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## Practicing *Hijab* (veil): A Source of Autonomy and Self-esteem for Modern Muslim Women

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### Abstract

In various periods of history, hijab as a religious symbol has been under criticism by the west and the modernist forces. The disapproval of hijab increased in the aftermath of 9/11. The sections of society that oppose hijab associate this dress code historically with subordination and servility of Muslim women. In the present scenario, immigrant Muslim women in western countries and native Muslim women in the countries where the states control women dress code are specially frustrated in wearing the attire of their choice. However, they have asserted their dress preference against all odds. The present paper argues that hijab is merely a symbol. The oppression linked with it depends on the social and political dynamics of the society in which it is practiced. More than these, it depends on the will and the mental state of the wearer herself. This study develops the thesis that the present Muslim woman, by adopting hijab, is carving public space for herself and this dress serves as an instrument of autonomy and self-esteem for her.

**Keywords:** hijab; modern Muslim women; religious symbol;

### Introduction

Humankind has used dress for various purposes. Among these purposes are modesty, protection, and beautification (Flugel, 1966)<sup>1</sup>. Qur'an has focused on modesty and beautification, though emphasized dress of piety at the same time (7:26). The attire we wear is also strongly connected with identity. It is related with

the sense of one's self (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Different classes of society wear different dress to mark their status and position in society. Kings and ruling elite have worn heavy and elaborate robes while public clothing has been simple. We use different uniforms to mention our jobs or institutions. People of different cultures wear different dresses. Besides culture and region where we live, dress code is also determined by the faith we espouse. This way dress becomes a symbol of one's religious identity and the modesty associated with it.

Head covering has been usually considered one of the most important identifier of a Muslim woman and has been practiced more or less throughout the Islamic world. *Hijab* in particular (headscarf/face veil along with *abaya*, a long gown, generally in black colour), has been the part of women costume in various Muslim states. However, it gained more popularity in the midst of Islamic movements towards the last quarter of the previous century (El Guindi, 1999).<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 (9/11 henceforth), immigrant Muslim women in western countries had to rethink of their identities. *Hijab* rose as a sign of their religious identity and Muslim solidarity (Murshid, 2005). *Hijab* practice increased in Muslim majority countries as well. At present, debate on *hijab* is continuing in both western societies and various Muslim countries (Murphy, 2006). In the backdrop of this new global scenario of searching identities and facing conflict, the present study is set to explore the phenomenon of *hijab* with respect to space and psyche of the wearer herself. The present paper does not concern with defining *hijab* or explaining it with reference to religious text and other sources nor does it take any position to favour or disfavour it as a religious ordain. In this text, we will be using the terms *hijab*, veil, and headscarf interchangeably.

### ***Hijab/Veiling in Retrospect***

*Hijab/veiling* has historically been associated with Islam. However, it can be traced to various cultural traditions found in pre-Islamic era and has been in practice in all ages in one way or other. Noble Greek and Roman families would observe it. The social and cultural importance of the headdress in the Christian and Judaic societies was not principally different from Islam. It saved women from undue male attention and dangerous elements (Maududi, 1939/2005).<sup>3</sup> Female body was regarded sacred in that doctors would keep dummies at their clinics so that women could indicate the point of their disease by putting finger on different parts of the dummy. Even by 16<sup>th</sup> century, male youth would play the female roles in Shakespearean plays. The followers of Christianity adopted such extreme attitudes about women that they considered woman a sign of evil and thus segregated her from entire social fabric (Ali, 2005). This reading of veil embodies two objectives.

First, it was adopted for notifying the higher status of noble families, and second, for oppressing and segregating women.

Beliefs about ugliness surrounding woman body changed gradually and the limitations set on her life were relaxed. In post-renaissance period, women were accepted in social life. But this process had its own evils. In the years to come, they were made to appear as asexualized object. Maududi (1939/2005) believes that the woman was not still liberated and was being still treated as a material object. Western sexuality mutilates woman's integrity and reduces her to a few inches of nude flesh, photographed with no purpose than profit (Mernissi, 1985).

Besides this discussion of draping or dropping clothes, we turn to the status of veiling in non-Muslim societies. In European and Christian cultures, Nuns and royalty still put on some headdress. Victorian era saw women wearing a kind of hat on their heads. Rural women in many parts of Europe don a sort of headgear. In a movie *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, displays that a 17<sup>th</sup> century painter catches a glimpse of his model, as she lets her hair down from her headgear. She quickly covers her hair, as if to guard herself from his gaze. Social attitudes about women's covering in west have relaxed now, but not equally dramatically in the Muslim world (Murshid, 2005). Though there has been a great influence of western powers in Muslim countries in many ways.

In the subcontinent, British colonialism led to a debate about *burqa* (a long cloak from head to toe that also covered women's face). It was argued that this type of covering might not be religious or at least not a required part of dress. This debate was initiated without any logical or religious necessity, but only under the sway of a dominant and attractive western civilization. Additionally, the pressure was exacerbated due to inferiority that developed as a result of direct attacks at backwardness of local civilization. Women clad in veil were dehumanized by such labels as "walking tents" (Maududi, 1939/2005: 35-36).

In the same vein, Mernissi (1985) believes that the budding liberty of Moroccan and Arab women in mid 1900s had indeed borrowed many features of western women's mode of life. The first gesture of the liberated Arab woman was to dismiss the veil in favour of western dress. Muslim women could probably claim their right to their bodies as part of the liberation movement. The ever-increasing beauty salons and boutiques in Moroccan cities, for example, could be understood as a predictor of women's attempts to various other rights such as mobility and birth control.

The modernist trends occurred in late nineteenth century in Egypt, Syria, Ottoman Turkey, and other Muslim lands. Restrictions and taboos related to veiling were

questioned and consequently relaxed even in some of those Muslim countries that were not under colonial rule. For example, veiling was discarded first in Kemalist Turkey in the thirties of the twentieth century. Iran followed suit when Reza Shah banned the veil in 1936. Some other Muslim countries also joined this trend. However, veil or head covering still prevailed to some extent in Pakistan and several other Muslim states (Maududi, 1939/2005).

However, this westernization had to see decline at last. History saw an Islamic uprising in last part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Still earlier many women had started withdrawing from society as a sign of resistance against ban on veil. In previous decades, many Egyptian women have started putting on headgears in spite of the secular position of their governments. In Turkey, a clear demarcation can be seen in old secular women and their Islamist-oriented daughters (Murphy, 2006). Beginning in the 1970s, Islamic symbols, faith, and practices have earned growing commitment and support. Increased devotion to Islamic codes of social behaviour (e.g. female covering and abstinence from drinking) was witnessed among Muslims (Huntington, 1996).

### ***Hijab* in Present Muslim Societies**

Colonialism did bring some changes at least in dress code in Muslim countries. In the seventies women in these countries walked the streets wearing western costume. Their outfit included skirts below the knee, high heels, sleeves that covered the upper arm in the summer, their hair was usually visible, and they did wear make-up. Their bodies seem to be facing a cultural battle. Their dress carried the capitalist construction of the female body (sexualized and objectified) on one hand and the traditional construction of the body (possession, property, and trustees of the family honour) on the other. This ambivalence was resolved in nineteen eighties by revising their dress from colonial non-veil to the present veil (Mernissi, 1985), though this trend does not characterize the whole womenfolk in these countries. However, women in many countries have adopted this dress code. This veiling class generally belongs to urban lower and middle class. They work as civil servants, school teachers, secretaries, bank employees, and nurses. Others are university students. They are usually young in their twenties and early thirties (Odeh, 1993).

While the *niqab* (face covering) is not practiced strictly in most Muslim countries, the simple headscarf or *chadder* have made a dramatic comeback in recent decades. In 1970s, for instance, headscarf was donned chiefly by rural women in Egypt. These days at least 80 percent of women cover their hair. One negative aspect of Islamic movements, nonetheless, is that certain hardliners try to apply head covering forcefully. For instance, *Hammās* in Palestine was reported to send

unofficial orders to schools that they not allow the girl students without a long traditional gown and headscarf (Hammami, 1990). In recent years, police was seen to enforcing Islamic dress in a Malaysian province (*Dawn*, 2009, Dec 2). Evidence for this type of suppression is small though. On the other hand, attempts to veil off the women are stronger and have been implemented from states themselves.

Although practicing veil has faced a heated debate in western nations after 9/11, it is not a smaller issue in some of the Muslim countries themselves. From Morocco and Tunisia to Turkey and pre-revolution Iran, many Muslim states have at times restricted, in some cases banned, women's veiling. In many of these cases, such restriction stem from the viewpoint that public exhibitions of religious symbols are a political, not a personal act and therefore considered a potential threat to the state (Murphy, 2006). However, this forced practice did not dent deep into the public. Narrating the history of attempts at unveiling women, White (1977) described that such efforts have faced failure; for instance, in Turkey in the beginning of the twentieth century, then in Afghanistan, Iran, and Tunisia, etc. Only a few women put their veils off and they were mostly those who got opportunities to have education and better employment. Covering herself remains a social reality for a common woman of the Muslim world.

The American intervention in Afghanistan in recent years was partially justified as an effort to rescue Afghan women from the clutches of the Taliban. American media and the government both called the Taliban regime as the most atrocious in Afghan history. On the other hand, some Afghan women also challenged Taliban's interpretation of Islam. They thought that Taliban were being sponsored by Saudi Arabia and hence the latter wanted to impose Arab traditional dress. These women preferred to wear the indigenous shuttlecock *burqa* rather than the Arab *hijab*, while many of these women told the Taliban to don Arabian dress themselves. Yet veil was not abandoned by women even after the Taliban had been dethroned. They have been demanding security from the western forces present in their country, only then they will throw their *burqa* (Khattak, 2002). It seems the present Afghan women can stress her free-will in her social rights including the right to her body.

Murphy (2006) emphasizes that covering the head is not covering the brain. Then why the authorities are so upset at this religious symbol. Unveiling is not synonymous with empowerment. Humphreys and Brown (2002) argue that what is in the head is important not what is on the head. Some authorities in these Muslim countries believed that uniform-like veiling challenges the secular foundations of the state. However this check on *hijab* is not solely based on democratic and secular motives. Their political interests and worries of losing power to the Islamic

opposition quarters may be the important determinants of their attempts to corner the *hijab*-wearing women and other religious elements.

Besides political quarters, we need to look into the academic position of the feminist scholarship on this particular issue. The first generation of Muslim feminists believed that veil was a powerful token of female oppression. Consequently, abandoning the veil appeared to be the most visible sign of their disapproval of patriarchy and their assertion of their rights as active participants of the society. In the present milieu, in contrast, young educated women across the class hierarchy are returning to the veil. The present feminist views wearing the veil as a coping strategy that women use to gain or maintain societal esteem and a small yardstick of autonomy in a patriarchal society in which opportunities for autonomy are rare (Mule & Barther, 1992).

From the above descriptions, it comes forth that there are both trends, revolting against the regimes that attempt to impose head covering and at the same time challenging those powers that try to put ban on veil. Women seem to be struggling to make their mark and seek autonomy by warding off that is put on them forcefully. It also surfaces that the headscarf is loaded with different symbolic meanings (Jorgensen, 2008). To Muslims it is a mark of modesty whereas Europeans and liberal feminists both view it as symbol of lower status of women (Murshid, 2005). The construction of veil as a sign of seclusion has been challenged by many scholars. For example, Clark (2007) argues that *hijab* is after all a piece of cloth. It is ultimately a symbol. It oppresses or empowers according to the society, tradition and the wearer herself. He further suggests that this practice has multiple reasons than just political expression. His stance is supported by some other studies. To name some, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) established that women adopt *hijab* under religious obligations and parental expectations. They also wear it as an indicator of Muslim identity and modesty. Jones (2005) asserts that wearing it is however their own choice. Droogsma (2007) and Kopp (2005) in their separate studies found that *hijab* defines Muslim identities, performs a behaviour check/control, resist sexual objectification, affords more respect, preserves intimate relations with family, and provides freedom. From this summary of few empirical findings, we can observe that practicing *hijab* has diverse reasons and multiple functions.

### **The Veil Debate / Ban and Immigrant Muslim women**

*Hijab* observance is not only limited to the Muslim majority countries but also a familiar sight among the Muslim women living in the countries where they are only a minority (Murshid, 2005). A great debate has surrounded *hijab* and other religious representations in the aftermath of 9/11. Many women have described

facing discrimination on account of wearing *hijab*. They have been removed from flights for security screening, found difficulty gaining employment, have received angry looks and shouts from passers-by on the streets, and the like (Droogsmas, 2007; Lueck, 2003).

Bakht (2009) notes that *niqab*-wearing women are not allowed to appear in courts in Canada, Britain, and the United States, especially in cases where the woman has to show her face to be identified. She emphasizes the need to accommodate such women in their multiple roles as lawyers, jury members, witnesses, defendants and the accused. Seckinelgin (2006) opines that when women demand to wear headscarf in these circumstances, they pose a challenge to the state. On the other hand, punitive actions by governments relating to *hijab* threaten the right to education and justice in a democratic system.

The ban in France has led to the exclusion of several Muslim girls and some Sikh boys from public institutions. They have either been moved to private schools or a sort of distance learning courses. Although, Christian crosses, the Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans, and the habits of nuns are also unacceptable but they have not had the same effect. Roman Catholic nuns in Germany were furious at a comparison made by the German president of the oppressive headscarf with their habit of covering themselves. It seemed that under the rhetoric of equality, actual target was the Muslim dress code (Murshid, 2005). It is not an attack on dress code only. It is an instance of 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1996), though this thesis was seemingly dismissed by president Obama in his lecture at *Jamia tul Azhar*.

France, where war on *hijab* was the strongest in recent years, later imposed complete ban on face veil / any dress designed to hide the body and face. Those who do not comply would be fined or sent on a course to learn the values of French citizenship. Anyone who urged someone through violence, rough threats, or misuse of authority to cover her face because of her sex would be jailed for a year and fined 15000 Euros. Lawmakers also focused on husbands who force their wives to full veil. Similarly, Belgian parliament put to vote a law banning women from wearing *burqas* in public spaces and fixed a fine or some imprisonment for the offence (*ShirkatGah*, 2010)

We need to look the picture from other side too. The immigrants in Europe and America had also sensed after 9/11 that these were the lands of opportunity. So mixed with fears of discrimination and desire to stay there any how, they started to wear local dressing. Women started to wear trousers and men shaved off their beards. This reality is shown in a bollywood movie *My Name is Khan* (Johar, Khan, Khan, & Johar, 2010), where a psychology teacher removed her scarf at her

workplace. However, when the hero of the movie earns good name for Muslims, the teacher revisits her identity by covering her head again. She pronounces that it is not just her religious symbol; it is part of her existence. Similarly, with the passage of time, Muslims began to return to their symbolic identities. This might have occurred due to two reasons stemming from the same occurrence. This occurrence refers to the discriminatory practices against these Muslims. First reason was their attempt to resist this discrimination, by asserting rather than avoiding their identity. Second, they felt that discrimination was not structural. It was transitory and was not under the law, nor strictly from authorities. It was more from a part of a population. Perhaps having considered this reality and to profiting from the better opportunities, these Pakistanis will remain there (Iqbal, 2003).

Let's turn to scholars' position on this atmosphere of clashes and conflict. Commentators such as El Guindi (1999) advocate veiling practices because of their association with female purity, privacy, and respect, and more specifically, resistance to western commercialism and consumerism. In contrast, some Muslim western theorists oppose the veil as a symbol of oppressive hierarchies and male domination (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). But it is surprising that these liberal feminists do not see ban as an affront to international law, and the right to freedom of expression and practicing religion (Murshid, 2005). On the other hand, feminists like Sadr (2010) complain that major human rights organizations like Amnesty International are fierce upon Belgian and other European governments for prohibiting veiling but they do not issue even a sentence of condemnation against Iran that forcefully binds its women to observe Islamic attire.

Nevertheless, some studies have revealed that the contemporary culture-wars over gender are often pushed by the select few ideologists and front line activists whose views do not completely correspond with the actual standpoints of local women at whom such rhetoric is targeted (Read & Bartkowski, 2000). This situation scares human rights monitors, who do not fail to draw a parallel with the history of European fascism. Barbara John, Germany's retired commissioner for foreigners exclaimed, "This kind of policy against a single religion may be very harmful. This may not be a new Holocaust, but this is how it begins" (as cited in Murshid, 2005:16).

Commentators have argued that if it is unacceptable to force others to wear a headscarf, it is equally condemnable to be forced not to wear one (Murshid, 2005). These actions of the governments collide with the United Nations human rights laws (Clark, 2007). Within the Islamic world, other than Saudi Arabia and Iran, dress code does not fall within the realm of enforceable laws in most Muslim countries. Even in Iran some women are being allowed to drape more attractive form of Islamic dress (Harrison, 2007). It is a matter of great irony that in a free society such as France,



the state should rule on issues of dress (Anderson, 2005; Jones, 2005; Seckinelgin, 2006). But some Muslim nations such as Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia are also following European trends (Anderson, 2005).

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) guidelines emphasize that legal prohibitions on discrimination apply to any improper employment action based on one's affiliation or perception of affiliation with a particular religious or ethnic group; physical, linguistic, or cultural traits as well as clothing associated with any such group (Malos, 2010). Ignoring the legal matters, political motives seem to sway the scene. The covered body of Muslim women allowed Western media and political institutions to exaggerate it with layers of symbolism representing foreignness and female oppression (Lueck, 2003). Fully cloaked, these unseen women were ripe for misinterpretation. They became the victim in need of salvage by the democratic values of the United States. After 9/11, they rushed to rescue the veiled women allegedly being dejected by the *Taliban* in Afghanistan. They did not bother to know the standpoint of these women themselves. However, while many Americans believe *hijab* functions to oppress women, veiled women probably possess alternative understandings (Droogsma, 2007). An overview of empirical literature can help these understandings of conditions and functions of practicing *hijab*.

### Empirical literature on *Hijab*

Sometimes researchers are criticized in that they tend to assign meaning rather than find the meaning the veil has for women, and that they seldom consult the veiled women themselves so that they could empirically understand how veil functions in their lives. However, such work is not that scarce. In the following lines some studies have been quoted, some of them being descriptive and others are based on interviews with the veiled women.

*Hijab* seems to resolve the questions of identity. Kopp (2005) reports that while living in America, the question veiling assumes a supreme importance when communal solidarity is threatened. Religious self and group solidarity could be understood as an explanation of increased covering in America. Women even with skirts feel pressures to do what other women in the close community are doing. Here covering is not for shame or for protection, but for a religious recognition to communicate that they are different. Similar was the situation in Medina when the divine message appeared in chapter *Ahzaab* of Qur'an. It told Muslim women to cast their *jalabeeb* (bigger piece of cloth) over their heads, when outdoors, so that they convey their identity to *munafiqins* (hypocrites) and not be maltreated (as cited in Ghamidi, 2009).. If we generalize this ruling, women should veil when their

identity is at risk or they are under the threat of assault. Such conditions may occur in certain non-Muslim societies that discriminate on the basis of religion. Interviews with *hijab*-wearing women in America led Droogsma (2007) and Kopp (2005) to somewhat similar conclusions, where they found that Muslim identity was the most salient function of practicing *hijab*.

This may also be true for those who have been on a short stay in a western country. In a personal interview with the authors, a Pakistani woman reported that when she had been on a short educational trip to a western country, she felt that she should start covering her head. She used to carry a piece of cloth to cover upper part of her body. A male colleague asked her why she carried this piece of cloth. She replied that it was her religious identity. The colleague suggested then that Muslim identity is rather represented by head covering. She felt a bit embarrassed and made up her mind to start using a headgear (anonymous, personal communication, August 27, 2013)<sup>4</sup>.

While *hijab* clearly symbolizes a woman's religious affiliation, it also shapes Muslim women's independent identities, often acting as an element of resistance to patriarchal norms and standards (El Guindi, 1999; Droogsma, 2007). In some societies, the choice to wear the veil subverts such rules that attempt to control women's lives. Wearing *hijab* in these countries indicates women's efforts to achieve or maintain esteem within a patriarchal society in which possibilities for autonomy are increasingly limited. In this way, *hijab* becomes a different concept from that of *pardah* (covering head and a sort of segregation from society). While *pardah* has been a source of segregation from men and outer world, *hijab* develops as an instrument of independence, mobility, and participation in public sphere activities. Hence *hijab* appears to offer freedom.

Along these lines, Murphy (2006) found that donning *hijab* provided some women in Egypt a sense of independence from those parents who stressed their girls not to cover heads. This practice also inculcated a sense of morality in them and helped stopping men calling at them in streets. Correspondingly, Jones (2005) noted that Muslim women in France stress their own choice to wear scarf, even to that degree where their parents force them to unveil so that their girls should continue their education. At the same time mothers or other family women may also serve as models for various girls in taking to covering practices. And sometimes this figure may be an external one. For example, after conversion of poetess Kamla Das to Islam, Muslim girls in Kerala (India) began wearing headscarf under her inspiration. In Egypt, middle class parents were surprised to see their daughter having switched to covering their heads under the influence of popular preachers like Amr Khaled (Murphy, 2006).

Besides a separate Muslim identity and independence, *hijab* affords more respect for the wearer. Women receive more respect from both Muslim and non-Muslim men just because they veil. If a *hijab*-wearing woman is walking into a mall, there will be a man with his wife or girlfriend, who will rush to open a door for her and his wife or girlfriend will open the door for herself. These women feel that they are often associated with nuns and religious figures when in public (Droogsma, 2007). Some women often compare themselves to a diamond. Being very precious, they would prefer to keep diamond in a very safe place and only the very intimate (e.g. husband) will be allowed to see it (Kopp, 2005). The authors of present paper have also noted such expressions during their informal discussions with *hijab*-wearing women in Pakistan. They also stressed the respect associated with their dress code. For example, one *niqab*-wearing girl remarked, “Hijab is restoring the lost status and respect of women, which is not otherwise possible in a society with ills and insecurities” (anonymous, personal communication, May 28, 2010). However, *hijab* can also make veiled women a target of disrespect in the post-9/11 world. Indeed, several of the women fairly unmarked earlier, now noted being stared and shouted at after that event. In USA and other European countries, *hijab* practice has caused women being barred from employment opportunities after 9/11 (Forstenlechner & Al-Waqfi, 2010; Ghumman & Jackson, 2010). These discrepancies demonstrate west's changing perceptions of *hijab*. However this has not lowered the spirits of Muslim women and they have consistently shown resilience in this respect.

Religiosity and religious practices have been found to be a major predictor of both physical and psychological health. Practicing *hijab* is one of these practices. Errihani et al. (2008) noted that women often began to wear *hijab* (scarf) after the diagnosis of cancer. Odoms (2008) established that in contrast to using medical standards, views of African-American women about their bodies largely derived from social and family expectations, cultural norms and values, and more importantly, spiritual and religious beliefs. Younger Muslim women wearing non-Western clothing and a head veil were significantly less likely to express drive for thinness or pressure to attain a thin-ideal standard of beauty than women wearing Western dress or younger women wearing non-Western dress without a head veil (Dunkel, Davidson & Qurashi, 2010).

Besides physical health, religious beliefs and practices have been shown to positively influence psychological aspects of health. Wearing *hijab* has been found by women a medium of gaining as well as maintaining societal esteem and autonomy in conservative societies (Mule & Barther, 1992). Women who ardently practice Islamic *hijab* have higher self-esteem and lower depression (Rastmanesh, Gluck, & Shadman, 2009). Furthermore, indices of spirituality and religiousness

are also related to recovery from disease, social inclusion, hope, and personal empowerment (Corrigan, McCorkle, Schell, and Kidder, 2003).

Contrary to above, a certain section of theoretical literature uncovers some negative effects of observing *pardah*. Women living under *pardah* system in Pakistan may become target of tuberculosis, bone deformity, and obesity (Khaddarphosh, 2004; Khan, 1972; White, 1977). Psychologically, such women lack initiative, independence of thought, sense of responsibility, and achievement motivation. Empirical literature from other countries provided evidence alike. For instance, Harrison's (2007) empirical study in Iran led to similar conclusions. The Filipinos married to Iranian men found *hijab* as harmful to physical health (Zahedi, 2010). *Purdah* limits medical treatment opportunities because of insistence on seeing the female physician only (White, 1977). Such restrictions made it necessary for women to discuss many of their ailments only with a woman health provider, and this sometimes compelled a woman to seek health care outside the village (Khan, 1999).

These findings show that observance of a strict religious practice has a protective effect on psychological health. At the same time it has also some ill effects. From this contrasting position on relationship of health and religious practices like veiling, we can note that negative discourse surrounding *hijab* comes more from old theoretical literature. But this is a new world. The situation in the present scenario might be different. Muslim woman is now seeking new avenues of independence. She is not relying on liberalized and secular demands of freedom. She is doing so by adopting symbols of religious identity. One of the most important of these symbols is *hijab*, which seems to provide a vehicle for autonomy, respect, freedom of mobility, and high self-esteem (Kopp, 2005; Mule & Barther, 1992; Rastmanesh et al., 2009).

## Conclusion

Besides the review of theoretical and empirical literature around *hijabi*, the authors also had the opportunity to have some informal discussions with some liberal scholars and *hijab*-wearing women in Pakistan. It was noted that some modernists express their reservations on *hijab*. They view *hijab* as a foreign element, a Saudi style dressing. Behind this costume, they smell some conspiracy. They attribute it to some Talibanization and religious radicalization. It might be true that in certain instances, girls in religious schools have been taught the importance of covering and focus has been particularly on Arabian *hijab*. On the other hand, there are many a women who have chosen this dress on their free will. They have first observed its rising popularity, may be through those women who have borrowed

this habit while being in a religious school, and then have adopted it as a sign of their identity, respect, and comfort associated with this outfit.

A few sections of Pakistani society blame women for adopting *hijab* merely as a fashion and that they use attractively decorated *abayas* and scarfs (see, for example, Hasan, 2013). However, this act of the women might be another expression of their independence of choice. Some blame them for using *hijab* as a cover under which they involve in immoral activities. Such people become oblivious to the fact that such community of women is only a thin minority. On the other hand it should be noted that how much the *hijab*-wearing have struggled to achieve and maintain their identities and existence in society. They faced discrimination, assault, and seclusion (Imran, 2012). They remained steadfast and won for themselves many rights. Saudi women were able to run at athletic turfs of London Olympics after much resistance from opposing camps. Iranian *hijab*-wearing women participated in various sports including hiking. They won education rights in Turkey recently (Murphy, 2006). They climbed up the hierarchy in various organizations. That is a long story of success.

We have inferred in above lines that wearing *hijab* has served women as a medium of respect and honour. When we look into history, it appears that covering practices, regardless of the religious affiliation, have always been a symbol of honour. Historically, women and even men of high order would cover heads (and in some cases veiled their faces) and wear more elaborate dressing. Common man on the other hand remained bare headed; common women would wear only a simple and shorter cloth to cover head or not cover the head at all. This veiling was more practiced while meeting strangers, so that to show distance and state one's identity related to higher ranks (El Guindi, 1999). But what is new in the present state of affairs is that common and lower middle class woman also gained respect. And she gained this honour by adopting relatively new mode of covering, i.e. *hijab* (headscarf/veil along with *abaya*), the trend of which grew enormously in the post 9/11 world.

To add more, she perceived autonomy in switching to *hijab* and consequently achieved it as well. Earlier attitudes related to *purdah* and covering helped to detain the woman indoors. Respect there was, independence was absent though. The present day *hijab* has rather helped her come out, participate in society, and become an economically independent and a self-sufficient person (Mule & Barther, 1992; Jorgensen, 2008). Dressed in *hijab*, she can at once maintain a distance from strangers, be safe from miscreants, and hold her religious identity.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Flugel finally concludes that dress is more for beautification than modesty or protection from weather. He reasons that body is naturally coarse and ugly, and thus needs clothing to be covered.
- <sup>2</sup> El Guindi has been an influential feminist writer of the Muslim world and has closely watched the Islamic movement in Egypt in her ethnography towards the last quarter of the previous century.
- <sup>3</sup> Maududi notes that, in the later centuries, obscenity arose in these societies and believes that this factor led to their downfall. Pp 14-30.
- <sup>4</sup> The names of the participants of personal interviews/discussions cannot be reported due to the ethical requirement that their privacy and confidentiality be maintained.

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