

# Why Here, Why Now? Young Muslim Women Wearing *Hijāb*

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## Introduction

At the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America<sup>1</sup> held at the McCormick Center in Chicago in early September 1999 and attended by an estimated 35,000 Muslims,<sup>2</sup> a group of young men were selling T-shirts with humorous, Islamic themes.<sup>3</sup> One of the shirts read, “It’s good in the hood,” over a silhouette of a woman wearing *hijāb* (headscarf). The shirt quickly sold out, and literally hundreds of young women were roaming around the McCormick Center wearing the t-shirts over their long-sleeved shirts and baggy pants, with *hijābs* on their heads.

Islam has become a publicly recognized religion in the American social landscape. Muslims have become visible actors not only in sports, but also at school and at work, in big cities and smaller towns. The most visible Muslims are those women who have taken up the *hijāb* and the *jilbab* (a full body cloak worn in addition to *hijāb*). In the last few years, the numbers of young, second-generation immigrant Muslim women in schools and colleges who have started wearing the *hijāb* and *jilbab* has greatly increased.

Why is this happening, and why now? Why did their elder siblings or parents not take up *hijāb* earlier? The argument here is two-fold: the women under consideration are agents of change, of self and others, but they act under certain constraints. The changing attitudes of these particular women to religion are important and explain their decisions at the individual level as to why they wear *hijāb*. But this does not help us understand why wearing *hijāb* has suddenly become tolerable and in some ways “fashionable.”

I argue that *hijāb*-wearing is being taken up now by young, second-generation immigrant women also because of shifts in the American social landscape in the late 1980s and 90s, shifts that point to newly salient aspects

of Muslim identity in the United States. Ethnic identities, and here I consider religion to be a type of ethnic identity, are socially constructed, and the *boundaries* and significance of ethnic identities vary over time and space. Barth writes that ethnic identities are “produced under particular interactional, historical, economic and political circumstances; they are highly situational.” Further, “ethnic group membership must depend on ascription [by others] and self-ascription: only in so far as individuals embrace it, are constrained by it, act on it, and experience it will ethnicity make organizational difference.”<sup>4</sup>

Ethnic identities are produced through interactions of self-ascription and ascription by others and ethnicity is produced under particular historical circumstances, and these ideas have important implications. First, the ethnic group is not a given; it is contested, fought over, constructed and reconstructed. Second, at certain times, the boundaries of the group will become charged; at other times they will not be salient. Third, how others perceive and define one has an effect upon one’s construction of identity, sometimes less than, sometimes greater than the way the individual defines him- or herself. Ascription by others can also affect *which* identities become salient. For example, one’s Jewish identity can be privileged over one’s French identity, or one’s Arab identity over one’s Christian identity. Using this idea of the constructed and varying nature of ethnicity, I argue that for these young women, being Muslim is becoming more salient, often privileged over their national-origin identities, and these young women are acting out their Muslim identities, displaying their “Muslimness” by wearing *ḥijāb* and *jilbab*.

## Methods and Data

This study uses three sets of data. The first is based on open-ended e-mail interviews in 1999 with a nonrandom, snowball sample of twenty-two second-generation immigrant women nationally who have taken up *ḥijāb* or *jilbab*.<sup>5</sup> The young women ranged in age from thirteen to twenty-nine, and were mostly South Asian, but included those of other ethnic backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> I also draw upon data from ethnographic field research conducted in New York City among Indian Muslims at weddings, Eid celebrations and at mosques.<sup>7</sup> A third source of data is drawn from observations and interviews conducted at the ISNA convention in Chicago in 1999.

I exclude black Muslim women from the analysis, as the acceptance and meaning of Islam for them is different than for immigrant Muslims, and there are also differences of class position and feelings of alienation from immigrant Muslims.<sup>8</sup> I also exclude older first-generation immigrant women, since exploratory interviews show quite different dynamics in terms of religiosity, notions of religious duty, and status anxieties with respect to wearing *ḥijāb*.

## **Hijāb in the United States**

In a survey of Muslims in the mid-1980s, Haddad and Lummis found that “few if any Muslims born in the U.S. wear *hijāb* or *jilbab*, and most migrants who came wearing such ‘conservative’ clothing gradually change to more typical American style clothing.”<sup>9</sup> Since their study, there has been a change with respect to *hijāb*-wearing in the U.S., and not in the predicted direction. Since the early 1990s, *hijāb* and *jilbab* have become more and more commonplace. While the vast majority of Muslim women do not cover, the fact that some do, and that its occurrence is increasing, leads to the complementary questions “why?” and “why now?”

### ***What the Hijāb-wearing Woman Understands the Qurʾān to Say***

The young Muslim women under consideration have chosen to wear the veil after being persuaded by their own studies that *hijāb* is mandatory and that wearing it fulfills a religious commitment. As one woman said, “I realized that it was *fard* (religious duty) and I wanted to obey Allah’s commands.”

However, that this is Allah’s will is not something that is universally accepted by Muslims or scholars of Islam. For instance, Smith writes, “The Qurʾān, despite what some Muslim women seem to think, does not actually specify how much of the body has to be covered.”<sup>10</sup> Imad ad Dean Ahmad, president of the Minaret of Freedom Institute in Bethesda, Maryland says, “It’s an inference on the part of Islamic jurists to say that because modesty in the Prophet’s day meant covering the hair that it is therefore immodest for women today to leave hair uncovered.”<sup>11</sup> Many Muslims echo this scholarly insistence, saying that because veiling is mentioned in neither the Qurʾān nor ḥadīth, it is a custom and not scripturally sanctioned.

Most people who favor the *hijāb* and *jilbab*, however, cite specific passages in the Qurʾān for so doing. Surah An-Nur (24:31) advises women that “they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband’s fathers, their sons, their husband’s sons, their brothers or their brother’s sons or their sister’s sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess or male servants free of physical needs or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex.”

A more direct command is found in Surah Al-Ahzab (33:59): “O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons [when abroad]: that is most convenient that they should be known [as such] and not molested: and Allah is Oft-forgiving, most merciful.” A translation of the Qurʾān into English widely used by South Asians supports covering in its interpretive notes. Abdullah Yusuf

Ali<sup>12</sup> in his translation, note 3764, writes, “This is for all Muslim women, those of the Prophet’s household, as well as the others. They were asked to cover themselves with outer garments when walking out of doors.” In note 3765, he defines *jalabeeb*, the plural of *jilbab*, the term used in this passage: “An outer garment; a long gown covering the whole body, or a cloak covering the neck and bosom.”

My point here is not whether or not this is a direct and detailed order of what to wear or how to wear it. It has been debated and will continue to be debated.<sup>13</sup> The proponents of covering see those who say it is not mandated as ignorant; those who say it is not required see those who advocate covering as fundamentalists. The important point is that young women who wear *hijāb* and *jilbab* interpret the above passages as requiring covering, and act accordingly.

### **What She Says**

There are many reasons why these women take up the veil. First, as just stated, they believe that it is a religious requirement. Many also find it comforting in mixed sex settings. One woman who started wearing *hijāb* in college said, “I lived in a co-ed dorm and it was really the first time I had to deal with unwanted attention from guys. I guess that was the first time I really understood why it was necessary to wear a scarf, because as soon as I did, all the idiots left me alone.”

Adopting *hijāb* is not an easy decision to make, and these young women often struggle for some time before doing so. But they are comforted and aided by the thought of higher rewards and judgment from above. One woman put it this way:

[I started wearing *hijāb*] because I began to realize that what people think is nowhere compared to Allah (*subhanawatallah*), and so, how could I blatantly disobey an order because of ‘standing out’? Also, I was very active in playing outside, and so I realized that while it would be harder with *hijāb*, it’s probably better than not having it at all. Basically, I realized how what was preventing me from doing so was directly linked only to this world, and the insignificance of this world was just so obvious.

These women come to a decision to wear *hijāb* relatively early, unlike their mothers and aunts who, if they wear it all, have adopted it in middle age.<sup>14</sup> Many young women, especially if they are in Islamic schools, start before puberty. Among those I interviewed, four of the twenty-two started before the age of twelve (two of the four went to Islamic schools), and ten started at age thirteen or fourteen, just as they were beginning high school.

Another seven of the young women started wearing *ḥijāb* when they were seventeen or eighteen, as they started college. Only one woman whom I interviewed, Zeba, a twenty-six year old housewife with a master's degree in Chicago, started later, at the age of twenty.

It may seem that because these young women adopted *ḥijāb* so young, they were pressured, subtly or not so subtly, to take it up. But this was not the case. Some took up the *ḥijāb* in opposition to their parents. A twenty-two year old Pakistani law student said that her “parents were very unsupportive and had an extremely hard time coping.” Zeba said that while her immediate family was supportive, in her extended family, “Some took it as a joke, some thought I would never get married looking like that.” All these women said that they took up *ḥijāb* on their own, without pressure from their parents to wear it, a statement that by itself does not preclude the possibility of subtle pressures and manipulations. But the fact that four of these young women took up *ḥijāb* and *jilbab* despite family members' objections points to this not being a function of oppression by parents or others. Most said that their parents were supportive of their decision, while only four said their parents were indifferent.

Wearing *ḥijāb* is undoubtedly difficult when there is pressure from friends, family, schoolmates, and coworkers against wearing it. Sometimes, women give up wearing *ḥijāb*. None of the women in the survey gave up *ḥijāb*, but a young woman I knew gave up *ḥijāb* because she felt uncomfortable with all the pressure from high school friends in her small Southern town.<sup>15</sup> For many, though, wearing the *ḥijāb* in school is not difficult. The young women I interviewed in the survey and during field research felt very comfortable wearing *ḥijāb*. While some abandon it, most seem to be quite sure that they will continue wearing it. One nineteen-year-old Palestinian pharmacy student said she has doubts sometimes, but in the summer she is particularly thankful that she wears it. She says that, “those are usually moments when I see how the women who aren't as covered are treated and stared upon by men.” Another young woman, a twenty-three year old undergraduate student with Iranian and Pakistani parents, said she has little doubt, except for the occasional desire to be a “desi [South Asian] Barbie doll.” She goes on to say: “How do you resolve these doubts? Remembrance of Allah and *akḥira* (the Hereafter).”

Will these young women give up *ḥijāb* as they leave the more socially secure university settings, and venture into the workforce? Women wearing *ḥijāb* face discrimination in the workplace, yet it is becoming more and more common to find women in the workplace wearing *ḥijāb*.<sup>16</sup> That question can only be answered by tracking these young women as they go into the work force in greater numbers.

### ***What Her Relatives Say***

The reactions of others to the young women wearing *ḥijāb* and *jilbab* range from enthusiasm to antagonism. For many young women, taking up the *ḥijāb* was an easy transition, as family members and even friends supported them. For others, though, it was a difficult decision. Friends, schoolmates and strangers often stare, tease or react even worse. But they can be ignored. Family members, on the other hand, cannot be ignored easily. Some parents object vehemently to *ḥijāb*. The mother of a thirty-year old Indian-American consultant said she would be quite angry if her daughter wore the *ḥijāb* (their family in India is well-off). The consultant further said that her cousins in India would think she was a “freak.” The cousins thought she was silly for even going to the annual ISNA convention.

Other parents accept *ḥijāb* but do not like the *jilbab*, viewing the latter as excessive and attracting unwanted attention. They feel that the *ḥijāb* covers the head, and the young woman is already wearing loose clothing, making the *jilbab* redundant. The interactions between the mother of a young American-born Indian college student who adopted *jilbab*, and the mother’s sister, who objected, show this. Both the aunt and the mother had recently taken up *ḥijāb* (but not *jilbab*), the aunt after performing *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), the mother before performing *hajj*. The aunt strongly complained when her niece, having worn the *ḥijāb* for a short time, had taken up the *jilbab*. She said that it was too much, and she should not “cover herself up like that.” Interestingly, the aunt also complained that her own teenage daughter had recently given up *ḥijāb*, and asked her sister to talk to the daughter and convince her to wear it again. The mother of the college student replied, “We both only recently, and in our advanced age, have started wearing *ḥijāb*. Who are we to tell these girls that they must do this?”

Young adult women in their late twenties and early thirties react strongly to younger women wearing *ḥijāb*. I have observed very few women this age who wear *ḥijāb* or *jilbab*; most are opposed to the wearing of either. They are college-educated and in the workforce. Many are now married. These women came either at a young age or were born here. In New York, where I did my field research, a few of these twenty- and thirty-something women joke of the burgeoning “*jilbab* mafia.” They refer to young women who wear the *jilbab* and travel in groups on college campuses, at Islamic events like Eid prayers, and larger gatherings, like ISNA. At functions like South Asian weddings they command tables in the back of the women’s section, where they generally sit separate from the men and sometimes even from other women who are not wearing *ḥijāb* or *jilbab*.

Young women who wear *ḥijāb* and *jilbab* harvest not only criticisms, but also sometimes overwhelming support. They often have praise and hugs

heaped upon them by their elders. They are the subjects of positive conversations among older women in the mosque and at functions. Girls who do not wear *ḥijāb* are still liked by their “aunties,” but they are not praised to the degree that the women who wear *ḥijāb*, and especially *jilbab*, are. Schmidt observes a similar status transformation among students in Muslim Students Associations (MSA) on Chicago campuses. As girls begin to wear *ḥijāb*, they get public praise. Besides praise, they also receive gifts — a bag with tapes of the Qurʾān, a scarf, and chocolate. The community publicly valorizes them, causing an elevation in status within the community. Schmidt writes, “It would be fair to say that these actions took place at the cost of those in the audience who did not wear *ḥijāb*.”<sup>17</sup>

Many of the older second-generation immigrant women think that wearing *ḥijāb* is just a fad, a fashion, that younger women adopt it only because their friends wear it. This is interesting since the young women who wear *ḥijāb* and *jilbab* say that they learn good Islamic practice and habits from their friends. In any case, the peer group is important, and there has been an increase in the number of young women wearing *ḥijāb* and *jilbab*. A small industry has arisen catering to the clothing needs of these young Muslim women. In Jackson Heights, New York, tailors have steady orders to sew *jilbabs* in fine fabrics and pleasant colors. At the 96th St. mosque in Manhattan, the bazaar outside does brisk business in *ḥijābs* before and after prayers. Smith notes “there is now a burgeoning number of stores and retail houses specializing in Islamic dress, including robes (*jilbabs*), scarves and other kinds of fancier headgear and even matching shoes, [which] is a joy for many women and a worry for others.”<sup>18</sup>

## **Understanding Why *Hijāb* Now**

There have been many changes in approximately the last fifteen years in the broader American context, and changes within the community of American Muslims, which help us to understand why the move toward *ḥijāb* is only happening now. First, the rise of multiculturalism has given space to, and legitimated, the *public* expression of ethnicity.<sup>19</sup> Second, as the Muslim population has grown and become more politically involved, Muslim attitudes have changed. Third, the first Persian Gulf War, the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, and the 1993 bombing and 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center served as catalysts for a reevaluation among Muslims of what it means to be Muslim. Finally, there has been a shift in how Islam is being taught to, and read by, young Muslims.

### ***The Upside of Multiculturalism***<sup>20</sup>

In the last few decades, the public display of ethnic identity in the U.S., especially among nonwhites and immigrants and their children, has become

more noticeable and more acceptable. This is partly related to the rising numbers of immigrants from non-European countries (before changes in immigration law, such countries had sent few immigrants). With the influx of nonwhite immigrants, and the changes in racial and ethnic politics of the late 1960s and 70s, ideas of the importance and desirability of the melting pot came into question.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1990s, the idea of multiculturalism as an ideology and practice emerged. While assimilation as an ideology is still quite strong, multiculturalism as an ideology and, more importantly, as a practice, has gained ground in the public sphere.<sup>22</sup> On college campuses, multiculturalism tends to be dominant, having won the battle for curricula of primary and secondary schooling. The victory of the multiculturalism movement is so complete that the eminent sociologist Nathan Glazer asserts in the title of his book that *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*.<sup>23</sup> This shift in educational curricula correlates with a change in how ethnicity as lived experience is viewed. Immigrants no longer *must* culturally assimilate; they may display their identities as they choose and in public, not just in private.<sup>24</sup>

Whether one likes the idea of multiculturalism or not, this effective shift towards it allows more space for the public display and practice of ethnicity. Where once it was not “cool” to be anything other than white, black or Latino, a wide array of “otherness” is now valued. In the recent past, nonwhite ethnic culture was not something that second-generation immigrants admitted to liking or performing. But a transformation has occurred. Ethnicity is not only acceptable, it is often chic.

While certain displays of identity are still contested, as with debates over bilingualism in California, ethnic identity and cultural markers of ethnicity have become more tolerated, and sometimes appropriated in an open manner — going from uncool to cool. For example, South Asian customs such as wearing henna and nose rings have been adopted by a larger audience, whereas ten years ago, young South Asian women were ridiculed for wearing such items. Hindi film music remixes can be heard in Manhattan nightclubs, while just ten years ago, youngsters who enjoyed Hindi films and Hindi film music would not admit to others that they liked these things. India’s Bollywood film industry has even made it to Broadway, with Andrew Lloyd Webber’s production of “Bombay Dreams” in 2004.

This shift towards acceptance of otherness has affected how Muslims express themselves. Multiculturalism with its increased acceptance of public performance of ethnicity and “otherness” has encouraged outward religious identification and internal acceptance and the practice of a “purer” Islam. In the 1980s, few women, old or young, wore *ḥijāb*, let alone *jilbab*. One second-generation immigrant Muslim woman interviewed in the mid-1980s said about

clothing, “How women dress outside the mosque is their own private business. I don’t want to go to college with my head covered, and wearing a short skirt does not make me a bad Muslim. I am a Muslim, and I am proud to say it, but I want to say it in ways other than dressing in obnoxious clothing. I want to blend in as far as my clothes go. I want to look normal.”<sup>25</sup>

Looking “normal” in the mid-1980s for a young woman meant conforming to dominant dress patterns, e.g., skin-tight designer jeans and sweatshirts with the necks cut off. The only people wearing ethnic dress, such as the South Asian *salwar kameez* (long shirt and loose pants), were recent immigrants, “FOBs” (fresh off the boat), who did not know any better. The more Americanized immigrant children often kept their distance from these people in public, so as to not lower their own status by associating with these low status “dorks.”

Status is a major preoccupation of students in high schools. Who one is friends with, who one eats with, who one dates — these are critical for high school social life.<sup>26</sup> Status is gained by conforming to social norms, and by one’s associations.<sup>27</sup> Associating with low status people, ideas, and things will lower one’s status. Associating with people, ideas, and things of high status will improve one’s status. These recent immigrants were often low status within schools because they did not know the norms of behavior and dress of the American high school scene, and their behavior and their own norms were not acceptable there. Also, they just did not have either the social or economic capital to wear the right clothes, and did not, or could not, associate with the right people. New to the schools and country, they did not possess other types of knowledge that would allow them to move up in high school hierarchies. For second-generation immigrants to associate closely with their first-generation co-ethnics would have been a road to social death. While this distancing of those born or raised in the U.S. from newly immigrated youngsters may still go on, “being ethnic” is no longer something that needs to cause embarrassment as it did fifteen years ago, and is not necessarily a marker that in itself will cause one’s status to be lowered.

Today, we are becoming more open to expressions of otherness generally, in society at large and in schools. For example, Milner (2004) argues that status stratification in high schools may be changing from an integrated hierarchical pyramid, with athletes and cheerleaders on top and geeks and nerds at the bottom, to one that is more pluralistic, and one populated with multiple niche subcultures *not necessarily* organized hierarchically.<sup>28</sup> In this scenario, it seems easier for those wearing *hijāb* and *jilbab* to find a social space for themselves without necessarily being social outcasts for wearing *hijāb*.<sup>29</sup> The status of these young women will vary according to other factors, but the wearing of *hijāb* is not necessarily the important factor.

### ***Changes in Political Attitudes of Muslims***

The Muslim population in the U.S. has grown, and this growth has been accompanied by changes in the attitudes of many immigrant Muslims.<sup>30</sup> They now feel they are a part of American society and must participate by becoming naturalized citizens, voting, getting involved with the local schools, and getting involved in political campaigns. Previously, first-generation Muslim immigrants remained aloof from involvement in American society, often thinking that they would return to their countries of origin at some point.<sup>31</sup> Now that the second generation has come of age and is in high school, college, and the work force, the idea of return for most families has become moot.

At the national level, organizations such as CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations), AMC (American Muslim Council), and MPAC (Muslim Political Affairs Council) help to channel these political energies. Muslims are also becoming more active at the local level, on school boards, in union politics, and running for local level public offices. Agha Saeed puts the beginning date of Muslim politics at 1990 with the formation of the AMC and other professionally staffed national organizations.<sup>32</sup> He also points out that by 1994, Muslims had run for every type of elected office in this country save for the presidency and vice presidency.

### ***Effects of External Events***

The suspicions and resentment towards Muslims that had been ongoing since the Iranian Revolution have been heightened by the first and second Persian Gulf Wars, the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building, the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City and its 2001 destruction by Muslim terrorists. Individual Muslims at school and elsewhere became, and continue to be, targets of abuse. They are easy and safe scapegoats.<sup>33</sup> They are scapegoats that anyone (read: true, patriotic American) can feel at ease denigrating. A ninth-grader in New Jersey told an interviewer how, after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the kids would call her "towel-head." She said they would "threaten to remove my *hijāb* to see if I was bald."<sup>34</sup> During the first Gulf War, one of my own students, a recent arrival from Puerto Rico, came to my high school English as a Second Language class demanding to know if there were any "I-raqis," and if they wanted to step out of the class. Mosques were desecrated and people were attacked.

One result of these events has been self-evaluation on the part of Muslims in America. They ask themselves what it means to be Muslim, and if, indeed, they are Muslims in any meaningful way. A suburban New York City imam whom I interviewed in 1999 put it this way: "In times of crisis, you need to define yourself. In times of dormancy, you can be complacent." The first Gulf War, in his estimation, while having a negative impact initially for Muslims in

the U.S., was overall not a bad thing for Islam in the U.S. He said, “The Gulf War exposed Americans to Islam. People started asking about Islam, and Muslims attempted to define Islam themselves.” While this may overstate the case, it was roughly from this time in the early 1990s that we began to get more and more positive articles in newspapers and magazines about Islam in general, and about Muslim institutions and practices in the U.S. While Muslims constantly negotiate being ethnic and religious minorities in a social environment that can at times be quite hostile to ethnic and religious minorities, the first Gulf War and subsequent events publicly associated with “Muslim fanaticism” have forced a reconsideration of Muslim identity on a collective scale.

### ***Towards an American Islam***

There is a new trend among younger Muslims to define collectively for themselves what it means to be Muslim. “Rediscovery” of religion and the study of religion among the young is at a new high for Islam in America. Many young people, especially college and high school students, are seeking Islamic knowledge on their own, “true” Islamic knowledge, something their older siblings in their late twenties and early thirties never did. For the older ones, religion was something parents and others taught them, and they had no choice but to learn. It was a chore. But for many of the younger ones, religious knowledge is something they independently seek out for themselves. There are many *balaqas* (study groups) formed and run by students, something quite uncommon just a decade before. Young students badger their imams for information and constantly question the knowledge given them.

The same suburban New York imam (see above) stressed this point to me. He said that older teachers were (and still are) not as effective at communicating religious obligations in a way that children will listen to, understand, and accept. Children and teenagers do not take their older teachers very seriously, since their teaching style is rooted in Old World practices like rote memorization. The older teachers are not used to engaging in dialogue with students. A visiting *Majalis* reciter from Hyderabad, India also made this same point.<sup>35</sup> He said that he was taken aback at how youngsters in the U.S. are always questioning everything, are always asking “why?” “In India,” he said, “you just do as you are told.”

It is not transnational religious influences that are affecting the practice of religion for these young people, but rather changes in teachers and teaching methods. A new generation of American-raised scholars has become prominent, and students are paying close attention to them. Preachers such as Hamza Yusuf (a white convert) and Imam Siraj Wahhaj (former Nation of Islam preacher) appeal directly to the young in a manner that is accessible and

tremendously motivating. They are superstars. Their presence at any event commands a full house. The “preach-ins” they organize at venues such as Madison Square Garden in New York City draw crowds in the thousands. Their lectures at ISNA are always filled and their videotaped lectures are in high demand. In addition to the superstars, there are changes at the local level. For example, at Sunday schools, American-born or raised young adults often give instruction to younger children, motivating them with prizes such as Pokemon cards.<sup>36</sup> All these factors enhance the appeal of Islam in the U.S., especially for younger Muslims.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined why some second-generation immigrant Muslim women in the U.S. are donning *ḥijāb*. They understand this to be Allah’s will, they see it as proper Islamic behavior, and many feel it deflects unwanted male attention. Many have come to wear *ḥijāb* as a result of learning from and talking with their friends. Some take up wearing *ḥijāb* with the support of family and friends; others do it in spite of resistance from family, friends, schoolmates, and others.

I have also considered why this is happening now, and not earlier. The suburban imam mentioned above feels that this *could not* have happened before. I argue that the trend toward multiculturalism in this country, with ethnicity becoming a valued and acceptable public form of expression, has created a space where *ḥijāb* and *jilbab*, as expressions of an Islamic identity, can flourish.<sup>37</sup> Further, the attitudes of Muslims themselves towards engaging in civic society are changing. They are reevaluating what it means to be Muslim after the first Persian Gulf War and World Trade Center’s destruction and all that these events symbolize. Also, there has been a redefinition by younger Muslims of Islam and how they learn it. These factors all contribute to the increased wearing of *ḥijāb* and *jilbab* by second-generation immigrant Muslim women.

Examining changing ethnic boundaries as a *process* of negotiation between self and others and as variable over time shows that an Islamic identity has become more significant in recent years in the U.S. This has been both cause and effect of much internal searching and debate over what it means to be Muslim in the U.S. Partly as result, and partly as cause of the challenge to these boundaries, a deeper sense of “being Muslim” transcending other kinds of ethnic ties is becoming more palpable. The wearing of *ḥijāb* and *jilbab* is the most visible manifestation of this move toward being Muslim. It is these factors that are internal to the dynamics of American Muslims’ lived experiences, and the interactions with other Muslims and other Americans that are critical to understanding these changes in religious practice. That is, this Islamic

movement is homegrown, and it occurs, for the most part, without the input of elders here, and without reference to changes in Islamic practice elsewhere.

But this change in religious practice is not the only change of importance for Muslims here. Muslims in the U.S. are quite diverse in terms of practice, religiosity, and class, more so now than in the 1970s and 80s when there were fewer Muslims. This diversity was especially visible at the ISNA convention in 1999, where young women in *hijāb* and *jilbab* loudly and proudly swept through the spaces, going from one panel on religious practice and theory to another. Meanwhile, other young women in tight shirts and tighter pants and boys in homeboy gear hung out near the central fountain, chatting and flirting. Class and ethnic differentiation among Muslims has become especially striking and complex among second-generation immigrants, young people now coming of age. Their interactions with the U.S., with Islam, and with their parents and friends have produced a multitude of ethnic practices and a complex layering of identities. These other varieties of experience are beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that there is no single accepted version of Islam in the U.S., nor can we say that all American Muslims view religion in the same way or are equally committed to it. Wearing the *hijāb* is a highly visible manifestation of one uncommon, somewhat “radical” strategy towards studying and adopting Islam as a life path by certain young Muslim women.

## Endnotes

1. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) sponsors an annual meeting, where Muslims converge for a long weekend of prayer, and discussion of religious, social and political issues. Equally important, the convention also serves as a big social gathering and venue for reunion of family and friends.

2. While ISNA estimated 35,000, a Chicago Sun-Times reporter put attendance at 25,000 people (Ernest Tucker, “Muslims Gathering in Chicago for Islamic Convention,” *Chicago Sun-Times* [September 3, 1999], 31).

3. They are of mixed backgrounds. One of their representatives said, “We have some Hyderabadis [Indians], some Pakistanis, some Saudis and even a Canadian (well, half-Canadian but that’s just as bad) :-)” (e-mail correspondence, June 19, 2000).

4. Fredrik Barth, “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity,” in *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond ‘Ethnic Groups and Boundaries’*, eds. H. Vermeulen and C. Govers (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), 12.

5. I will refer to this group of informants as young Muslim women throughout the paper. I sent my questionnaire to my sister in New York City and my cousin in Chicago and they forwarded it to others. My sister and cousin wear *jilbab*. Of those who responded, nine were living in Chicago, one was in Philadelphia, one was in Houston, and two were in New York City. Nine did not specify where they lived, though it is likely most or all lived in either New York City or Chicago. All were born or raised in the U.S. Only three (all South Asian,

including my sister) specified that they wore *jilbab*. Some of the questions I asked included: Why did you start? Was it your decision, or did your parents (or other relatives, e.g., brother) make you? Did you get any resistance from family or friends? Did you get support for your decision from family or friends? Will this be a permanent decision? Do you have doubts at times? How do you resolve these doubts?

6. Of the survey informants, sixteen were South Asian (eleven Indians, five Pakistanis), and six were Arab (four Palestinians, one Syrian, one Lebanese). They were mostly young: eight were in high school, ten were in college, two were in graduate programs, one was a housewife with a master's degree, and one was working as research technologist in a university.

7. I conducted field research in New York City for a study of ethnic identity formation among South Asian Muslims in New York City from September 1996 until February 1997, from August 1998 through June 1999, and from September 2002 through December 2002. In the community that I knew best, there were dozens of young and adult women who wore *jilbab*, and more and more women adopt it regularly. In this Muslim community, the people are mostly Albanian or South Asian, with fewer Blacks and Arabs, but those who wear *jilbab* are nearly all South Asian.

8. See Aminah McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Richard Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

9. Yvonne Haddad, and Adair Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 132.

10. Jane Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 108.

11. Caryle Murphy, "Modesty and Modernity: Some Muslim Women Choosing Not to Cover Their Heads," *Washington Post*, Metro Section, (December 9, 1999), B1.

12. Abdullah Yusuf Ali is an Indian Muslim whose 1937 translation of the Qur'an is one of the most widely used English translations.

13. Some see it as Allah's will, while others see it as superfluous since *hijab* is meant to enjoin modesty, which, they assert, Muslim women practice anyway (see McCloud, *op. cit.*, 135–45).

14. This is especially the case for South Asians. The parents of the young women who I interviewed and interacted with were mostly professionals who did not wear the *hijab* before immigration to the United States.

15. Caryle Murphy, *op. cit.*, gives a journalistic account of women giving up wearing *hijab*. Some give it up due to social pressures, others because they have come to believe it is *not* religiously required. Modesty is still important however. One woman whom Murphy interviewed said, "I still wear long sleeves. I don't flash any skin."

16. Erin Trodden, "Anti-Muslim Bias is Rising, Survey Finds," *Los Angeles Times* (July 18, 1998), Metro, Part B, 4.

17. Garbi Schmidt, *American Medina: A Study of the Sunni Muslim Immigrant Communities in Chicago* (Lund, Sweden: University of Lund Press, 1998), 138.

18. Jane Smith, *op. cit.*, 109.

19. David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). This multicultural turn is correlated with increasing numbers of Hispanics, Africans and Asians, both immigrants and native-born in the post-1965 immigration wave.

20. Nathan Glazer (*We Are All Multiculturalists Now* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 10) writes that for most of those who advocate multiculturalism, "It is a position-taking stance on the racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S. It is a position that rejects assimilation and the 'melting pot' image as an imposition of the dominant culture, and instead prefers such metaphors as the 'salad bowl' or the 'glorious mosaic,' in which

each ethnic and racial element in the population maintains its distinctiveness. The maintenance of distinctiveness is seen as a proper task of the school, rather than relegated to the family or the ethnic school or neighborhood, as those who defend assimilation would advocate." It is this sense of multiculturalism that I employ here.

21. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in their famous book, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1963) argue that the melting pot was, even in 1963 when the book was first published, more of an ideological fiction than an empirical reality.

22. Many Non-European cultural markers such as "ethnic food," clothing, music, and language were marginalized until the 1980s, kept to the sidelines on ethnic television, in ethnic newspapers and magazines, and in ethnic stores. These cultural forms were considered at best exotic, at worst "uncool," and they frequently elicited derision and violence.

23. Nathan Glazer, *op. cit.*

24. The shift toward multiculturalism is reflected in changes in theories of immigration, which have gone through a sea change, especially since the publication of Milton Gordon's classic *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Examples of recent theoretical approaches that reflect this trend include Josh DeWind and Philip Kasinitz, "Everything Old Is New Again? Processes and Theories of Immigrant Incorporation," *International Migration Review* 31 (1997): 1096–1112, Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1996), Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants," *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530 (1993): 74–97.

25. Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis, *op. cit.*, 132.

26. Murray Milner, Jr., *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

27. Murray Milner, Jr., *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

28. Milner, *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*, 2004.

29. I do not mean to say that it is not difficult for them in schools, but that they can wear such items and not automatically be ostracized is telling.

30. How much it has grown is an open question, as there is no census data on religion. A 1981 estimate put the population at 1.2 million (Arif Ghayur, "Muslims in the United States: Settlers and Visitors," *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science* 454 [1981]: 150–63), and recent estimates usually put the figure at 6 million or more (Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 52–55). These may be overestimates. The American Religious Identification Survey (*Profile of the U.S. Muslim Population*, Report No. 2 ([http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris\\_part\\_two.htm](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris_part_two.htm), October 2001), a random sample survey, found the Muslim population today to be 1.1 million, though they allow that perhaps it as much as 2.2 million.

31. Karen Leonard, "South Asian Leadership of American Muslims," in *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, ed. Y. Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

32. Agha Saeed, "Muslim Activism: Past, Present, Future," paper presented at the *Muslim Identities in North America Conference*, University of California, Irvine (May 20–21, 2000).

33. On the surface, this seems to contradict my earlier contention that public practice of ethnicity is more acceptable. But accepting ethnic otherness and scapegoating ethnic others are not mutually exclusive processes. On the one hand, the media and politicians

stereotype Muslims as bloodthirsty fundamentalists (Esposito, John, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], Woods, John, "Imagining and Stereotyping Islam," in *Muslims in America: Opportunities and Challenges*, eds. H. Asad, J. Woods, and J. Akhtar [Chicago: International Strategy and Policy Institute, 1996]). On the other hand, newspaper and magazine stories about Muslims in the U.S., especially around Ramadan (the month of fasting in the Islamic calendar), portray them in a nuanced, positive light.

34. Richard Wormser, *American Islam: Growing up Muslim in America* (Walker and Company: New York, 1994), 46.

35. During the month of Muharram, Shia reciters recount emotional stories about the tragedy and martyrdoms at Karbala, where the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain and others were killed. These recitations are done at meetings called *majlis* (pl. *majalis*). Interviewed in Hyderabad, India, December 29, 2000.

36. Denise Al Johar, personal communication, May 21, 2000.

37. Sarah Wayland, ("Religious Expression in Public Schools: *Kirpans* in Canada, *Hijāb* in France," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20 [1997]: 545–561) makes a similar point for the acceptance of *hijāb* in Canada.