

Module 7: Body Politics

7a Hijab 101

7b Multiple Meanings & Images of the Hijab

7c Belonging & Banishment – Quebec’s Bill 94

7d Educator’s Guide to 7c (pdf)

| Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century

introduction

This unit shows how the hijab has multiple meanings that can change over time and in different contexts. It shows examples of the hijab in historical contexts as a focus and symbol of colonial attraction, of post-colonial and revolutionary protest, and of religious and national banishment. It presents visual images and related information to address why certain images continue to circulate. The unit also examines the marketing of these images in advertising and pop culture.

the hijab & identity politics

- The hijab is a complex symbol of religious, cultural, political and gender identity.
- The meaning of the hijab is always shifting and is based on different historical and social realities that influence women's lives.
- The hijab is significant to *some* Muslim women's lives because it marks them as being different and not "fitting in" with the mainstream culture – whether they want to or not.
- Such popular judgements about veiling Muslim women may limit the potential of Muslim women to define their identity in their own way. (*Veiling* refers to wearing the hijab, niqab, burqa, chador, or some variation of these.)
- To be recognized for who they are, veiling Muslim women have to respond to negative stereotypes that are associated with how they look.



<http://saudiwriter.blogspot.com/2009/07/demonizing-hijab-wearing-muslim-women.html>

exoticizing Muslim women

- Western art and media have a history of presenting the veiled Muslim woman as being exotic.
- Painting Muslim women as sexual objects, usually thinly or scarcely clothed, lying in a seductive way, *unveils* these women. That is, their bodies, which they covered to be modest, are revealed against their will for the world to see.



<http://people.tribe.net/maureen-theresa/blog/14963779-c731-4bc5-98e5-95800ec5602d>

<http://newsletter.rwnaf.org/April2010/index.html>

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exoticizing Muslim women

- Because the veil (hijab, niqab, etc.) hides a woman's body from the public eye, there has been a strange fascination with unveiling Muslim women to exhibit their bodies.
- This "gaze," or the demeaning way Muslim women are looked at, treats them as objects rather than humans. It is an example of how the West exercises its power over them by showing what the women wish to hide.
- This relationship of power is what Edward Said has termed orientalism – the way the Western world negatively views the Muslim world to maintain its own superiority.



<http://www.x929.ca/shows/newsboy/wp-content/uploads/burka-sexy.jpg>

the hijab & colonialism

- Another side of orientalist images of Muslim women shows them as mere victims who are powerless.
- From this perspective, the hijab highlights the difference between the civilized, educated Western women “here” in North America – who are powerful and knowledgeable about their rights – and the backward, passive, helpless Muslim women “over there” who need to be saved by us.



<http://www.kanchangupta.blogspot.com>



<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2002/04/afghan-girl/index-text>

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the hijab & colonialism

- Through these “victim” pictures, the observer not only views the woman in the frame, but also tries to make sense of her life as depicted by the image and of the various associations (political, social, etc.) that the image brings to mind.
- As a result, much of what we know about the unknown Muslim women in the pictures is based on our imaginations and on what is told to us by other people – without any direct interaction with Muslim women themselves.
- Usually, such images are strategically used (as part of orientalism) to produce negative stereotypes about Muslim women.

the hijab & post-colonialism

- By painting Muslim women as lacking power and needing to be rescued, the West can justify taking over their land to save them from the barbaric men in their society.
- These images continue to circulate today to justify new forms of old colonial policies. (For example, the media often used similar depictions of “burqa-clad” women in Afghanistan and Iraq to portray them as helpless victims of Taliban rule, needing to be liberated.



<http://jalopnik.com/368161/muslim-scholars-debate-whether-saudi-women-can-drive>



<http://www.kanchangupta.blogspot.com>

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the hijab & post-colonialism

- This is a poster for the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR) campaign advocating the rights of Muslim women. The fine print at the bottom reads: “Stop the oppression of women in the Islamic world.”
- Why might this image be problematic? What assumptions does it make about the veil? About Muslim women’s ability to fight for their own rights? What are the dangers of making Muslim women’s clothing a “human rights” issue?



<http://viz.dwrl.utexas.edu/content/citizenship-unveiled>

the hijab & resistance

- Contrary to such negative “weak” representations, many Muslim women actively speak out against political and gender injustices.
- An example is a powerful group of Muslim women called RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan). Started in 1977, it is the oldest political/social organization of Afghan women struggling for peace, freedom, democracy and women's rights in Afghanistan.
- One of the ways RAWA's members and other Muslim women act as agents of change is by secretly videotaping violations of human rights (hiding their cameras under their *burqas*) and alerting international organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.
- For more info about RAWA, watch their video on YouTube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLvdB4oK_TI



http://www.myhero.com/go/hero.asp?hero=t_faryal

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the hijab & resistance

- In 2004, French President Jacques Chirac banned any visible religious symbols in schools, including the Sikh turbans, Christian cross, Jewish yarmulkes, and the hijab worn by Muslim women.
- The ban's purpose was to maintain the secular nature of the public space. (In many countries, the “public space” does not welcome religious expression.) This ban is not acceptable because it creates fear among people about Muslims and is based on racist, anti-immigrant feelings.
- In 2007, a similarly controversial event occurred in Quebec, Canada. The Quebec Soccer Association asked 11-year-old Asmahan Mansour to leave the tournament for not removing her hijab during the game.

1: <http://frogsmove.com/page/105/>

2: <http://cultureofsoccer.com/category/what-im-reading/page/4/>

3: <http://anthro102hijab.blogspot.com/2009/11/politics-of-veil-joan-wallach-scott.html>



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the hijab & resistance

- Soon after the ban in France, there was a global protest across 25 countries. In Paris alone, over 20,000 joined the protest to show their resistance to the hijab ban.
- “I, as a French Muslim woman, am proud of this day with droves of hijab-wearing women huddling together here to defend hijab and their religion,” said one of the protesters in a news report.

Source:

<http://www.kabyle.com/forum/salon-discussions-generales/16746-milliers-de-femmes-francaises-protestent.html>

- Two Muslim countries, Tunisia and Turkey have also banned the hijab in public schools and universities or government buildings. These bans reflect the desire for a more secular nation as well as problematically linking the practice of hijab with extremism.

1: <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/1032871/-Aussies-%27love-other-cultures-and-fear-them%27>

2: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/03/france.angeliquechrisafis>

3: <http://www.7iber.com/2010/03/tyh-gaze-tyh-inaccuracies/>

4: <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2009/07/03/notes-on-frances-ban-the-burqa-debate/>



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the hijab & national ideologies

- The hijab is closely associated with shifting national ideologies and identities.
- Example: In Iran, the political, religious, and social significance of the hijab is complex and changing:
 - Unveiling was made compulsory in the 1930s under the rule of Reza Shah, who wanted to modernize Iran. Many women protested against this changing of local traditions that were centuries old. They felt it was a violation of their rights, and wore veils intentionally as a form of resistance.
 - After the revolution in the 1970s, veiling was forced on women to reflect the country's transition into an Islamic Republic. Many women also challenged this change.



Women anchors on Iranian TV Top left: 1978
Bottom left: 1985
Top right: 1997
Bottom right: 1998

<http://www.iranian.com/Times/Subs/Revolution/Aug98/anchor.html>

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the hijab & national ideologies

- In recent decades, the government's pressure to fully veil has relaxed, but wearing the hijab is becoming popular again as a sign of empowerment.
- Many women choose to wear it to assert their personal identity and to gain greater access to the public sphere (such as universities, workplace, etc.).
- Video:
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31156949>
(Inside Iran, Part 3)
- Questions:
 - How does the hijab act as a source of empowerment for women in Iran?
 - How does it restrict them?
 - What are the different meanings of veiling for Iranian women?

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the hijab & national ideologies

- Another example of the role the veil plays in national interests is in the history of French colonization of Algeria (1830–1962).
- Under the occupation, the veil served as a tool for resistance. By wearing it, Muslim women denied the French access to their bodies. To try to gain control over the Algerians, the French government enforced unveiling, to uncover Muslim women.
- Algerian Muslim women also played an active role in the liberation movement by hiding weapons in their burqas, using their veils to challenge colonial rule.

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the hijab & national ideologies

- Some Algerian women used *unveiling* as a strategic tactic. This is illustrated in the movie, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966).
- In this movie, three female characters remove their veils to pass as mainstream French women without suspicion. They are able to get to the core of the city to plant bombs.
- Years after the revolution, veiling is a central part of Algerian Muslim women's identity today. While it has lost its political symbolism to a great extent, it is still a reminder of the Muslim women's resistance to a colonial legacy.



<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2005/proyect120805.html>

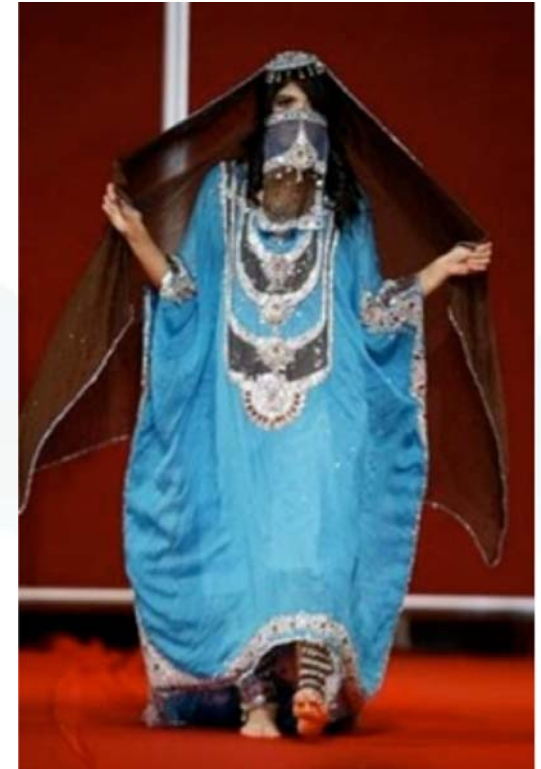
the hijab as a commodity



http://thepurplesharepoint.blogspot.com/2010_02_01_archive.html



<http://bajusopanz.blogspot.com/2010/05/beautiful-wedding-wear-jilbab-muslim.html>



<http://www.hijabstyle.co.uk/2008/07/omani-fashion-on-runway.html>

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the hijab as a commodity

- The hijab has also taken the form of a commodity, with the development of a new “modesty market” that caters to young Muslim women.
- To help women be “hijab chic,” there are many fashion accessories such as hijab pins, colourful headscarves in different materials, designer jilbabs, and how-to guides for stylish ways of wearing the hijab.
- Muslim women’s bridal fashion is another growing category for women who want to cover their hair but appear beautiful for their wedding day.
- Some trendy hair salons now have separate areas or dividers to appeal to clients who wear the hijab but also want to use the services of high-profile hairstylists.



<http://bridesmaidsguide.blogspot.com/2009/07/bridal-hijab-turkish-wedding-dresses-by.html>

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the hijab as a commodity

- The hijab fashion industry reveals another dimension of modesty, one that seeks to balance individuality, fashion, and piety.
- Such trends enable Muslim women to be more stylish and confident in their religious identity and to be more visually appealing in the mainstream public arena.
- However, these trends also face some criticism.
- The new wave of “hijab cool” does not look at the underlying social standards of beauty and image that women are expected to conform to. The gender-different norms that demand women be “dolled-up” for the male gaze are ignored as the hijab becomes a commodity.
- Also, the religious significance of the hijab is diminished when the focus is placed on appearance rather than spiritual development and self-restraint.



<http://dziriya.net/forums/sujet-mode.php?p=1746&l=1>



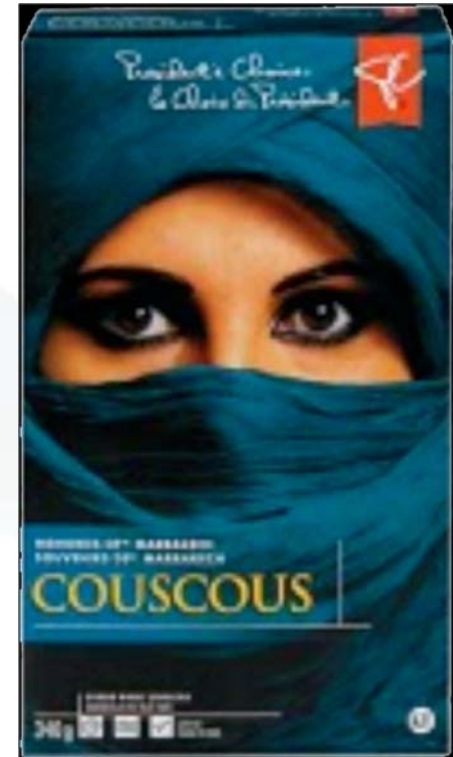
<http://www.fashionclothingtoday.com/c/islamic-clothing/hijab/page/2/>

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the hijab as commodity



(VOGUE MAGAZINE, 1993)



http://canadianrockiesart.blogspot.com/2009_01_01_archive.html

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the hijab as a commodity

Product Description:

- Bilingual 16" soft plush doll that speaks and sings
- Interactive hands, feet, number pad and colour pad
- Over four minutes of sound
- Muslim doll speaks English and Arabic
- Fun way for young children to learn languages
- Aamina speaks when you press her hands and feet.
- This is an enjoyable way for your children to learn about Islam and its teachings.
- Aamina will recite some essential Quranic words, phrases and suras, and will say their meanings



<http://www.thehijabworld.com/2-2422-49-270-muslim-desi-doll---talks---islamic-words.aspx>

the hijab & its multiple meanings

- To conclude, the hijab is an ever-changing symbol for Muslim women. Its significance depends on the different social, historical, and political contexts that women are part of.
- Unlike the dominant negative assumptions about Muslim women, they have multiple, dynamic identities. They can be both Muslim and Canadian at the same time, having the universal values of freedom, empowerment, and democracy.
- Much of the discussion about veiled Muslim women and the divide between the “West” and the “Rest” / *modernity versus tradition / religious versus secular* misses an important point. That is, the real experiences of Muslim women are not so simple, but very complex and inter-connected to larger issues.



<http://sudanforum.net>



<http://sudanese-truth-seeker.blogspot.com/2007/02/muslim-women-enjoying-special-swimsuits.html>

suggested discussion questions

- Why do you think the hijab is such a loaded symbol? What are its various meanings?
- How is wearing or not wearing the hijab connected to a Muslim woman's identity? To national identity?
- What are your thoughts about the "hijab industry"? What are some of its positive and negative implications?