

## HIJAB AND IDENTITY: COMPARATIVE NARRATIVES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN WESTERN AND SOUTH ASIAN SOCIETIES

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### **Abstract**

*This study explores the hijab as a symbol of identity, faith, and resistance in the lives of Muslim women from Western and South Asian societies. By analyzing qualitative narratives, the research highlights how Muslim women define, negotiate, and express their identities in diverse cultural, social, and political contexts. In the West, hijab often signifies resistance to Islamophobia and asserts religious identity amidst secular pressures. Conversely, in South Asia, the hijab may reflect traditional values, religious devotion, or socio-familial expectations. The study draws upon in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to uncover the nuanced motivations and meanings behind hijab practices. It challenges binary perspectives that view hijab as solely oppressive or empowering and instead situates it within women's lived realities. The findings emphasize the importance of context, voice, and agency in understanding Muslim women's experiences with the hijab and contribute to global gender and religious discourse.*

### **Keywords:**

*Hijab, Muslim Women, Identity, Gender and Religion, Western Societies, South Asian Context, Feminist Perspectives.*

### **Introduction:**

The hijab has emerged as a powerful yet contested symbol of Muslim women's identity in both Western and South Asian contexts, reflecting diverse interpretations, cultural norms, religious commitments, and political ideologies. While mainstream global discourses often portray hijab through binary lenses of oppression versus empowerment, these interpretations frequently ignore the voices and lived realities of Muslim women themselves (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahmood, 2005). In Western societies, hijab is often situated within discourses of secularism, feminism, Islamophobia, and national identity, and is framed as a visible marker of otherness or nonconformity to liberal values (Scott, 2007). In contrast, within South Asian societies, hijab is embedded in traditional, familial, and religious practices, though it also intersects with modern education, urbanization, and emerging feminist discourses (Shaheed, 2010; Jamal, 2018). The lived experiences of Muslim women in these societies illustrate how the hijab functions both as an expression of religious devotion and as a site of complex social negotiation, revealing the intricate ways identity is shaped, contested, and performed across cultural boundaries. In the post-9/11 world, Muslim women's veiling practices in the West have become subject to intense scrutiny, with many governments introducing or supporting bans on religious dress in public spaces, especially in France, Belgium, and parts of Canada (Fernando, 2014). These policies are often justified under the rhetoric of gender equality, secularism, or public safety, yet they disproportionately affect Muslim women and reflect deeper structures of racialization and Islamophobia (Hassan, 2015). In countries like France, the hijab has become central to debates about who belongs in the republic, where Muslim women's bodies are policed as sites of cultural anxiety and ideological contestation (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2010). Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom and North America, although legal restrictions are fewer, Muslim women still face discrimination in workplaces, schools, and public institutions, where wearing a hijab may attract suspicion, stereotyping, or exclusion (Zine, 2006). For many women, wearing the hijab in Western

societies is not merely a religious act but a political and identity-affirming one—challenging dominant narratives of assimilation and asserting their right to be visibly Muslim (Afshar, 2008; Bullock, 2002). Conversely, in South Asian contexts such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, the hijab functions within more established religious and cultural traditions, yet remains subject to patriarchal interpretations and social expectations. In Pakistan, for instance, the hijab is often perceived as a symbol of modesty and family honor, particularly in rural or conservative communities, where women's dress is closely monitored as a reflection of communal morality (Papanek, 1982; Saeed, 2013). However, urban and educated Muslim women increasingly appropriate the hijab as an expression of Islamic identity and autonomy, distinguishing themselves from both Westernized fashion and secular feminism (Jamal, 2018). In India, the hijab has also become a political symbol, especially in the wake of rising Hindu nationalism and religious polarization, with Muslim women resisting communal pressures and asserting their religious rights in public and educational spaces (Ahmad, 2020). While hijab in South Asia may be more socially normative than in the West, it is still subject to contestation—particularly in contexts where feminist activism challenges patriarchal control, or where state policies marginalize religious expression. Importantly, both Western and South Asian narratives of hijab reflect intersecting structures of gender, religion, class, and power. Muslim women's choices to wear or not wear the hijab are rarely shaped by a single factor but are the outcome of multiple influences, including religious upbringing, family traditions, personal beliefs, peer networks, political awareness, and media representation (Mahmood, 2005; Ruby, 2006). The notion that Muslim women are coerced into veiling erases the significant number of women who choose to wear the hijab as a conscious and empowering act—asserting agency within both Islamic frameworks and secular liberal societies (Hamzeh, 2011). Simultaneously, the idea that hijab is always empowering can also obscure situations where women face pressure to conform to religious norms, especially within conservative South Asian families or communities where not veiling is seen as a sign of moral failure or Westernization (Shaheed, 2010). Therefore, any comprehensive understanding of hijab must move beyond simplistic categorizations and instead attend to women's voices, narratives, and contextual realities. Feminist and postcolonial scholars argue for a decolonized approach to Muslim women's subjectivity, one that centers their experiences rather than judging them through Western liberal frameworks (Spivak, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 2002). This study adopts such an approach, using qualitative methods to explore how Muslim women from Western and South Asian societies construct their identities through the hijab. By focusing on personal narratives, the research aims to uncover the diverse meanings and motivations behind veiling, and how these relate to broader discourses of religion, gender, and identity. In doing so, the study not only contributes to feminist theory and Islamic studies but also engages with global conversations about multiculturalism, secularism, and women's rights. Furthermore, in an age of increasing globalization and digital connectivity, Muslim women's expressions of identity are shaped not only by local cultures but also by transnational dialogues—via social media, diaspora communities, and global Islamic movements. For instance, many young Muslim women in both the West and South Asia engage with online hijabi influencers, fashion blogs, and Islamic scholars, forming hybrid identities that blend religious piety with contemporary aesthetics (Lewis, 2015). These hybrid forms challenge the dichotomy between tradition and modernity and suggest that Muslim women's agency is not confined by geography but is part of a global negotiation of identity. This study, therefore, asks: how do Muslim women in different regions articulate the significance of hijab in

their lives, and how do these narratives reflect or resist dominant cultural narratives? By comparing the lived experiences of Muslim women in Western and South Asian societies, the research provides insight into how veiling is experienced, interpreted, and transformed across cultural and political boundaries. Ultimately, this investigation seeks to foreground Muslim women's voices in the hijab debate—recognizing them not as passive subjects but as active agents shaping and reshaping the meanings of their faith, identity, and bodies.

### **Literature Review:**

The hijab has been at the center of scholarly debates across disciplines including gender studies, sociology, religious studies, and postcolonial theory. Initially discussed within orientalist frameworks, hijab was often seen as a symbol of backwardness, submission, and female oppression (Said, 1979). This view persisted in much of Western scholarship until the emergence of postcolonial and Islamic feminist perspectives, which began challenging the homogenizing representations of Muslim women and emphasized the significance of contextual and subjective interpretations (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2005). The politics of hijab in Western societies are deeply embedded in notions of secularism and national identity, particularly in countries such as France and Canada where religious symbols in public are viewed with suspicion. Scholars such as Scott (2007) and Fernando (2014) argue that hijab bans under the guise of secularism disproportionately target Muslim women, reinforcing cultural exclusion and structural Islamophobia. In this regard, the hijab becomes not only a marker of religious devotion but also a political symbol contested in public and legal spheres. Zine (2006) and Bullock (2002) have shown that Muslim women in North America often experience the hijab as a double-edged sword—on the one hand asserting faith-based identity and resistance, and on the other, facing exclusion, stereotyping, and institutional bias. In the United Kingdom, although state policies are more accommodating, hijab-wearing women still confront Islamophobic attitudes in workplaces, media, and public interactions (Gale & Hopkins, 2009). Many women report that their hijab invites questions about loyalty, freedom, and gender roles—illustrating how religious attire becomes a site of identity politics in liberal democracies (Afshar, 2008).

Contrastingly, in South Asian societies, the hijab functions within different religious, cultural, and historical contexts. While veiling is more normalized in many regions, it remains influenced by patriarchal traditions, religious interpretations, and class structures (Papanek, 1982; Shaheed, 2010). In Pakistan, for example, the hijab often reflects familial honor and religious piety, particularly in conservative or rural settings, yet its meaning shifts in urban contexts where women actively adopt it as a symbol of Islamic modernity (Jamal, 2018). India presents a more contested picture, especially in light of rising Hindu nationalism and communal tensions. The hijab here has become a flashpoint in debates around minority rights, with Muslim women resisting state-imposed dress codes and asserting their constitutional freedoms (Ahmad, 2020). In Bangladesh, hijab practices have been influenced by a mix of cultural tradition, Islamic revivalist movements, and globalization (Karim, 2011). Across these contexts, the hijab is not a static tradition but a dynamic symbol reflecting shifting gender norms, religious ideologies, and political tensions. Feminist theorists caution against interpreting veiling solely through Western lenses, which often ignore the diversity of Muslim women's experiences. Mahmood (2005) critiques liberal feminism's emphasis on autonomy and choice, arguing that Muslim women's piety and modesty practices must be understood within their religious and cultural frameworks rather than imposed secular ideals. Similarly, Göle (2011) and Ruby (2006) emphasize the importance of understanding

how veiling intersects with identity formation, spirituality, and modernity. Hijab in this context is not merely a response to external pressures but also a form of self-cultivation, a way to embody moral discipline and collective belonging. The literature increasingly supports intersectional analysis, recognizing that hijab experiences differ across lines of class, education, ethnicity, and geopolitical context. For instance, working-class women in both South Asia and the diaspora may experience hijab as an economic necessity or protective mechanism, while educated middle-class women may adopt it as part of Islamic consciousness or feminist resistance (Hamzeh, 2011; Lewis, 2015). Moreover, the influence of transnational media and digital platforms has transformed how hijab is perceived and practiced globally. Social media influencers, Islamic fashion bloggers, and online preachers contribute to shaping a hybrid hijab culture that blends religiosity with aesthetic appeal, especially among younger Muslim women (Rizvi, 2013). This global circulation of hijab images challenges the binary of tradition vs. modernity and demonstrates how Muslim women actively construct new modes of identity through veiling. Still, literature from both regions identifies ongoing tensions between personal choice and societal expectations. In both the West and South Asia, some women report being pressured either to veil or not to veil—revealing how hijab can be co-opted by both patriarchal and secular forces (Afshar, 2008; Shaheed, 2010). Thus, the hijab cannot be reduced to a single narrative but must be examined through the prism of women's voices, situated experiences, and socio-political structures. The comparative literature highlights that while hijab serves as a medium of faith and identity, its meanings are always shaped by the local and global forces in which Muslim women live and act.

#### **Research Questions:**

- How do Muslim women in Western and South Asian societies perceive and interpret the hijab in relation to their personal, religious, and cultural identities?
- What social, political, and religious factors influence Muslim women's decisions to wear—or not wear—the hijab in Western and South Asian contexts?

#### **Significance of Research:**

This study is significant for its contribution to understanding how hijab shapes Muslim women's identity in varied cultural landscapes. By comparing Western and South Asian narratives, the research challenges dominant stereotypes, amplifies women's voices, and provides a culturally nuanced perspective on agency, religion, and gender in Muslim societies.

#### **Research Methodology:**

This study employs a qualitative, comparative methodology to explore Muslim women's personal narratives concerning the hijab in both Western and South Asian societies. The research aims to understand how identity is shaped through veiling within culturally distinct yet religiously connected environments. The study focuses on six countries—three from each region: the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada representing Western societies; and Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh representing South Asia.

Purposive sampling was used to select 30 Muslim women participants (15 from each region) aged between 18 and 45, ensuring diversity in education, socioeconomic background, and levels of religious observance. Data was collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person and via virtual platforms. The interview questions explored personal motivations for wearing (or not wearing) the hijab, societal responses, family expectations, religious understanding, and the role of media and politics in shaping identity.



Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in participants' narratives. These included categories such as religious commitment, cultural conformity, empowerment, social resistance, and identity construction. NVivo software supported data coding and organization.

The study maintained strict ethical standards: participants gave informed consent, pseudonyms were used, and confidentiality was preserved. The comparative approach enabled contextual sensitivity, allowing the study to highlight both regional distinctiveness and global intersections of hijab-related experiences. The methodology underscores the importance of centering women's voices and privileging their lived realities in discussions of Islamic identity and veiling practices.

Table 1: Participant Demographics Summary

Category	Western (n=15)	South Asia (n=15)
Age Range (18–45)	All	All
Higher Education	12	9
Employed/Students	10	11
Regular Hijab Wearers	9	12
Chose Hijab Independently	11	7
From Urban Background	13	10
Sunni / Shia / Other	11 / 3 / 1	12 / 2 / 1

### Data Analysis:

The qualitative data collected from 30 Muslim women—15 from Western societies (UK, USA, Canada) and 15 from South Asian countries (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh)—were analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method guided the identification and interpretation of themes. The analysis revealed key similarities and differences in how the hijab is perceived, practiced, and politicized in the two contexts. Five overarching themes emerged: **Religious Significance, Cultural Pressure, Empowerment and Agency, Social Perception, and Intersection with Modernity.**

In Western contexts, **religious significance** emerged as a dominant theme. A majority of participants described the hijab as a deeply spiritual practice linked to their relationship with Allah. For many, it represented discipline, self-respect, and a constant reminder of faith. However, this meaning was often complicated by the presence of **Islamophobia** and the politicization of the hijab in public discourse. Western participants frequently mentioned facing suspicion, prejudice, or exclusion in workplaces, educational institutions, and public spaces. These experiences were particularly prevalent among women who visibly practiced Islam through the hijab, reflecting the intersection of gender, race, and religion.

In contrast, South Asian participants, while also identifying the hijab as a religious obligation, emphasized **social and familial expectations** more than their Western counterparts. Many reported that veiling was introduced to them by mothers, grandmothers, or community norms. The act was often framed in terms of modesty, protection, and social reputation rather than solely spiritual choice. This suggests that the hijab in South Asia often reflects collective rather than individual identity, embedded within patriarchal expectations and social conformity.

Another major theme was **empowerment and agency**. In both regions, participants resisted the notion that hijab is inherently oppressive. Western participants especially viewed hijab as a tool for reclaiming their religious identity in hostile secular environments. For them, wearing the hijab

was an act of resistance against homogenizing Western norms and an affirmation of self-defined empowerment. South Asian women also identified empowerment in veiling, but their narratives revealed a more complex interplay between personal faith and social obligation. Some women confessed to internal struggles between personal desire and societal pressure, while others reappropriated the hijab as a feminist or political symbol in increasingly liberal urban environments.

**Social perception** further differentiated experiences. Western Muslim women discussed how the hijab often invited stereotyping, with assumptions ranging from being submissive, uneducated, or foreign. Such experiences affected their confidence and sense of belonging. Conversely, in South Asia, wearing the hijab was largely normalized but became a point of contention when women chose not to wear it or adopted Westernized fashion. Non-veiling in South Asian cultures was often interpreted as a sign of moral laxity or deviation from religious norms, revealing a reverse pressure compared to the West.

The final theme was the **intersection with modernity and media**. Both groups of participants discussed the influence of social media, online preachers, and global fashion in shaping their perceptions of hijab. Western participants followed online hijabi influencers and blended modest fashion with Western styles, viewing hijab not as incompatible with modernity but as adaptable. South Asian participants similarly acknowledged the growing presence of hijabi fashion, especially among younger urban women, though conservative settings still maintained strict modesty codes.

These findings demonstrate that the hijab cannot be understood through universalized narratives. It operates within a matrix of religious conviction, cultural tradition, political context, and personal agency. The same symbol carries divergent meanings for women across geographical and ideological boundaries. Both conformity and resistance are part of the veiling experience, shaped by dynamic interactions between self, society, and state. Muslim women are not passive recipients of cultural norms but active interpreters, continuously negotiating their identities through the hijab.

Table 2: Key Motivations for Wearing Hijab

Motivation	Western Respondents (n=15)	South Asian Respondents (n=15)
Religious Obligation	13	14
Cultural/Familial Influence	3	11
Personal Empowerment	10	7
Political/Resistance Identity	8	2
Social Conformity	2	9

Table 3: Common Challenges Faced by Hijab-Wearing Women

Type of Challenge	Western Participants	South Asian Participants
Discrimination/Islamophobia	12	4
Family/Societal Pressure	3	10
Professional Limitations	7	5
Media Misrepresentation	10	6
Verbal Harassment	9	6

Table 4: Hijab and Identity Perceptions

Identity Aspect	Western Women	South Asian Women
Religious Identity	Strong emphasis (13)	Strong emphasis (14)
National Identity Conflict	Common theme (9)	Rare (2)
Self-Expression	Blended with fashion (10)	More traditional (6)
Feminist Interpretation	Moderate to strong (8)	Emerging among urban elite (4)

### Findings and Conclusion:

The comparative analysis of Muslim women's narratives across Western and South Asian contexts reveals a deeply complex and multifaceted relationship between hijab and identity. The findings suggest that while the hijab is consistently associated with religious devotion, its meanings and implications are strongly shaped by socio-political environments, cultural traditions, and personal experiences.

In Western societies, hijab functions not only as a spiritual commitment but also as a political and identity-affirming symbol. For many participants, wearing the hijab is an act of resistance against Islamophobic attitudes, media misrepresentation, and societal exclusion. These women reclaim the hijab as a marker of autonomy, asserting their right to visibility and religious expression within liberal secular frameworks. Their narratives reflect empowerment, resilience, and strategic negotiation of hybrid identities that bridge faith and modernity.

Conversely, in South Asian societies, the hijab is more commonly interpreted through lenses of tradition, modesty, and familial expectations. While participants affirmed the spiritual significance of veiling, many acknowledged that societal norms—particularly concerning gender, honor, and respectability—exert significant influence on their choices. Nevertheless, urban, educated South Asian women are increasingly redefining the hijab as a conscious personal decision, fusing religious meaning with contemporary interpretations of empowerment and modest fashion.

Despite differences, a unifying theme across both regions is the active agency of Muslim women in shaping their narratives around the hijab. They reject simplistic portrayals of oppression and demonstrate critical engagement with religious texts, societal expectations, and global discourses. In conclusion, the hijab is not a static or monolithic symbol but a dynamic and context-dependent expression of identity. This study underscores the importance of listening to Muslim women's voices and recognizing the diversity of their experiences. It contributes to decolonial feminist discourse and calls for more inclusive, culturally grounded understandings of veiling practices worldwide.

### Futuristic Approach:

Future research should explore the experiences of non-veiling Muslim women, converts, and transgender Muslims to broaden the discourse around hijab and identity. Expanding the study across more diverse ethnic and national contexts, especially underrepresented Muslim minority regions, can provide richer, intersectional insights into evolving religious and gendered identities.

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