Choosing Hijab

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There are numerous reasons why women wear hijab.* For some, it’s a matter of having control over what others can and cannot see, a matter of exercising their female agency in public. Others find that hijab liberates them from unrealistic standards of beauty prescribed onto women by society. And then there are women who cherish the sisterhood it builds, such as through those moments when two Muslim women who are complete strangers greet one another in the streets with Salam – peace.

Choosing Hijab

By Thamine Nayeem

Photography by Sofia Nicolet
These aforementioned understandings of hijab are all reasons why I also continue to wear hijab today. However, when I first decided to wear hijab nearly six years ago, it was – and still is – first and foremost a physical reminder of my connection with Allah,* or of my ongoing and sincere struggle, jihad,* to connect with God. Even on days when my faith is weak, and I feel as if I did something that can’t be amended, it reminds me that I am never not good enough or not spiritual enough to reconnect with my creator. I also feel free to traverse the realms of doubt, to critically question my faith in order to strengthen it, because hijab acts as a string, connecting me physically to my inward spirituality.

But there are undeniably days when I do struggle with hijab. I find that my relationship with hijab wanes and waxes with insecurities that many women, especially from minority groups, experience: Will I ever fit in a society that constantly rejects me? Can I, who am perceived as so foreign and different, ever be considered pretty? Am I, who is recognizably Muslim, safe riding public transportation today? Do those people staring hate me or blame me for situations around the world that I cannot control?

To fit in, to be pretty, to be safe, to be liked – these are all struggles that Muslim women in America face because of how they dress. These pressures directed at them in the name of liberation ironically force many to relinquish hijab.

I am fortunate and so incredibly thankful to have a support system of friends and family, of Muslims and non-Muslims, who help me relearn that my own confidence in my faith and in my decision to wear hijab is always stronger than these moments of struggle. And for the past six years, I find myself again and again choosing hijab.

Unfortunately, there does exist another group of Muslim women that does not share this freedom of choice that I am privileged to enjoy. An honest conversation on hijab necessitates that I address the fact that Muslim communities have problems – very real and plaguing problems that cannot be overlooked to save the face of our religion. This defensive approach internally hurts us far more than any gross generalization we are trying to deflect.

Every community has problems, and it is OK to admit that we do. It’s high time we start recognizing and addressing the fact that we teach our daughters to be modest without prescribing the same standards to our sons. After all, the Quranic verses on hijab were first addressed to men before they were addressed to women, and these verses were not just limited to physical clothing but encompassed many manifestations of modesty. So instead, it should be made clear that male behavior and morality does not rest with women -- men are in control of their actions.

“Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them. And Allah is well-acquainted with all that they do.” – An-Nur (24:30)

Instead of policing the bodies of women, we would do well to give all women the liberty to explore their own religious beliefs. A Muslim woman should feel, no matter where she is, free enough to move between hijab and no hijab, to be fluid and grow without scrutiny from the very people who are supposed to support her, to make hijab easy for her. For what is Islam if it isn’t grounded on one’s conscious belief in what he or she practices?

But I would like to push this narrative of the Muslim woman beyond her clothing within all communities. To the Muslim community, I say a Muslim woman is not Muslim because of her hijab; to the West, I say a woman is not only her religion. I hope that one day when I say the words “Muslim woman,” you don’t just visualize a girl in a headscarf, but instead women who consciously choose to express their devotion to God in whatever way they choose – with or without hijab. I hope we can talk about business women like Khadija, or scholars like Ayesha, war heroes like Nusseibeh, athletes like Ibtihaj Muhammad, and beauty gurus like Amena.* Muslim women are proud of their faith, but they aren’t asking to defined and understood by it exclusively.

We can humanize the Muslim woman beyond the context of a one-dimensional understanding of hijab, beyond the space we have confined her, so we can see her as the complex, multi-faceted human being she is.

And even if after all of this, you still don’t understand why women choose to wear hijab or you think we’ve somehow psychologically oppressed ourselves, that’s OK. Differences in outlook are not bigotry. Meaning-making – whether that’s through reason, emotion, empiricism, etc. – doesn’t lead everybody down the same road. I applaud you for reading and for trying to understand a different viewpoint. But what I do ask is that you respect the women who do observe hijab and their right to make their own decisions on how they wish to govern their bodies.

And if you do decide to help give voice to the oppression that some Muslim women experience in Muslim-majority countries, then please do it without a political agenda, with a non-ethnocentric mentality. Do it sincerely.

Salam.
REFERENCE FOR ISLAMIC TERMINOLOGY:
ALLAH (GOD) - In Islam, Allah is believed to be the one (tawhid), omniscient, omnipotent, non-human (genderless) creator of all things, akin to the Jewish tradition.
JIHAD (STRUGGLE/STRIVE) – There are many different forms of jihad in Islam. One form of jihad does involve the use of physical force, but there are VERY, VERY strict rules of engagement. For example, it has to be a justified fight against an oppressive force, such as self-defence, with no other peaceful alternative. But Islam emphasizes more greatly the jihad of striving towards personal betterment, whether that's social, spiritual, and so forth, to live by the guidance of Allah.
HIJAB/KHIMAR (VEIL) - There are several references to modesty in the Quran. Islam teaches that both men and women can be modest through their speech, conduct, and dress. Thus, physical modesty is just one dimension of this virtue; one can be modest by talking to someone respectfully.

‘If you are interested in learning more about these terms, tafsir (exegesis) of the Quran is a great resource; it will give you insight on which historical context the verses were revealed, to whom they address, and interpretations of their meanings. I am not an Islamic scholar so please take all this information I have offered as a starting point to understanding a religion that has been so unfairly perverted by groups like the media and terrorists.

KHADIJA - The employer and first wife of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as well as the first convert to Islam.
AYESHA - Another beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who was well-known for her intelligence and vibrant personality.
NUSA YBAH BINT KA’AB - Known to have fought in the Battle of Uhud and was honored for protecting the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).
IBTIHAJ MUHAMMAD - The first woman to wear hijab on the United States Olympic Team.
AMENA - A YouTube and lifestyle blogger who has launched her own makeup and clothing line.

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- Thamine Nayeem
APPLICATIONS DUE BY 5 P.M., SEPT. 29, 2016

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