying at a school in Quebec County felt great humiliation when her school teacher announced on television that Islam degraded women. The girl said in response to her teacher's announcement, "I do not understand why any person says such a thing. She knows me and knows my personality. I am not like what she says." In 1998, many cases were

documented as the hijab wearing women were expelled from their work place because of wearing hijab. This happened in “Dunkin Donuts” in Boston and Boston Market Restaurant, Sheraton Hotel, Washington 1997) (Council on America Kelly Islamic Relation’s 1998, Barkowski 2003, Droogsma 2007)

In Israel, a lecturer at Bar Ilan University asked a Muslim student to remove hijab; when she refused, she was expelled from class. (Ya’il Oom, News 29/10/17). The same happened with a medicine student when she was detained for a short period for wearing the hijab or was under identity suspicion. (Walla News site 2017).

I do not want in this research to follow up all these cases since this is not the purpose of this research. This matter is not only confined to Israel, but it also includes the majority of the Western world. Based on these incidents, it may be concluded that the West expresses aggressive views toward the hijab and those who wear it as well as associating it with the concept of suppression and terrorism.

In a study conducted by Catherine Block (2001) “Western view of Hijab”, interviews, with some women in Toronto city, Canada were conducted. It was found that the hijab is a religious outfit and not a form of suppression. In fact, it is part of religion which gives dignity and respect to Muslim women. The image of the hijab does not reflect the experience of women wearing hijab. The image about the hijab always served western politics and continues to do so in the twenty first century. The association of the hijab with suppression is based on western view of the concepts of (Equality and Freedom). Such definitions obstruct other ways to understand (equality and freedom). Block claimed that western culture is radically biased against Islam and Muslims and media plays a big role in the negative view of hijab.

Academic Education in Israel

The Israeli society consists of different ethnic and religious groups. There is a big difference between Jews and Arabs with regard to religion, language, lifestyle, and national aspirations (Jabreen 2005). Israeli Arab society in Israel is characterized by differences with

regard to desire to integrate or preserve traditions and customs or head towards western concepts and integration into the western culture.

Different researchers (Herzog, H. 2004, Jabareen 2005) showed that youth generation wishes to emancipate itself and integrate into the western culture since the rise of the state until current days.

The number of girls who seek university education especially in teacher training colleges has increased (Addi-Racah 2006). The majority of Arab female students study in Arab and Jewish colleges. However, there are two colleges (Qasimi and Sakhnin) where only Arab students study. The total number of students studying in teacher training colleges is 26320 students and 14.6% are Arabs and 10% of them are females (Higher Education Council 2017).

As mentioned above, this research will focus on the issue of the hijab of Arab female students who study in teacher training college. The research will answer the following question: How do Arab female students view the issue of wearing the hijab and what are the adaptation mechanisms they use to adapt with their situation in institutions? Since those students spend most of their times in the public domain rather than the private one and this by itself makes it difficult for them to adapt and integrate.

Research methodology:

This research will deal with a sample of female students studying in teacher training colleges especially those students who were characterized for wearing the hijab. It was noticed that the hijab they wore was varied and different. The research will focus on how these students view the hijab or what is the formulated picture about the hijab. The research methodology will be qualitative.

Research tool:

This research depended on in depth interviews; the purpose is to identify how the female students view hijab. Analysis of interviews will depend on girls’ stories with the hijab. This methodology is important and appropriate

for qualitative research, and it helps to reveal the truth and develop the positions of those interviews towards the event and give a deeper meaning. The interviewee will talk at length about her story (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiacha Zilber, 1998). By using the method of in-depth interview or story, the researcher gives a deeper concept and understanding with regard to his attitudes and understanding of it (Polkinghorne 1995). Analysis of interviews (stories) will enrich the research to have a better understanding of the phenomenon in a deeper and more objective manner (Stake 2006).

Participants:

In this research, 25 female students from different colleges took part in the interviews. Some study in Arab colleges only, and the other part study in Arab and Jewish colleges. 10 students study in Arab colleges only and 15 students study in mixed Arab and Jewish colleges. All the respondents wear the hijab and their ages are between 18-26 years (5 of them are married). All of them study to obtain an educational diploma in order to become teachers in the future.

Research question:

How do Palestinian university female students justify their choice of wearing the hijab?

Research significance and procedures:

This research gained my interest since a long time. When I was at a conference in the United Kingdom, I noticed, during the discussions, an Arab woman wearing the hijab and at the same time drinking a glass of wine. When I asked her about what I saw, she said the following, "My hijab reflects my identity rather than my religion." I do not think that this statement can be generalized, but it is an important indicator and an important gesture on the role of hijab. Furthermore, the research topic emerged out of a discussion in one of the courses the researcher teaches (analysis of events) where the hijab student and the non-hijab student discussed the religious aspect of the hijab. This has produced more interest by the researcher and the students to examine how female students viewed the hijab, its importance and reasons for wearing it.

The researcher asked all female participants in the course to write an anonymous report on how they viewed the hijab and the reason why they wear it. Following a review of their written answers, it was found that the female students wrote about different aspects and not only the religious aspect, but also they included social, economic and political ones. These answers were general and did not give in-depth answers. The female students were asked whether they were willing to participate in the research. 20 female students out of 35 gave their consent. 10 of them were chosen because they wore different kinds of the hijab compared to those in the other college. In a classroom discussion on democracy, culture of dialogue and hijab, some female students expressed their willingness to have a better understanding of the phenomenon. The number of those who wanted to take part in the research was 15 out of 40 female students. In the end, a total number of 25 hijabs from both colleges were interviewed.

Research ethics:

The research significance, objectives, mechanisms were explained to the participants. Also, the researcher promised to keep names of both students and colleges confidential. The researcher promised the hijab girls to read the transcripts of the interviews to give his opinion about them. He also made it clear to them that they could withdraw from the research at a later time. The voices of the hijabs were not recorded to preserve confidentiality and observe Arab customs and traditions. Interviews took place in the normal place for research in the colleges in the breaks between classes. The interview lasted for half an hour over the entire semester of the academic year 2017/2018. All students remained in the research except for one student who withdrew for personal reasons not explained to the researcher.

Interview:

In order to come closer to the research population, we choose the technique of "interview" which is considered the most successful means to gather the largest quantity of data on the topic. It is one of the best techniques to anyone who wants to explore the deep incentives of the individuals as well as

identify the common reasons for their behavior through the exclusive nature of each case (Moris Anjris 2006). We adopted the focused individual interview which required the researcher to prepare an interview guide which included aspects related to the topic and were directly conducted with the respondent, namely the hijab university student. This helps the researcher to be introduced to her so as to determine the way she interacts, speaks and behaves. We were allowed to come in direct contact with research subjects. 25 official interviews were conducted with the hijab university students in 2017/2018 academic year.

Data Analysis:

The results were analyzed according to main classifications identified based on respondents interviews.

Prevalence of fashion: Results showed that wearing the hijab is considered a cultural value and a culture symbol which carries one of the dimensions of identity (12) students. The hijab is a religious and moral behavior before it acquired a social dimension. It expresses holding fast to identity. However, the presence of girls in a Jewish/Israeli society (Western society) and the question of Globalization have greatly contributed to changing the shape of the hijab to match fashion. Therefore, 5 students explained that the hijab is a personal freedom and fashion (vogue) paves the way for them to choose hijab. A student explained this by saying the following quotation, "A month ago, I went to Nablus and stopped before a window shop. I was wearing the traditional hijab. What made me interested is that there were so many types of the hijab that go alongside modern fashion. Since then, I wore the hijab according to fashion, and I do not think this contradicts with religion."

Religion: 5 students wearing the traditional hijab indicated that the reason for the hijab is full conviction of religion. One of the subjects indicated that, "I started reciting Quran and deeply reading prophet's life story; after that I wore the hijab."

According to their conviction, the psychological condition makes her by all means wants to have a partner. One girl

indicated that one of her family was engaged to a girl from the north. When my family knew that she had recently removed the hijab, they broke off their engagement. Another hijab girl said that her hijab gives the impression that she is not too demanding in terms of wedding garments and preparations.

The hijab and values:

Some students indicated the importance of values and traditions in wearing the hijab. One of the respondents indicated, "I was obliged by my dad and grandfather to wear the hijab. Sometimes when I travel with my friends, I take it off; then I wear it when I return home." 8 respondents indicated that the hijab helps them to move around since the concept of the hijab means more respect and less harassment. "It warns others not to come near me or touch me. This convinces parents that their daughter is respected and no one dares to harass her for the hijab protects her."

Political situations and media

It was found that 4 respondents indicated that whenever they go to Jewish places, they would take off the hijab to avoid inspection, racism or humiliation. 2 respondents said that they would take off the hijab whenever they passed through Israeli military checkpoints because they were afraid of soldiers. Another student claimed that she was very much influenced by television shows especially the hijab news anchors on Al Jazeera channel. In this way, I do not oppose religion and I follow fashion as well.

It was found that Palestinian university female students have different attitudes towards wearing the hijab. The role fashion in wearing the hijab is stronger than that of the religious / traditional aspect. The hijab university student is no longer out of the circle of fashion and all what is new. This happened as a result of the large scale spread of fashionable clothes at window shops, magazines and all types of mass media. During the interviews, it was found that the majority of students choose the fashion hijab and they now have fashion culture which requires them to know all trademarks, niches, as well as fabric and quality of clothes. Many of the students indicated that they have Turkish hijabs.

Another student indicated that she was a member of Facebook group where there was a lot chatting and exchange of information about the importance, role, type, trademark and quality of brands in the market.

Another student claimed, “There are clear boundaries that show the girl the places she is allowed to be in. The hijab came and allowed me to move into places I was not allowed to go to in the past. The society looks at the hijab as protecting a girl from harassment.”

Audio visual media:

8 students indicated that audio visual media had an influence on wearing the hijab. 5 students indicated that religious satellite channels had a great effect on wearing the hijab. 2 students indicated that the Egyptian Muslim preacher Amr Khalid played a big role in influencing girls to wear the hijab. 6 students said that they were influenced by the hijab news anchors working in different television channels like Al Jazeera and others.

Fear of becoming spinsters:

The hijab girl wears the hijab as an important factor to speed up her marriage. 6 students supported the idea that the hijab contributed to speeding up their marriage. The majority of Arab young men come from conservative families. Therefore, they prefer the hijab women. Some girls resort to the hijab just when they reach a certain age. Some of the respondents explained that the girl who wears the traditional hijab has a better chance in marriage more than those wearing the Turkish hijab. The social pressures (being left behind)

Conclusion:

Based on our study of the phenomenon of the hijab of Arab Palestinian university female students in Israel and the way they viewed the hijab, we realize that many of the local and international views consider the hijab as a religious indicator only; it refers to the cancellation of the woman as well as imposition of the policy of suppression on them. However, the research showed that the majority of the hijab concepts are not only religious.

The hijab constitutes one of the psychological and social pressures on university girls who belong to a segment of society who experience the contradiction between two kinds of concepts and values: On one hand, traditional concepts which they inherited and were passed to them through culture and the new concepts which scientific and technological development supported on the other hand. Since they are university students, they look for social acceptance and work on proving their presence and social status that distinguishes them as intellectual elite. The hijab does not cancel their personality, nor does it confine their freedom. One of the interviewees stressed this by saying, “Eat as you wish, but dress as what others wish to see you.” Therefore, the students think that the hijab harmonizes with the topic and allows for integration into the society. It goes alongside fashion on one side and religion on the other side. In Arab Palestinian institutions in Israel, we notice nowadays a new hijab culture – a youth culture that focuses on thoughts and behaviors like consumption habits and trademarks. Fashion culture (modern hijab) has noticeably spread among Arab girls thanks to mass media and cultural gatherings and contexts within a western society like the Israeli society and the place (University campus). The hijab constitutes one of the psychological and social needs, and it is a cultural expression that distinguishes between men and women in the Muslim society. It changes according to the changing social, cultural and economic conditions. In light of the distinctiveness and nature of the female body, Islam obligated women to wear the hijab because it has social, psychological, and religious as well as aesthetic values. This last value is the prevailing one nowadays among female Palestinian university students in Israel. Undoubtedly, the university female student finds in the modern hijab a strategy to hold fast to Islamic religion and to please the family on one hand and appear in an elegant and beautiful image on the other hand. It also helps her to move easily and freely.

The hijab plays a role in attracting the future life partner especially when the girl reaches marrying age, so she resorts to all means to avoid becoming a spinster.

Therefore, there is no doubt that the prevailing idea about the hijab in the western world which claims that the hijab is a means of suppression, terrorism and piety is basically a misconception. The hijab has become a means to attract admiration and attention of others as well as showing that they are different. The Arab Palestinian female student expresses her freedom and independence in her tastes and choices by escaping from stereotypes and traditions sometimes and by following values and standards which scientific and media developments advocate. Therefore, the model of the Palestinian university female student in Israel expresses her personality, piety, thoughts, desires, motives and justifications at the same time.

Based on the research results, it is noticed that the idea of the religious and traditional hijab which seeks to detach the woman from strangers through using different restraints that inhibit the woman from going out to public life is now obsolete. The introduction of the Arab Palestinian hijab student in Israel into the academic, scientific and university life has made it impossible to restrain her. Rationality stresses that the woman's honor, chastity and virtue are not protected by locking her inside four walls. The model of the Palestinian university female student wearing the hijab is the best example of her ability to adjust in a complex society by succeeding in establishing a harmony between what is religious or worldly and what is old or new.

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