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Decolonising the Modest Dress: Intersectionality, Agency, and Choice in Diasporic Muslim Women's Fiction

Sumayya P
Dr. Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi

This article explores the intersection of religion and modest dressing within the framework of intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw 1998, Selod 2018) while reading diasporic fiction by Muslim women. It looks into how the protagonists in the novels *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and *Love in a Headscarf* (2010) navigate agency and choice while adopting Islamic sartorial styles. Challenging the modernist premise which regard faith as a private act rather than explicit ritual practices or as reciprocated in faith-based clothing (Tarlo and Moors 2013, Asad 1997), the article expands the concept of 'modesty' (haya) beyond traditional fiqhi interpretations into the frame of modest dressing. Secondly, drawing from the works of Judith Butler (1999) and Saba Mahmood (2005), the article regards agency as embedded within power structures, moving beyond the binary of subordination and subversion. Thirdly, it builds on Miriam Cooke's 'multiple critique' (2007) and Elizabeth Bucar's 'creative conformity' (2011) to examine how characters negotiate religious and patriarchal norms while operating in a nuanced space between conformity and rebellion. The article situates Muslim women's sartorial choices within the broader context of secularism, global fashion networks, and the political climate of Islamophobia, and looks into its impact upon intersectionality and the broader discourse of feminist studies.

Key Words: Muslim Women Fiction, Diasporic Writing, Modest Fashion, Sartoriality, Intersectionality

Introduction

In his framing of intersectionality, Afro-American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois in the 1960s explored how intertwined oppressions related to race, class, and culture perpetuate social injustices and discrimination. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her 1998 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," coined the term intersectionality which she developed into a robust theoretical framework that examines the interplay of various social relations and identities (MaCall, 2005, p. 1771). Crenshaw's "black feminist criticism" focuses on the multifaceted experiences of black women and critiques the practice of treating race and gender as separate categories of experience (Crenshaw 139). Scholars have since extended the intersectional approach to read the convergence of race and religion (Islam), and examined how it creates a distinct form of racialization, particularly among Muslim women of the Middle Eastern/South Asian descent. By incorporating religion as a key component of gendered intersectional analysis, intersectionality can be effectively broadened to explore the daily lives of Muslim women. This approach offers an anti-essentialist perspective, challenges the concept of a universal sisterhood that oversimplifies women's experiences, and emphasizes the importance of women's narratives from religious and geographic margins to convey their experiences and potentially dismantle racial biases. Muslim feminists have co-opted intersectionality to critique academic perspectives that view the term 'Islamic feminism' as contradictory and which perceives any form of religiosity (particularly Islam) as an obstacle to women's liberation (Mescoli, 2022). By integrating intersectional theoretical frameworks, Muslim feminists have created innovative empowerment strategies, fostered an empathetic connection with Islam, and actively engaged with their political contexts, all of which enable them to develop effective methods to combat discrimination (Cooke 2007).

The article seeks to broaden the intersectional framework to explore the clothing choices of Muslim women and to bring more nuance to feminist discussions about women's agency and decision-making. It critiques traditional feminist principles that define feminist agency as merely the right of women to pursue happiness and make decisions independently, free from societal and legal constraints (Mill, 1869; Wollstonecraft, 1891). This perspective views agency as the capability of women to have full control over their bodies and lives and regards agentic acts as actions which allow them to make choices without external pressures. However, poststructuralist discourses challenge the notion of a fully autonomous self, unaffected by societal structures. They emphasize a decentered subject whose identity is socially constructed through language, social practices, and everyday interactions. From a poststructuralist viewpoint, agency is not about unrestricted freedom exercised by an independent subject but rather the ability to act within the limits imposed by social structures (Mahmood 15-25).

Foucault challenges the notion of an autonomous subject, proposing that the subject is shaped through practices of subjection or, alternatively, through practices of liberation and freedom, which are influenced by cultural rules, styles, and inventions. Similarly, Butler (1999) critiques the "emancipatory model of agency," where individuals are believed to possess inherent will, freedom, and intentionality, often seen as being constrained by external power structures. Butler argues against the idea that the subject exists with a 'pre-discursive status' and instead explores the relationships that construct the subject, diverging from traditional feminist views that equate ideal personhood with freedom from social constraints. She places agency "within structures of power, rather than outside them" and suggests that the "reiterative structure of norms not only consolidates a specific regime of discourse/power but also provides the means for its destabilization" (Qtd. in Mahmood, p. 20). Building on the works of Foucault and Butler, Saba Mahmood redefines agency by separating it from the conventional concept of resistance, which traditionally views the agency of a normative political subject through a binary lens of subordination and subversion (Mahmood, p. 9). In her book *Creative*

Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women (2011), Bucar draws extensively from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), highlighting the "clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals" who are already enmeshed within "nets of discipline" (Qtd. in Bucar 3, 2011). Certeau discusses various strategies aimed at critiquing, reforming, threatening, or rebelling, which have the potential to "introduce new rule books" or even "break the game entirely" (Bucar 3). Bucar seeks actions that allow women the possibility of exercising both creativity and conformity, enabling them to subtly navigate and subvert the terrain imposed by clerics, where they engage with and critique the individuals, institutions, and systems that oppress them (Cooke 109).

In her book *Women Claim Islam* (2007), Miriam Cooke introduces the concept of 'multiple critique', which is similar to the idea of creative conformity. This nuanced Islamic feminist discourse enables Muslim women to uphold Islamic principles while rejecting the "passive characterization of their experiences," which politically marginalizes them (Cooke 109). Cooke's idea of multiple critique draws from Moroccan literary critic Abdelkabir Khatibi's theory of double critique and Black feminist writer Deborah King's perspectives on the multiple consciousness of Black women. Khatibi (1983) discusses how postcolonial subjects develop an oppositional discourse that challenges both local and global adversaries. When gender is integrated into this discourse, a third space emerges, encompassing a range of antagonists, including foreigners, homophobes, religious others, and women with diverse backgrounds. Set along a similar premise, Deborah King, in her essay "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology" (1988), explores the multiple jeopardies that Black women face. This idea of multiple consciousness, which stems from Black women's experiences with racism and sexism, encourages a "multiple centering and multiple reaffirmation of the self" (Cooke 110), allowing them to confront intersecting systems of oppression and exclusion simultaneously.

Love in a Headscarf (2010) and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) : Diasporic Writing by Muslim Women

Love in a Headscarf (2010) offers a nuanced portrayal of a British Muslim woman's life as she navigates relationships and romantic love. Janmohamed's identity is deeply connected to her cultural and theological beliefs, reflected in her choice to wear the hijab and modest clothing. The memoir begins with her questioning romantic love in a Western society rife with stereotypes against Islam. Educated at Oxford, Janmohammed's ancestry is rooted in Africa and Britain, and the novel sets off as she embarks on a search for a life partner who is also a practicing Muslim via arranged marriage. As the narrative unfolds, Janmohamed explores the complexities of balancing her British upbringing with her Islamic faith, using her decision to wear the hijab as both an assertion of autonomy and resistance to Western beauty standards. Through her interactions with fellow Muslim women, she highlights shared experiences of love, struggle, and joy, while also addressing broader issues like Islamophobia, stereotyping, and social pressures. Her use of modest fashion underscores her commitment to Islamic principles and resistance to societal norms.

Set in 1970s and 1980s Indiana, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) by MohjaKahf is a coming-of-age novel that follows Khadra Shamy, a Syrian-American Muslim girl, as she navigates the complexities of identity, culture, and religion. The story centers on Khadra's struggle to reconcile her Syrian heritage with her American identity, reflecting the broader challenges faced by second-generation immigrants torn between the pressures of religious orthodoxy and the desire to embrace American culture. Set in a predominantly Christian community, the novel highlights the difficulties Khadra faces in practicing her faith, alongside the prejudice and hostility Muslims often encounter in America. It also explores the generational and cultural divide between Khadra and her parents, emphasizing their conflicting views on identity, religion, and culture, as well as the challenges of traditional gender roles.

"Who were Men to Tell Women How to Dress" ? : Intersectionality and Agency in Muslim Women's Fiction

This section explores how the protagonists in *Love in a Headscarf* (2010) and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) navigate issues of agency and choice while embracing distinctly Islamic styles of dress, using religion as a lens for gender analysis. Instead of generalizing women's experiences and negotiations, the section employs an intersectional approach, situating women's choices and expressions of agency within the "multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). In *Love in a Headscarf* (2010), Janmohamed notes that feminism has faced criticism from both postmodernists and traditional Muslims. The section delves into how feminism, both as a political and theoretical framework, intersects with the lived experiences and faith-based knowledge systems of Muslim women. It also examines how we should understand the terms 'choice,' 'agency,' and 'autonomy' as used by Janmohamed, particularly in relation to the historical context of the European feminist movement.

> Janmohamed writes: Both postmodernists and traditional muslims agreed on onething : feminism was a dirty word. But I was fascinated by the struggles that European women had gone through to create a society where I was able to choose to wear hijab and establish it as a principle of my choice and empowerment. I read writings about throwing off corsets, burning bras and the revolution of the miniskirt. The questions that women asked then were the same questions that Muslim women were asking now: who were men to tell women how to dress. I agreed wholeheartedly: women had to throw off their shackles, liberate themselves, enter the workplace and establish equality (179).

Janmohamed draws a comparison between Muslim women's decision to wear the hijab or any other attire of their choice with the second-wave feminist movement, where women asserted their sartorial autonomy in the European public sphere. She refers to the miniskirt revolution and bra-burning protests of the twentieth century, where women resisted patriarchal and restrictive fashion norms while advocating for reproductive rights, workplace equality, and sexual

freedom. By linking the European feminist history of agency and choice to Muslim women's decision to wear the hijab, Janmohamed intentionally incorporates secular intellectual traditions into a faith-based framework to foreground her argument. She critically examines the patriarchal structures that influence women's clothing choices, framing her discourse around themes of liberation, workplace equality, and a strong critique of patriarchy.

Feminism and its resistance to patriarchy are often dismissed as a "pathology of the West" (McClintock 384), overlooking the political struggles and liberatory ideals it embodies. Janmohamed connects feminism and Islam through the principle of women's autonomy, utilizing the concept of 'multiple critique' (Cooke 2007), which seeks representation from diverse perspectives, including gender, religion, community, and geography. By bridging European and Islamic traditions, she highlights the tension between history and eternity, the human and the divine, and the West and the East. These contrasts are not seen as mutually exclusive but as opportunities for transformation and inclusion (Cooke 109). Acknowledging the feminist focus on choice, autonomy, and agency, Janmohamed's ideological framework is rooted in a 'transnational sense of resistance' and within an Islamic feminist context (Cooke 107-113), which embraces all women and addresses the impacts of colonialism. She also critiques the European public sphere, which often fails to validate Muslim women's choice to wear the hijab, as well as secular Muslim men who discourage veiling. Janmohamed develops a nuanced critique that "moves beyond the dual" (Cooke 108), while addressing a range of antagonists, including secular Muslim communities and white imperialist patriarchy (Cooke 107-113). Her decision to wear the hijab is deeply grounded in cultural, feminine virtues and Islamic principles of modesty.

> Janmohamed writes: Choosing what to wear has been a struggle. I have to be attractive enough for the man in question, yet modest and demure enough for his family. The contents of my headscarf drawer are strewn colorfully across my bedroom floor in molehills of pink, purple, blue and green. Each scarf has been carefully draped and pinned in turn and then analyzed for aesthetics and impact. I chose one in dusky pink silk. The color is soft and

> welcoming, feminine but not girly. I fold the square silk in half and place the triangle over my hair, pinning it invisibly under my chin and throwing the ends loosely in opposite directions. The fabric delicately swathes itself over my hair and shoulders. Fortunately, I am having a Good headscarf Day (3).

In the above passage, the protagonist's sartorial choices are not depicted as a straightforward choice, but as a complex negotiation process. Janmohamed's decision-making is deeply connected to religio-cultural codes related to feminine modesty. She must satisfy the male gaze by remaining appealing to the male visitors while also upholding the Islamic ideals of haya along with the expectations of feminine modesty in her South Asian household. Notably, Janmohamed's narrative does not reflect a rebellion against religious norms nor her cultural heritage; rather, it is a story of negotiation. She actively engages in choosing the colors of her hijab, wearing it in a way that becomes a deliberate and elaborate performance. Fully aware of the socio-religious expectations, she consciously selects from various hijabs laid out like "molehills of pink, blue, and green." For Janmohamed, wearing the hijab is less about religious devotion and more about the "aesthetics" and the "impact" (Janmohamed 3) it creates among the observers. Adorning the hijab and presenting herself veiled before others becomes a vibrant performance, where she playfully navigates and even challenges the dictates of her faith and cultural norms. Janmohamed's agency goes beyond the simple binary of submission versus subversion, as she explores the "possibilities of agency within structures of power rather than outside" (Mahmood 9). She writes in the memoir:

> By introducing modest behavior and clothing into the public space, the aim was to make life easier, less tense and less judgemental for everyone. If I wanted to make society a happier place to live, I was willing to spend a little more time and care on choosing my clothes and wearing a headscarf. For me it was a matter of faith and a contribution to making the community we live in better. The ever-visible headscarf was therefore only one element of the dress choice. Sometimes it was a bit hot, but it was worth it (154).

In the above excerpt, Janmohamed reflects on her decision to wear a headscarf in British public spaces. Beyond religious

motivations, her choice of modest clothing is tied to her conscious efforts to challenge and dismantle prejudices against practicing Muslim women, with the aim of making social interactions "less tense and less judgmental for everyone." By consistently using the first-person pronoun "I" ("I wanted to make society a happier place"/ "I was willing to spend a little more time"), Janmohamed emphasizes her personal agency in choosing to wear the hijab. By adopting modest/ Islamic attire in the seemingly secular environment of Europe, she actively counters stereotypes and advocates for multiculturalism. In this way, while she resists patriarchal and cultural norms, she also creatively reinterprets faith-based practices and extends these interpretations into political activism.

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), the protagonist Khadra Shamy faces challenges in relation to her modest dressing and societal gender roles imposed upon women in twentieth-century European society. For Khadra, modesty is a voluntary choice rather than an imposed obligation. Her negotiations within a multicultural society have broader implications when considered alongside the experiences of contemporary Muslim women, who navigate the intersections of faith, fashion, and personal aspirations. The moment when Khadra decides to wear a headscarf for the first time is particularly significant :

> At the Washington Square Shopping Center looking for the clothes of her first hijabs, Khadra could not find crepe Georgette as fine and lightweight as the fabric her mother treasured from Syria. She found instead a lightweight seersucker in cornflower blue with yellow daisies,a white cotton eyelet that would go with anything and a jade jacquard in sophisticated chiffon. And a warm woolen paisley for winter. Buying all this at one go was a breathtaking splurge. (...) This is a special day, Doora, Ebtihaj Said, using Khadra's baby nickname. You pick whatever you want (Kahf 112).

Khadra's decision to wear the hijab, accompanied by her journey through the Washington Square Shopping Center with her mother, is portrayed as a ceremonial act. The lightweight georgette hijab her mother brought from their homeland serves as a symbol of her Syrian heritage. Her struggle to find similar hijabs in America,

ultimately settling for "sophisticated chiffon and warm woolen paisleys," mirrors the immigrant experience and the hybrid spaces they navigate. Khadra develops a deep affection for the various hijabs she encounters at the shopping center, indulging in what she describes as a "breathtaking splurge." This attachment to the fabric is intricately linked to her religious and cultural roots. The phrase "breathtaking splurge" also highlights her financial autonomy, giving her the freedom to choose. The ceremonious interactions between Khadra and her mother during the hijab purchase are significant, with her mother declaring it a "special day." Khadra embraces the opportunity to select any texture and fabric, eagerly choosing a variety of colors and textures that reflect her ability to align her modest attire with her personal style and practical needs. Khadra's mother, Ebtihaj, plays a crucial role in her daughter's transformative journey. Challenging the stereotypical notions of passivity and lack of agency often associated with South Asian or Muslim women, Ebtihaj becomes a key influence in Khadra's pursuit of free will, independence, and emotional fulfillment. She encourages Khadra to "choose whatever she desires" and affectionately calls her Doora. This maternal support is vital in empowering Khadra to make her own decisions about her clothing. The narrative emphasizes how immigrant Muslim women like Khadra find empowerment and liberation through their conscious choice to wear modest attire, particularly the hijab. In this context, the hijab transcends its role as a mere article of clothing, becoming a symbol of financial independence, empowerment, cultural identity, and female solidarity.

Despite facing challenges and discrimination, Khadra remains committed to her education and aspirations. Her embrace of secular education and modern values, along with her claim to public space, does not signify a rejection of her religiosity. Instead, she skillfully integrates the principles of her faith and its visible expressions into her secular daily life, maintaining her ability to critically engage with both religious and secular perspectives. Her embodied relationship with the hijab is captured in the following excerpt:

> The sensation of being hijabed was a thrill. Khadra had acquired vestments of a higher order. Hijab was a crown on her head. She

> went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of a new grace. Even though it went off and on at the door several times a day, hung on a hook marking the threshold between inner and outer worlds, the hijab soon grew to feel as natural to her as a second skin,without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked (Kahf 113).

Khadra's connection to the hijab is deeply intertwined with both her spirituality and her identity as a woman. She refers to the hijab as "garments of a higher order," viewing the act of wearing it as an experience that enriches her both spiritually and intellectually. The headscarf becomes a central element in shaping her sense of self, offering her a "new grace" and eventually becoming her "second skin." In this context, the hijab is not merely an external garment; it becomes an integral part of Khadra's identity. This narrative delves into the profound and embodied relationship between Khadra and her headscarf, moving beyond simplistic binaries or the notion of coercion. The importance of the hijab to Khadra is further highlighted when she mentions feeling exposed without it, underscoring its essential role in her identity.

Khadra's neighbor, Zuhara, is portrayed as someone who openly embraces her Islamic identity. Zuhara acts as a mentor and spiritual leader for her younger sisters, for she leads prayers and participates in the Muslim council at her University. Zuhara advocates at the University to recognize Muslim holidays, apart from organizing public talks to dispel misconceptions about Islam, and even builds connections with Muslims who hail from places such as Sudan, Uganda, Palestine, Iran, Cambodia, and Kashmir. She is noted as the "first Muslim woman in hijab" on her campus and writes articles in support of Islamic protests in Iran. For Zuhara, being the "first Muslim woman in hijab" at her college is more than a fashion statement; it is a deliberate act of visibility in an environment where she is a minority in both race and religion.

While Zuhara's public actions are bold and highly visible, her mother, Ebtihaj, adopts a different approach that begins at home but also influences the broader community. Ebtihaj's meticulous care in

wearing her "ultra lightweight crepe georgette" hijab is so skillful that it garners admiration from other women in her religious group.

> Never a hair out of place, that was Ebtehaj's hijab. You could tell if Ebtehaj had been in a town on one of her Dawah trips with Wajdy by the fact that, in her wake, women would try to imitate her scarf style. Ebtehaj influenced hijab fashions from Collins to Cleveland (Kahf 133).

The portrayal of Ebtihaj's meticulously styled hijab, described as "never a hair out of place," underscores her deliberate choice and control over her appearance. This wasn't just about fulfilling a religious obligation; it was about asserting her presence and identity on her own terms. Her hijab also left a lasting impression on other women - as women from various cities admired her style, reflecting her subtle yet powerful influence and authority within her community.

As she hand washed her hijab scarves, she is seen as singing softly to herself :

> Then there was the grand and wonderful shaking out of the scarves, for she never wrung or twisted them to dry. Ebtehaj lifted the wet lump of delicate fabric out of the basin. She held one dripping end and the son or daughter helping her held the other. They backed away from each other until the crepe opened to its magnificent full length between them, a gossamer bridge (...) "Hold it from the corners. Don't let it fall to the floor. One two-three-SHAKE! And one-two-three-Again!" and then Ebtehaj gathered up the ends of her scarf from her daughter or son and neatly brought each corner to the corresponding corner and hung it on the shower curtain rack to drip dry. Gazelle, gazeh-eh-elle, healed, my wound is healed. (Kahf 134).

Ebtihaj's meticulous process of washing and drying her headscarves, singing as she goes, is portrayed as a ritual that is deeply intertwined with her cultural and religious identity. It also serves as a form of self-care and creative expression. The act of washing the hijab transcends a simple chore, becoming a means of self-preservation, highlighted by her deliberate actions and instructions on the "proper way" to clean it. The song she sings, "healed, my wound is healed,"

adds a distinct cultural dimension to this practice, suggesting that it offers comfort amidst the personal, cultural, or political challenges she faces in a foreign European environment.

Conclusion

The article has examined the role of modest dressing as an expression of Islamic faith, challenging the modernist perspective that prioritizes internal belief while marginalizing ritual practices and material culture (Tarlo and Moors 2013, Asad 1997). By focusing on the sartorial practices of Muslim women in diasporic fiction, the study expands the concept of 'modesty' (haya) in Islamic fashion beyond traditional fiqhi interpretations, which typically limit visible beauty to the face and hands. The analysis highlights how modest fashion interacts with secularity, reflective interpretations of Islam (Tarlo and Moors 2013), community cultures, and the socio-political context of Islamophobia and racism. These dynamics are further shaped by the protagonists' personal choices and psychological states. For example, the hijab serves as a symbol of modesty and ideological commitment for characters like Khadra Shamy and Zuhara in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), while Shelina Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf* (2010) explores the aesthetic dimensions of modest dressing through luxurious fabrics and embroidered sequins.

Addressing the noted gap in intersectional feminist studies regarding religion (Singh 2015), this article incorporates the agency of religious women within an intersectional framework, navigating the multiple power structures that influence and sustain their sartorial choices. By analyzing the material expressions of modest clothing in the novels discussed, the study underscores the implications of these sartorial choices on the protagonists' autonomy and agency, and their broader ideological impact on feminist theory.

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