

# HIJAB IN LONDON

## Metamorphosis, Resonance and Effects

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### Abstract

This article is about the significance of dress as a visible indicator of difference in multicultural London. It focuses in particular on the hijab (Muslim woman's headscarf), suggesting that its adoption by middle-class Muslim women is often a product, not so much of their cultural backgrounds as of the trans-cultural encounters they experience in a cosmopolitan urban environment. The article explores the transformative potential of hijab, demonstrating how its adoption not only acts as a moment of metamorphosis in the lives of wearers, but also has significant effects on the perceptions and actions of others. These themes of metamorphosis, visibility and agency are explored in relation to the complex conflicting resonance of hijab in the West, and how that resonance is constantly being reshaped both through contemporary political events and their media coverage as well as through the actions and campaigns of hijab wearers.

This article sets out to explore the popularity and resonance of the hijab<sup>1</sup> in London through a focus on trans-cultural encounters, which, whether directly or indirectly, form an important part of everyday life in the capital city. Building on earlier work concerning the social and cultural significance of the 'problem of what to wear' (see Tarlo, 1996; Bannerjee and Miller, 2003), it focuses on the decision made by some educated middleclass Muslim women<sup>2</sup> to adopt hijab. The aim is to move away from a cultural determinist approach to the garment (the idea that its wearing is simply a product of the ethnic or religious background of the wearer) without explaining away its adoption in terms of the alternative models available: theories of post-colonial resistance, gender performance, patriarchy, and the rise of global religious movements – all of which are relevant to some degree but which tend to undermine, if not ignore,

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<sup>1</sup> Following popular English usage of the term, hijab is used here to mean a Muslim woman's headscarf. In Arabic the word refers, not to a type of cloth, but to general notions of separation, screening, and keeping things apart, see El Guindi (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Whilst university-educated middle-class Muslims represent only a minority of Britain's Muslim population, they none the less play a very significant role in public debates concerning Islam and its development in the West. One consequence of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, has been the relentless interrogation of Muslims in the western media and politics. Whilst the negative side of this takes the form of police searches, arrests, racist attacks and suspicion, the more positive side is increased consultation and public dialogue with Muslims in politics and the media. The role played by middle-class educated Muslims in this process cannot be underestimated.

the complexities of biographical experience and the processes by which people make meaning of their own lives. The emphasis given here is on the significance of the trans-cultural city as a space which exposes people to alternative ways of being and in so doing, offers them the possibility of personal metamorphosis. Whilst the term 'metamorphosis' may seem exaggerated in the context of the tying of a simple piece of cloth, it is argued that for many women the adoption of hijab transforms not only their sense of self but also their relationship to others and the wider environment. To this extent it becomes possible to speak of the agency of hijab in people's lives.

Closely linked to the agency of hijab is its visibility and the significance of that visibility. This aspect of hijab has been insufficiently explored in the western context<sup>3</sup>, perhaps because to many westerners, the hijab is associated more with notions of invisibility than visibility. It is linked in popular perceptions to the idea of hiding, concealment and the effacement of women's presence in the public sphere. But whilst it is true that forms of Islamic dress for women are about withdrawing certain parts of the body from public view (whether the head, hair, neck, bosom, all of these or more, depending on particular interpretations of Qur'anic prescriptions), they are also about increasing a woman's visibility in the public sphere – making her visible as Muslim. This aspect of being seen to be Muslim has considerable importance for many hijab wearers who draw attention to the verse in the Qur'an which reads: 'Oh Prophet, tell your wives and daughters, and believing women, to draw their cloaks around them so that they may be recognized [or noticed] and not harmed' (33:57). A focus on this issue of seeing and being seen, and on the significance of inter-ocular experience can, it is argued, offer new insights into the meaning and significance of hijab in contemporary London, and in Britain more generally.

### ***LONDON, MULTICULTURALISM AND HIJAB***

In July 2004, London's City Hall, a spectacular state-of-the-art glass building on the banks of the River Thames opened its doors to a conference entitled 'Hijab: A Woman's Right to Choose'. The conference was organized by the Assembly for the Protection of Hijab (Figure 1) (otherwise known as Pro-hijab), a newly established London-based international network and lobbying group formed in response to the French proposal to ban the wearing of religious symbols in state schools – a ban which took effect in September 2004. The conference brought together on one platform an unusual mix of hijab-wearing Muslim women activists from Britain, Belgium, Holland, France, Turkey and Tunisia as well as Muslim academics, legal specialists, human rights activists, left wing politicians, a Catholic priest, a Sikh dignitary, a German feminist (conspicuous for her 'F\*uck racism' T shirt) and the guest of honour, Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi – a robed Muslim cleric from Quatta whose presence in Britain caused outrage in some sections of the popular press which, perhaps for the first time, found themselves siding with and supporting gay rights activists who were opposed to the cleric for his alleged homophobic

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<sup>3</sup> It has received more attention in studies of countries with a Muslim majority, for example Nilafar Gole's work on the new visibility of Islam in the public sphere in Turkey (Gole, 2002).

views (Figure 2). Whilst the key aim of the conference was to launch a global campaign for the reversal of the various bans on hijab in Europe (France, Germany, Holland, Belgium) on the basis that these were infringements of human rights, a recurrent theme that emerged throughout the conference was the status of London as a shining example of successful multiculturalism. 'London' stated Ruby Mahera, representative of the London Muslim Centre, 'is like a beacon for other world cities to follow' – a theme developed most eloquently by London's Mayor, Ken Livingstone, who was both hosting the conference and speaking in it. 'London', he proclaimed, 'is a city with an underlying creed – that we live by the laws of tolerance, that we accept the differences of the people around us. And that is why every religion exists in this city. Every community from every nation has its outpost in this city. And the city works well. The city works, not just because people tolerate each other; people enjoy the diversity of the city'. In this sunny, if somewhat idealized portrait of multicultural London, clothing diversity plays a very significant part, acting as visual proof of British tolerance and acceptance of ethnic and religious differences whilst, at the same time, naturalizing and reifying these differences in the process. Such differences are visually inscribed in the streets where various forms of ethnic and religiously inspired dress from around the world mingle with a huge variety of street styles and hybrid fashions with apparent ease. Such differences have also become formally institutionalized in Britain through a complex mixture of experimentation, political struggle, protest, laissez-faire and formal legislation<sup>4</sup>, with the result that most schools, many hospitals and even the London Metropolitan police force have a turban or top knot option for Sikhs and a hijab option for Muslim women as part of their official uniforms. If the right to express visual difference is a good measure of the success of multiculturalism, then the claim that London is its beacon would appear to attain a degree of truth and it is no coincidence that hijab activists chose it as the location of their conference.

Certainly, for those women who wish to wear hijab, wearing it in London is probably easier than wearing it in any other European capital city (Figure 3). Though it should also be added that for those who do not wish to wear hijab, choosing not to wear it is more difficult in London than elsewhere in Europe. If London is characterized by its wide repertoire of differences (its 'outpost for every community and nation') visibly expressed, it is also, as a result of this, characterized by the high degree of exposure to visual difference that it offers, and the intended and unintended consequences this may have. The aim is to explore these consequences in three stages. First, to locate the adoption of hijab by middle-class Muslims within the complex web of social relationships made possible by London's multiethnic multi-religious composition and ethos.

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<sup>4</sup> The most significant of these struggles took place in the 1960s and 1970s when a number of Sikh men suffered dismissal from work for refusing to remove their beards and turbans. Under the Race Relations Act of 1976, these dismissals were considered acts of indirect discrimination against an 'ethnic group'. Because Muslims are classified as a 'religious' rather than ethnic group, their dress codes are not covered by the same legislation (see Poulter, 1998: Chapter 8).

Second, to give a taste of the multiple ‘resonances’<sup>5</sup> of hijab in London, illustrating that whilst the trans-national character and multicultural ethos of the city might appear to make the adoption of hijab unproblematic, this is rarely ever the case. For the hijab, more than any other religious symbol, is semiotically overcharged. Not only is it subject to a diversity of interpretations by different individuals and groups (both Muslim and non Muslim, locally and globally) who try to shape and control its meaning, but it is also subject to a constant re-framing by contemporary political events and the excessive media coverage of these. Having to contend with and negotiate the multiple resonances of hijab is an important element of hijab wearing. Finally, the aim is to explore the hijab-effect. That is, its capacity to effect and delimit the circulation and actions of its wearers as well as its indirect effects on those who do not wear it.

### ***THICK DESCRIPTION AT THE HAIRDRESSERS***

This ethnographic foray into the significance of hijab begins in a hairdressing salon in a quiet residential neighbourhood of north-west London. In many ways it seems an unlikely place to begin, for it is a pocket of London more noticeable for the whiteness of its inhabitants (of various Judeo-Christian and/or secular backgrounds) than for its multiculturalism. But hairdressing salons are interesting places – not least for the easy flow of interactions and conversations that take place there, and it is precisely these aspects that make this salon an interesting starting point for considering the indirect presence and impact of hijab in spaces where it could appear to be irrelevant. Briefly, there are three people of interest in this example: Jane<sup>6</sup>, the owner of the salon, a 40-year-old woman from an Irish Catholic background; Nicole, a young Spanish woman employed in the salon and Loraine, a British girl with Anglo-American parentage, who, along with her mother, is a long time client of the salon. Each of these women has a connection with and interest in hijab, not through their backgrounds but through people they have met in London. To begin with Nicole, she is a highly fashionable and generally rather skimpily dressed Spanish employee in her late 20s who moved to London some eight years back. Like many young migrants arriving in London in search of fun and financial remuneration, she found herself mixing with people from a variety of backgrounds and when she split up with her Afghan boyfriend, she fell in love with Pierre, a young Muslim man of French Algerian extraction whom she met and eventually married.

The Muslim aspect of Pierre’s identity was not particularly relevant either to him or to Nicole and might never have become so had he not been diagnosed somewhat tragically with a rare and severe form of leukaemia. In distress, he turned to his local mosque for support, which he found at the hands of a group

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<sup>5</sup> In using the term ‘resonance’ I seek to build on Stephen Greenblatt’s use of the term in relation to exhibitions of works of art. He writes: ‘By resonance I mean the power of the displayed object to reach beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand’ (Greenblatt, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all people mentioned here except those with a known public profile.

of devout young Muslim men who convinced him that if he devoted his life to Allah, he might be saved. When Pierre survived a series of life-threatening operations, he felt he had been given a new life. This young man for whom Islam once occupied a minor place has, over the past two to three years, redefined his life according to strict Islamic principles. He has changed his name to Mohammed, now dresses in long loose robes, prays five times a day, keeps strict dietary rules, spends large amounts of time in the company of other devout worshippers and has virtually withdrawn from anything he considers 'un-Islamic', including his wife's friends and to some extent, his wife. Nicole's attitude to this was one of stoic acceptance and determined resistance. She performed her wifely duties by supporting him throughout the illness but refused to transform her lifestyle in harmony with his, resisting his attempts to convince her to dress modestly and cover her head. Her initial line of defence was that Pierre's own sisters did not even wear hijab and they were Muslim, so why should she? In response to this, Pierre succeeded in persuading two of his sisters to adopt hijab in order to set a good example to his Spanish wife. But Nicole remained resistant, refusing to attend Muslim social events where she feared that people would 'suck her in'. Her only sartorial concession was to wear a cardigan over her overtly skimpy flesh and pierced-navel revealing tops when in the house so as not to offend her pious husband. Meanwhile Pierre (now Mohammed) learned to withdraw into the sanctity and safety of what soon became his private room (protected by Islamic prescriptions) whenever Nicole's non-covered female friends came to the house. Various popular interpretations of this circulated in the salon, ranging from 'Pierre has been brainwashed by extremists when he was near to death' to 'he has reverted back to his original roots' and so forth. But the fact is that Pierre was not religiously active before and neither were his parents. It is not that he has returned to his roots but that he has chosen a particular route from the wide cultural repertoire of possible ways of being Muslim in London – in this case precipitated by personal trauma and exposure to a more religious way of life. But in contemporary multicultural London, such a repertoire is open, not just to people from Muslim backgrounds, but also to others.

Whilst Nicole was not attracted to the possibilities for personal transformation opened up through transreligious encounter and exposure to an Islamic life style, there are others who find such transformative possibilities appealing. Loraine is a 21-year-old blonde-haired girl with a pale complexion who, until recently, could be seen wearing the jeans and track-suit tops so ubiquitous amongst her generation. She was raised just around the corner from the salon by her British mother and American father (and later step-father). At the age of 17, Loraine met and fell in love with a Muslim boy, a student of Gujarati Kenyan background who had come to England to attend sixth-form college, which is where he met Loraine. Until this point, to her knowledge, she had not had any direct contact with Muslims, having attended a rather sheltered private school. 'When I was at school I didn't know anything about Islam', she says, 'I mean nothing at all. If you'd asked me what a Muslim looked like I wouldn't have been able to tell you'. Like Nicole's boyfriend before his religious rebirth, Loraine's boyfriend was not particularly religious. He was the sort of person who made an effort to attend the odd Friday prayers and

participated in Eid feasts but not much more than that. But through him, Loraine met other members of his family and was particularly impressed by the women who seemed to take their religion more seriously. In particular, she was attracted to the 'rules and regulations' by which they lived and the sense of order, hierarchy and solidarity in their home. This encounter spurred an interest in Islam, which Loraine fed initially through reading and surfing on the internet, and later through interaction with religiously active Muslims she met during her first year at university in west London. Loraine soon found herself welcomed by enthusiastic members of the Islamic society who encouraged her towards Islam. What appealed to her was the level of their dedication and 'the complete way of life' that Islam seemed to offer and which she said, 'made sense to her', offering 'a whole logic to believe in'. In February 2004 she said the Shahada and took on the hijab the following day. It was, she said, 'part of the package of becoming Muslim'. Like many other converts, she is keen not to miss anything out and, if in doubt, she consults one of the many online imams. For the past two years, she has been sharing a house with other young Muslim women from various backgrounds (two Jordanians, one British-Asian and one other British convert). All wear the hijab and long robes (abayas or jilbabs) when out of the home (though Loraine modifies her outer garments when she comes back to visit her mother<sup>7</sup>) and all consider the covering of arms, feet and hair a non-negotiable Islamic requirement. In addition her housemate of British-Asian origin who teaches in a Muslim school, adds a niqab (face veil) when out of doors.

For Loraine, what began as a trans-religious encounter has become a means through which to transform her life. I mention these two cases in the context of the hairdressing salon because the salon provides a micro-environment in which different attitudes and experiences intersect with interlocking and accumulative effects as we shall see more clearly by examining the actions and responses of Jane, the third person in this trio. Jane, who is, as mentioned earlier, the owner of the salon, is of Irish Catholic extraction. Her relationship to hijab is far more tenuous and remote and it is precisely for this reason that it is in some ways the most interesting. She began as a mere witness to the experiences of the others: of Nicole's resistance to hijab-pressure from her husband and Loraine's decision to embrace hijab – something she learned about from Loraine's mother who deeply resents her daughter's conversion to Islam and has devoted a number of hairdressing sessions to expressing her horror and disgust.

In the summer of 2004, just a few months after Loraine's conversion, Jane almost encountered Loraine in her hijab when her mother booked her a hair appointment at the salon. But Loraine had rung up to cancel at the last minute – an act which every one in the salon attributed to the hijab. And in a sense, they were right. Asked why she had not kept the appointment Loraine explained that it was not that 'Islam wouldn't let her have her hair cut' as her mother supposed or that 'she mustn't be touched by a non-Muslim' as others suspected, but, rather that she did not want to run the risk of a man walking

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<sup>7</sup> For example, on the day I interviewed her she wore her hijab with a kneelength pink coat rather than a full length jilbab or abaya.

into the salon and seeing her hair uncovered. What is very clear talking to Jane is that although her encounters with hijab have been indirect, they have had a profound impact on the way she feels about her environment and her projected future. Loraine's hijab (though she has only ever seen it at a distance) has affected her in significant ways. To her it not only signifies that Loraine has been led astray or 'brainwashed' as she put it, but it also acts as a warning. Hearing Loraine's mother's accounts and seeing 'what has happened to Loraine' made her anxious about her own child (then aged 4) who was attending the nursery attached to her local state school in the multicultural multi-religious neighbourhood of Finsbury Park, north London. In the past, whenever we discussed schools, Jane had always said she wanted her son to be exposed to as many different cultures and religions as possible. She thought it was 'healthy' in contrast to her own strict Catholic upbringing. 'I hated all the Catholic stuff I grew up with in Ireland' she confessed, 'but this business with Loraine has got me thinking. I mean maybe children need to grow up with a religion in order to have something to rebel against', she laughs, aware of the irony of what she is suggesting, 'and perhaps if you don't give them anything, they'll go off searching for something, like Loraine.' Loraine's hijab had, in effect, become proof to Jane of the potential perils of multiculturalism (although she would never have phrased it like that). It not only got her thinking, but also, acting. Despite declaring quite openly that she is 'a complete atheist', she started attending her local Catholic church with the explicit intention of securing her son a place in the safely closeted environment of the local Catholic school and – more to the point – pulling him out of the multi-ethnic multi-religious local school to which he was attached. Her efforts were successful.

What is interesting is that Jane, far from being some right-wing conservative with entrenched racist views, is, on the contrary a classic example of the sort of liberal Londoner of Ken Livingstone's description – the one who enjoys ethnic diversity in food, clothes and friends, who mixes freely with people from different cultural backgrounds, employs an Indian nanny to look after her child and people of different cultural backgrounds in her salon (including a British-Bengali Muslim girl who does not wear hijab). To say that Loraine's adoption of hijab has caused Jane to withdraw her son from the state education system would perhaps be to overstate the case. Yet Jane undoubtedly did succumb to fears and anxieties triggered by Loraine's hijab, the sight of which made her nervous about the number of visibly Muslim mothers standing outside the school gates at her son's nursery. She explicitly links her decision to attend the Catholic church to Loraine's conversion and visual transformation. And it is worth noting that had Loraine simply converted without transforming her appearance, it is unlikely that Jane would have been affected in the same way. It is the presence of hijab, and the way it makes difference visible, that made Loraine's conversion unpalatable, both to her mother (to whom it signifies distance and rejection) and to Jane (to whom it signifies both warning and threat). Jane did not wish to expose her son to a hijabi environment for fear of what such exposure might unleash.

Here we have not the forging of new hybrid identities, about which we read so much in post-colonial theory, but rather the reinforcement of difference

through fear. It is likely that much of the ethnic and religious segregation so visible in London's schools and neighbourhoods is explicable in terms of this type of fear – a fear, not so much of encounter or interaction but of the transformation that such interaction might engender. It is, of course, a fear that works in several directions, as the proliferation of religious schools testifies. For example, both orthodox Jewish and orthodox Muslim parents in the Stamford Hill area of north-east London recently expressed their desire to keep community services in the area separate even for children of pre-school age. Foremost amongst their anxieties about mixing was the fear that their dress codes might become compromised or diluted through interaction with others (personal communication). In this locality, the majority of Muslim women (most of whom are of Indian origin) wear full length jilbabs (long-sleeved outer coats), hijabs and in many cases, niqabs (face veils) – mostly in black. Where visual difference is so densely inscribed in the local environment, it can exert a powerful normative pressure that is difficult to resist. A young, religiously practising Muslim couple who moved into the area three years ago from Delhi, find themselves frequently questioned by their neighbours about why they do not visually display their religious identity. The woman, who had never seriously contemplated wearing hijab when she lived in Old Delhi, now finds herself constantly having to justify her decision not to wear it, not only to other women in the area, but also to her six-year-old son, Ahmed. He sees his mother dressed differently from the other Muslim mothers he encounters in the area and wishes that she would conform to type.

What these examples seem to illustrate is: first, how individual decisions to wear hijab may come about through exposure to a hijabwearing lifestyle which is just one of a large repertoire of ways of being open to both Muslims and non-Muslims in London who may or may not take it up for their own personal reasons. Second, they show how the adoption of hijab may come to guide or delimit a person's modes of action; for instance, Loraine can no longer go to the salon, a trivial example, but others will follow. And third, they show how the visual presence of one person's hijab may have effects on the actions of others. For example, Jane, an atheist and advocate of multiculturalism has withdrawn her child from the local school to protect him from hijab, whilst Ahmed, a 6-year-old Muslim boy surrounded by Muslim women in hijab, is doing his best to try to persuade his mother to dress similarly.

### ***THE RESONANCE OF HIJAB***

Whilst at one level Loraine's adoption of hijab can be explained in terms of the micro-encounters of her immediate environment and her particular emotional and spiritual quest, at another level it cannot be divorced from a much wider set of discourses and practices relating to hijab and its public resonance. Loraine was drawn to the positive resonance of hijab as built and exemplified by the religiously dedicated practising hijab-wearing Muslim women with whom she mixed at university. What attracted her was not the heavily politicized ideology of radical Islamic groups (which also exist in British universities and whom Loraine classifies as 'nutters') but rather the idealized notions of modesty, privacy, protection from the male gaze, rejection of

consumerist values and, above all, religious duty that Islam promotes and the hijab enables and embodies (Figure 4). These are ideas that Pro-hijab activists are keen to promote through their explicit comparison of the ideal Muslim woman with the Christian ideal of the Virgin Mary and with nuns. The primary association is with modesty, goodness and virtue. Why, such women ask, when nuns are respected as a good example and positive moral presence in western society is the woman in hijab regarded as suspicious and oppressed? Abeer Pharaon, head of the Pro-hijab campaign even goes so far as to argue that the hijab would be the 'natural attire' of all women of every religion were they free to choose – something she tried to prove in a lecture delivered at the first ever women's only FOSIS (Federation of Islamic students) conference held in Leicester in the summer of 2004. In an unusual PowerPoint presentation she juxtaposed images of scarfwearing women from different historical periods, religions and cultures as proof of the 'natural' affinity all women have with hijab. The positive resonance of hijab is something felt very strongly by many of the hijab-wearing women I have interviewed, most of whom are from Muslim backgrounds where their mothers did not wear hijab. They too have often come to the hijab through encounters with people they have met in a multicultural urban environment. One such example is Jasmine, a woman of south Indian origin, who had a somewhat itinerant international childhood before settling in London in her student years. As a child and adolescent she wore what she describes as 'western dress' and used to shock relatives back in India with her short haircut and jeans. Now she shocks them even more by wearing the hijab. The person who convinced her of the Islamic necessity of adopting the hijab in daily life was a woman she describes as a Spanish feminist whom she met on an Arabic course in London. Another example is Humera Khan, a dynamic and highly articulate woman of Pakistani origin who works as a social activist and councillor on Muslim issues in the multicultural borough of Brent and plays a prominent high profile role as a consultant on Muslim affairs in Britain. She initially began covering her head in order to facilitate interaction with the migrant Muslim women from various ethnic backgrounds with whom she worked. She felt they would be able to relate to her more easily and trust her more readily if she wore hijab. At first she would wear a head scarf only in the contexts of work and prayer. But over the years she has found herself 'growing into' her hijab and now does not feel right without it (a sensation described by many women). She ties her scarf, not flat on the head but in a large and exuberant turban – a style she copied from an English Muslim she saw wearing it – though she thinks it is probably inspired from west African traditions. 'When I saw it [this style] I really liked it. It was the late 1980s and early 1990s. Women were looking for ways we could dress Islamically which were also fashionable and which we could control ourselves, rather than being controlled by the fashion industry'. Whilst Humera's hijab style is a product of trans-cultural encounter, the fabrics she uses to tie her head covering also express her expansive global outlook. She chooses patterns and materials drawn from what she considers 'Muslim traditions' around the world or which have an Islamic resonance.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Many of these she buys in the popular chain store, Tie Rack, the point being that they visually evoke Muslim traditions rather than having pedigree Islamic origins. For details of Humera Khan's sartorial biography, see Tarlo, 2007.

What many hijab wearing women speak of are the feelings of community they feel when they see other women in hijab. Jamila, a 36-year-old woman from north-east London, who adopted hijab a few years back, following the example set by her daughters (who in turn had been encouraged by school friends), now regrets not having worn it earlier. She speaks passionately of the extraordinary sense of respect she felt when she first went into the streets in hijab, and of how suddenly other scarf-wearing women greeted her with 'salaam' making her feel that she really did belong to one big community. Others tell of how, through their hijabs, they are able to greet complete strangers when they travel abroad, marking their collective recognition of belonging to a global Islamic community or umma, and contributing towards the creation of such a community in the process.

The hijab acts as an orienting device, not just in the physical world and through acts of looking, but also in the virtual world where the sisters' forums of Islamic websites are literally overflowing with hijab stories and discussions in which Muslim women from around the world share their trials and tribulations relating to dress. Meanwhile online Islamic clothing stores are an expanding commercial domain (Figure 5), contributing to the creation of a new global vocabulary of Islamic dress in which styles drawn from diverse cultural traditions around the world are redefined as 'Islamic'.<sup>9</sup> These form part of a growing body of consumer goods, from Islamic chocolate to wallpaper and Barbie doll lookalikes (Figure 6), through which new normative models of an ideal Islamic life style are created.

Closely linked to the positive feelings of community engendered through hijab is the sense that the hijab plays an essential role in maintaining the social and moral order for, as Suzanne Brenner pointed out in her perceptive analysis of the Islamic movement in Indonesia, the adoption of Islamic dress is concerned not only with a reconstruction of the self but also of society as a whole (Brenner, 1996). Some women informed me that the hijab actually prevents marital breakdown, stopping men from being led astray, preventing women from leading them astray and saving taxpayers' money in social services bills as a result! These 'benefits' of hijab are propagated in a variety of forms – whether through inspirational teachings, casual conversations, dolls, children's books, popular songs, private blogs and online hijab chat. For example, in a multimedia screen saver entitled, Hijab, downloadable from the Canadian website, Islamicoccasions.com,<sup>10</sup> (but in global circulation in a number of sisters' online discussion forums), verses celebrating the virtues of a hijab wearer are intermingled with messages concerning the power of hijab to protect women from exploitation, bring psychological peace to men and women, improve the moral character of society, guard women from the lustful looks of men, prevent people from being distracted from constructive social work, prevent social corruption and immorality, bring confidence in social

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<sup>9</sup> Conversely, a number of styles worn by Muslims in different parts of the world such as the sari and shalwar kamiz (both popular in south Asia) are now being classified in certain pious Muslim circles as 'un-Islamic'.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.ezsoftech.com/screensavers/presentation/hijab.swf> (accessed 26 March 2007).

participation as a human being rather than as a sexual commodity and save time and money by preventing people from flaunting themselves and worrying about clothes.

These messages are flashed on screen along with Islamic prescriptions from the Qur'an and Hadith and cutout images of veiled women to the background of the uplifting soundtrack of world music singer, Dawud Wharmsby, singing his song, *Veil*, in which a Muslim girl living in the West defends her decision to wear hijab in response to an imagined western observer's sceptical comments. For some women, the act of wearing hijab also has an explicit proselysing intent. For example, the radical political party, Hizb ut Tahrir argues that the hijab is a flag for Islam, designed not only to mark out the Muslim woman's utter rejection of western capitalism, secularism and integration, but also to draw infidels towards submission to Allah (see Tarlo, 2005). By contrast, as already explained, liberal hijab wearers are more likely to embrace their visual affinities to and sympathies with modest women of other religious faiths. For example, Rezia Wahid<sup>11</sup>, a textile artist of Bangladeshi origin who adopted hijab just one month after 11 September 2001, described with good humour the experience of entering the Vatican in Rome and finding herself surrounded by what she described as 'women in hijab' who welcomed her, assuming her to be a follower of Mother Theresa. Such tales indicate the potentialities of affinities being recognized by what might be considered a community of modest women of different religions.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely this sentiment that the American online clothing store, Headwear Heaven, tapped into when it advertised its range of inspiring headwear options without specifying any particular religious affiliations.<sup>13</sup>

However the various inspirational interpretations of hijab that coexist in London and elsewhere are constantly undermined by the more dominant negative resonance encountered on the streets and in the press – resonance fed by the complex legacies of Orientalist, imperialist, secular and feminist discourses as well as by the contemporary political situation.<sup>14</sup> This negative resonance, in which the western dominated global media invests a great deal<sup>15</sup>, builds upon a whole other set of associations which tie the hijab to ideas of patriarchy, oppression, victimhood, ignorance, tradition, barbarism, foreignness, fundamentalism, suspicion and the threat of violence – associations which have been greatly inflated by '9/11' and through subsequent events such as the London bombings of July 2005 and the

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<sup>11</sup> For details of Humera Khan's sartorial biography, see Emma Tarlo (2007).

<sup>12</sup> For example, in some online discussions characterized by intolerance and paranoia concerning hijab, we find orthodox Jewish women defending Muslim women's rights to be modest and to dress according to their religious traditions without harassment.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, during the two-year period in which I have been consulting this website (2004–2006), it has changed its advertising strategy from a general one aimed at 'all women' including religious women and those experiencing hair loss and 'bad hair days' to an explicitly Muslim-oriented strategy in which it refers to 'Islamic inspired Hijabs' and displays different headwear options in pointed dome-shaped frames, see Head Wear Heaven (2001–2003).

<sup>14</sup> There is a wealth of literature on colonial, Orientalist and feminist perceptions of the veil. For some critical discussions of these, see El Guindi (1999) and Bullock (2003).

<sup>15</sup> For discussion of portrayals of Muslims as victims and terrorists in the British media, see Ahmed (2003).

cartoon controversy of 2006. It is no coincidence that the cartoon which caused the most outrage was the one which reasserted the association of Islam with violence and terrorism, using dress – the prophet’s turban – as the link. Reactions to this cartoon by European Muslims should be understood not only in terms of the fraught political situation and Islamic prohibitions regarding iconography, but also in relation to the fact that since 9/11, people who look Muslim are constantly having to fend off the association of their dress with terrorism and oppression.

In the past three years, there has been an undeniable media hunger in the West for images of covered women whose concealment seems to serve as a visual shorthand for lack of integration, oppression and threat. For example, at the Pro-hijab conference in London, there were only four women wearing niqab (face veils) in an audience of 200, yet there was an obscene conglomerate of photographers gathered around them like a against a backdrop of earnest speeches about how to combat stereotyped perceptions of Islam.

Any individual adopting hijab in London, whatever their intentions and beliefs, has to engage with some of this negative resonance of hijab. In Loraine’s case, she puts up not only with her mother’s hostile interpretations but also with strangers speaking to her slowly as if she were either foreign or stupid (something of which many Muslim women speak). She has also received comments along the lines of: ‘Poor thing! Her parents must have forced her!’ (a comment she finds particularly ironic given her mother’s hostile attitude to hijab). ‘My mum’s convinced I’m a fundamentalist’, she muses, ‘She thinks that if I go on holiday with her to Florida wearing the hijab I’ll be arrested at the airport!’ – a joke which might have been funnier were it not for the extent to which Muslims have been criminalized both in the USA and Britain since 9/11.<sup>16</sup> It is this negative resonance that the Pakistani-born British comedienne, Shazia Mirza, tries to expose and challenge in her politically provocative sketches which, until recently, she performed in hijab (see Figure 7).

The joke for which she is most famous, which she performed just two weeks after the attack on the twin towers, involved her standing on stage in austere black clothes including hijab and announcing blankly: ‘My name is Shazia Mirza. At least that’s what it says in my pilot’s licence!’ It is a theme she frequently reiterates when she goes on tour around the world and begins with jokes about how nobody wants to sit next to her on the plane. ‘I wouldn’t worry’, she says to an imagined passenger, ‘When I blow up the plane, it won’t make much difference whether I’m sitting next to you or a few rows back!’ It is the same attempt to confront the associations made between Islam and terrorism, and to face racism and suspicion head on, that we find in a slogan printed on a sixth-form college student’s T shirt: ‘Don’t panic, I’m Islamic’ (Figure 8). Yet so sensitive is the hijab issue that attempts to expose

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<sup>16</sup> For example, in 2004 both the singer, Yusuf Islam, (previously known as Cat Stevens), and the Muslim philosopher, Tariq Ramadan, were refused entry into the USA despite the fact that both are respected public figures with important contributions to make to debates concerning contemporary developments in Islam in the West.

'Islamaphobia' often get interpreted as anti- Islamic gestures. For example, when the contemporary Moscow-based art group, AES, displayed their digitally manipulated photographs from the series, 'The Witnesses of the Future' which showed Islamicized versions of iconic buildings in famous western cities, they found themselves accused of producing anti-Islamic art. The series was produced in 1996 but became more controversial in the light of 9/11. Their defence of the project was that their art was intended as a psychoanalytic interrogation of western paranoia about Islam. None the less, at the Rutgers's Maison Gross School for Arts exhibition in the USA, T shirts portraying the image, 'New Liberty', which showed the Statue of Liberty wearing a burqa and holding the Koran were withdrawn from sale for fear that 'the T shirts would spread the very fears they purport to deconstruct' (Figure 9).<sup>17</sup> This, along with an image of Islamicized London (Figure 10), was also excluded from an exhibition of their work in Walsall in the British West Midlands for fear that the images might act as 'an incitement to violence' given 'the current political climate'.<sup>18</sup> Certainly their proximity to images produced on some right-wing fascist websites is undeniable. Similarly the comedienne, Shazia Mirza has received much criticism for performing in hijab and was even physically attacked by young men in a British Muslim audience in London's Brick Lane. In interview, she spoke of her recent decision to stop wearing the hijab on stage and of the relief she felt at stepping outside its physical and metaphorical strictures, which had not only framed perceptions of her but also stifled her freedom of expression. It had become impossible for her to perform in hijab without 'representing' Muslims in general, a burden she ultimately could not sustain. Her case is interesting for, in many ways, her humour revolved around exploring, exposing and transforming the resonance of hijab but ultimately the weight of expectation associated with it was too inhibiting.

Within this highly charged environment, every action and image with potential Islamic resonance comes under scrutiny. When in the summer of 2004 the London metropolitan police published a poster encouraging people to ring a terrorist hotline, they found themselves accused of re-asserting the link between Islam and terrorism. The poster showed a woman's eyes peering from behind a black screen, which was presumably intended to evoke notions of vigilance (Figure 11). To many Muslims, accustomed to having to defend elements of their clothing practices, the image seemed a direct slight to Muslim women in niqab (Figure 12). Of course the hijab occupies an important place not just in external tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims but also in internal tensions between Muslims both in Britain and around the globe concerning different interpretations of Islam. For example the peaceful protests of hijab activists trying to reverse the French ban in schools in September 2004 using the language of human rights were, to a large extent, undermined by the aggressive militant tactics of extremists in Iraq who kidnapped and threatened to kill two French journalists unless the hijab ban was revoked (Figure 13). At another level, hijab-wearing women often find themselves criticized by non-hijab-wearing Muslims for being

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<sup>17</sup> See Blake Eskin's article 'Russian-Jewish Art Angers Rutgers's Museum: Soros-Sponsored visions of Islamic Future Irk ADL were meant as Irony' (Eskin, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> See inIVA press release, 'Walsall Council ban photographs' (inIVA, 2003).

judgemental, over-pious, for getting their priorities wrong, for falsely co-opting the language of human rights, for failing to criticize gender inequalities in Islamic countries. What all of these examples show is the overwhelming, overdetermining resonance of hijab which individuals and groups try their best to shape but are ultimately never able to control. Adopting the hijab in London means engaging with this resonance (whether in the form of racist abuse, suspicious looks, failed job applications or the person sitting next to you on the bus leaning ever so slightly the other way). As one young woman put it in relation to her work colleagues' reactions to her decision to wear hijab, 'It is not that anybody said anything. But it is like racism. If you feel it, it's there'.

### **THE AGENCY OF HIJAB**

Closely linked to the issue of the resonance of hijab is the question of its effects – both on the wearer and on observers. In a provocative editorial entitled, 'Please don't rub your religion in my face' (Guardian, 2003), a British journalist provides an ironic account of the rant that goes through his head when confronted by turbans, kipahs and hijabs as he sits on a London bus on a Saturday morning. His argument is that he does not know how he is supposed to react to such visual displays of religiosity. Concerning the Jewish kipah he writes, 'This apparently helps to remind the wearer of the existence of a higher authority, as well as making him an ambassador for the faith. But you can't help feeling that the kipah-man is really saying, "I have a relationship with God which by the way, YOU don't"'. Concerning the hijab, he asks, 'Is it saying "Don't look at me" or "Look at me"?' The interest of this lies not so much in the answer as in the question, for it highlights the extent to which one person's dress enters another person's visual field, not only altering the urban landscape in the process but also provoking new thoughts and feelings (perhaps of solidarity, perhaps of hostility, curiosity, bemusement, irritation). How this process works is skilfully captured by Ian McEwan in his novel, *Saturday* (2005), when his surgeon hero, Henry Perowne, finds himself both distracted and repulsed by the sight of three veiled women – 'three black columns' – entering a Harley Street clinic. 'He can't help his distaste. It's visceral', writes McEwan. The sight of the women's dress in the streets of central London plunges the hero into a darker mood, feeding his existing preoccupations with the threat of 'Islamic terrorism'.

These feelings or emotions associated with dress often have a significant impact on people's relationship to public space. I have heard both hijab and niqab wearers expressing their reluctance to visit areas where they will be in a sartorial minority – not so much because they fear attack (though, at times, some do) but because they feel over-conspicuous, ill at ease, 'out of place'. Equally, I have come across non-Muslim women who feel uneasy going to areas of London where large numbers of women are covered. For example, an Italian woman who has been resident in London for seven years, claimed to feel so depressed at the sight of Arab women in Regent's Park that she would rather stay in her flat on a sunny day than subject herself to this vision. Having been brought up on the Italian coast where sunshine is associated with peeling off the layers and the feelings of freedom that come with this, she found the presence of women in long black robes and, in some cases, face

masks, oppressive. She is one of a number of non-Muslim women who have expressed unease at their own bare legs and arms when in the presence of covered Muslim women. As Nilufar Gole points out in relation to the Turkish context, it is the public visibility of Islam and the corporeal, spatial and ocular aspects of this that create a feeling of malaise to secular liberal modernists (Gole, 2002). Here again, the malaise is a two-way process. On the other side of the coin, we find earnest young Muslim men wondering if they should avoid visiting public parks in the summer owing to the abundance of naked female flesh to which they are bound to be exposed. On the Quattabased website, Islam online, it was helpfully suggested that parks in western countries should be visited by Muslim men either early in the morning or in the evening when hopefully women would be wearing more clothes owing to reduced temperatures. Men were also advised to lower their gazes and say a prayer if confronted unexpectedly with female nakedness in the British streets.

Returning to Loraine, it is clear that the logic of hijab affects her movements in a whole variety of more-or-less subtle ways, preventing her not only from going to the hairdressers, but from doing a whole range of other things she previously enjoyed, such as mixing freely with members of the opposite sex, going to bars, going swimming and hanging out on the beach in Florida where her family spend their annual holidays. So wholeheartedly has she taken up the logic of hijab that, like so many other hijab wearers, she now claims that she would feel utterly 'naked' if she went outside without it. Her behaviour has, in effect, become constrained by hijab, which governs the degree and conditions of her social interactions with others. The pressure of living up to the virtues of hijab – of being worthy of it – is a common theme in women's accounts. Some speak of not yet being ready to adopt it; many perceive it as a stage in their spiritual development and talk of the sense of responsibility it brings with it, of how it makes them representatives of Islam and acts as a constant material reminder of how they should and should not behave. One talkative middle-aged woman who used to work in her father's newsagent's shop, commented. 'I realized [when I adopted hijab] that others saw it as a barrier, but more to the point it stopped ME from being so extrovert which was good for me because that was what I wanted'. In such comments one can sense the powerful constraining moral force of hijab. The woman in question has since taken this one step further, by adopting niqab. The real and imagined effects of hijab are examples of what Alfred Gell called the secondary agency of objects, – the capacity of artefacts which are the products of human agency to take on agency in the lives of humans (Gell, 1998). The hijab suggests, but also to some extent, governs, not only who can interact with whom but also the nature of those interactions. This contextual interactive aspect of Islamic dress makes it different from other religious dress codes, leading Pro-hijab activists to argue that the hijab is not a religious dress at all but rather a requirement of the Islamic way of life based on the separation of the sexes and submission to God. If it were a religious symbol, they argue, it would be worn by Muslim women all the time on a permanent basis, but instead it is worn only in public situations or situations where nonfamily males are present. In emphasizing this aspect, hijab activists build on the original Arabic meaning of the word, hijab – which is concerned with screening and separation rather than a particular form of dress. Presumably it

is precisely this 'separation' effect of hijab that the French and various other European governments wish to diminish.

Of course whilst the hijab prevents certain interactions, it also enables and encourages others. As mentioned earlier, it can encourage feelings of sympathy, trust and shared community. If it has prevented Loraine from doing certain things and entering certain spaces, it has also given her access to environments from which she was previously excluded: prayer rooms at University, the Islamic society, a shared house with other Muslim women of various ethnic backgrounds and a female Muslim social world characterized by levels of intimacy and transnationality she has never previously experienced.

At the same time the hijab allows space for individual interpretation and there are many different styles and nuances to hijab wearing (Figure 14). Differences in fabric, styles of tying, patterns of cloth and accessories such as hijab-pins leave ample room for individual experimentation and engagement with fashion.<sup>19</sup> Some women have an extensive collection of hijabs to match a wide range of outfits and invest a considerable degree of time and effort in maintaining them. Whilst some favour one particular style on a permanent basis, others modify their style according to the context.

Jasmine, for example, who works as a teacher in higher education, now wears a simple gypsy-style hijab in response to some of her male students from Muslim countries who, she felt, undermined her when she wore a more 'traditional' style. However, with this variety comes the critical gaze of more pious Muslims who assert that many women wear the hijab as a fashion accessory and that in doing so they misunderstand its true meaning. Almost everyone I have interviewed at some point stated that the hijab is really 'an attitude of mind' or that it is 'in the heart' so that if a person does not have the right attitude, then the headscarf becomes ineffective. Stories abound about the hijabi girl who tries to attract attention in the tight see-through blouse, or the one plastered in make up or caught sitting on a boy's lap, thereby letting down hijab and, by association, other Muslims (Figure 15).

Young women do in fact police each other's dress to a considerable degree, exploring the boundaries of what is or is not acceptable in hijab. Those who expose their necks or leave hair visible often become targets of censure. The amount of online chat dedicated to these subjects suggests that young Muslim women in Britain are just as preoccupied with their appearances as their non-Muslim counterparts. However, the claim that they are escaping the pressures of competitive consumerism and obsessive bodily preoccupation is powerful and attractive and holds some degree of truth. Certainly, in venerating modesty and piety over visual displays of overt sexuality, they are presenting an alternative role model for young women which puts them on a moral high ground in relation to their non-Muslim peers. The Canadian singer, Dawud Wharmsby, captures this in these lines from his lyrical song, *The Veil*:

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<sup>19</sup> For discussion of local and global developments in Islamic fashion, see Moors and Tarlo (2007).

‘See the billboards and the magazines that line the check-out isles [sic], With their phony painted faces and their air-brushed smiles? Well their sheer clothes and low cut gowns, they are really not for me. You call it freedom, I call it anarchy’. This hijab, this mark of piety, is an act of faith, a symbol, for all the world to see. A simple cloth, to protect her dignity. (Wharnsby, 2004)

To the claim put forward by the French government that the hijab puts unacceptable pressure on young girls to conform to oppressive religious norms, hijab-wearing women are quick to point out the pressures placed on young girls in the West to conform to the unrealistic body images pedalled in the media, and the low self-esteem and proliferation of eating disorders they see as a result. To them, the veil is lived as a form of resistance to these pressures even if, in the process, they willingly submit to another set of discourses and disciplinary regimes concerning the female body.<sup>20</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

In highlighting the role of trans-cultural encounters in encouraging the spread of hijab in London, my aim is not to reject existing research on the politics of post-colonial resistance and the spread of global religious movements, but rather to suggest that the individual actions of women who choose to take up the hijab cannot be fully explained without also giving weight to details of personal biographic experience and the particularities of living in a trans-cultural city. Falling in love with someone from another faith, surviving illness, meeting a convert on an Arabic course, working with immigrants from different countries are all part of the texture of life in London. What all of these examples also demonstrate is the extent to which however personal is a woman’s decision to adopt hijab, it is always caught up in a broad field of social relationships and discourses which both shape and are shaped by it. Ultimately, the possibility of personal transformation offered by hijab cannot be divorced from the transformation of possibilities produced by hijab as it imposes a certain way of looking and way of being in the city.

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<sup>20</sup> As Abu-Lughod put it in relation to the overlapping fields of power in which Bedouin women’s lives are located, ‘If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels’ (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 53).

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## Figures



Figure 1: Pro-hijab Conference, London City Hall 2004.



Figure 2: Gay rights protesters objecting to the presence of Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi at the Pro-hijab Conference, City Hall, London 2004.



Figure 3: Oxford Street, 2005.



Figure 4: Positive resonances of modesty and freedom promoted by hijab activists, London 2004. The protester wears a mid-blue hijab which matches her placard and resonates with painterly images of the Virgin Mary.



Figure 5: Online commerce, The Hijab Shop, 2005.



Figure 6: Razanne doll, as advertised on the internet, 2005.



Figure 7: Comedienne, Shazia Mirza, experimenting with hijab, 2003. *Photograph: Steve Ullathorne*



Figure 8: Student attending the Pro-hijab Conference, London 2004.



Figure 9 and Figure 10: Censored images from the series. 'The Witness of the Future'. AES ART Group, 1996. Left: New Liberty, right: London. AES Art Group



Figure 11: Police poster, London underground station, 2005.

*Photograph: Jenny Newell*



Figure 12: Woman in niqab with her grandchild, north London 2006.



Figure 13: Pro-hijab protesters outside the French Embassy express hostility both to the proposed ban on the wearing of religious symbols in French state schools and to the arrest of French journalists in Iraq in connection with the ban. London 2004.



Figure 14: Fashions in hijab tying, London 2004.



Figure 15: Anonymous cartoon in circulation on Islamic websites, 2005.