“Why Can’t She Also Wear Everything?”: The Hijab as a Symbol of Female Empowerment

Ruti Ejangue

At the prestigious La Sorbonne University in France, a veiled Muslim female was sitting in class when her geography professor asked her, “Are you planning on keeping your thing on throughout all my classes?” He added, “I’m here to help you integrate into professional life, and that [headscarf] is going to cause you problems.” When the Muslim student refused to remove her headscarf, the professor asked her to “go to another class” (Aboulkeir, sec. 2-4). As this example suggests, a simple piece of clothing referred to as the hijab, predominantly worn by Muslim women and girls, has stigmatized all Muslim women and is perceived as a threat to freedom and gender equality, particularly across western nations. This religious veil has come to bear the symbol of oppression, fundamentalism, terrorism, coercion, and the invisibility of Muslim women in their societies (Sadar, sec.1). The 2004 and 2010 French laws banning Muslim women and girls from veiling in public spaces, including schools, has received mixed responses. Nicholas Sarkozy, the former French president, claimed this ban to be “necessary” in order to preserve “traditional French culture of a laïque society,” which is the separation between church and state (Ahmad 4). Furthermore, the French government supports the views of western liberal feminists such as Élisabeth Badinter, who claims the ban is a “liberation” to women who have been pressured to veil (Ahmad 20). However, non-western and Muslim feminists assert that such laws are oppressive, as women are being coerced into some “liberation” that they never sought in the first place (Mumeni 4).

In this paper, I will argue that not only are western perceptions of the veil fundamentally distorted, but that such discriminative bans in France and other nations are anti-feminist, neocolonialist, and a denial of self-expression. It is impossible to ignore the women who still live in patriarchal cultures where the veil might reveal oppression, fundamentalism, and coercion. However, at the same time, we must also recognize the independent Muslim women who are promoting a new version of feminism with the veil. By

veiling themselves, they take control of their bodies, embrace their faith, and resist the pressure of western, capitalistic norms.

Brief Historical Background of the Hijab

Though veiling is commonly associated with Islam, the practice actually predates Islam and was practiced by numerous Mediterranean civilizations. For instance, the Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and Zoroastrians required upper-class women to veil themselves as a sign of "high status and respectability" (Awad, sec. 1). In these ancient civilizations, veiling was meant to differentiate between "respectable" women and those who were "publicly available" such as slaves, prostitutes, and lower caste women. Furthermore, harsh penalties were implemented if lower class women were ever seen veiling. (Ahmed 36). During these times, the veil symbolized a woman's exclusive lifestyle, her privilege, dignity, and at the same time a particular type of femininity that was forbidden to lower-class women.

However, veiling became more prevalent amongst Muslim women as Muslim empires conquered the various ancient civilizations and adopted their cultural practices (Ahmed 36). "Because Islam identified with the monotheistic religions of the conquered empires, the practice was adopted as an appropriate expression of Qur'anic ideals regarding modesty and piety" (Ahmed 36). The ideals of class and dignity that were associated with the veil throughout ancient civilizations became something Muslims gradually used to denote modesty and piety. Eventually veiling was adopted by Muslim women throughout the Middle East, spread among urban populations, and became customary in Islam (Ahmed 36).

Contemporary Debate on the Hijab

Nevertheless, there has been an ongoing debate throughout the Islamic community on whether Muslim women should veil themselves and to what extent. Some believe that the hijab was specifically instructed by the Quran and Allah as a symbol of modesty in order for women to preserve their beauty and adornment (Murphy, sec. 23). On the other hand, some Muslims argue "that it is not a strict religious requirement" but merely a strong suggestion that is open to individual interpretation (Murphy, sec. 42). While Islam does encourage women to dress modestly, that principle applies to both sexes, but does not necessarily entail

the veiling of women (Murphy, sec. 42). Yasmin Alibahi-Brown, a Muslim columnist, summarized that nowhere in the Quran is there a "necessity for Muslim women to wear a headscarf or any other piece of clothing" (Brown, par. 8). Brown believes that, in the Quran, the veil is mostly used "metaphorically to describe barriers between good and bad, believers and non-believers" (Brown, par. 7). Similarly, Fatima Mernissi a Muslim feminist, argues in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite* that the veil "was to be God's answer to a community with boorish manners and to separate the space between two men, not between a man and a woman" (Mernissi 85). Moreover, Mernissi explains the hijab as representative of a spiritual obstacle that prevents one from seeing God (Mernissi 95). However, she never describes the hijab as something physically worn by a woman.

Asra Nomani and Hala Arafa, both Muslim reporters, further elaborate on Mernissi's idea by examining the use of the word hijab throughout the Quran. "The word hijab or a derivative appears only eight time in the Quran as an obstacle, wall of separation (7:46), a curtain (33:53), hidden (38:32), a wall of separation, hiding, prevented or denied access to God (83:15)" (Nomani and Arafa, sec. 3). However, both writers explicitly argue how the hijab never connotes any act of piety" (Nomani and Arafa, sec. 3). As we will come to see, these scholarly interpretations, while related to some women's experiences of veiling, don't fully map on to the realities faced by Muslim women who veil. Rather, there are a number of dispositions to wearing the veil among women in the Arab world.

Interpretations of the Hijab among Muslim Women

Compared to the oversimplified, and inaccurate meanings that tend to be attributed to the veil, the veil is interpreted very differently among Muslim women, and has varied connotations depending on one's personal convictions, and values. Muslim women such as Saida Kada, the head of the Organization for French Muslim Women in France, wears the hijab as a religious statement and as progressive path in her faith with important links to her spirituality" (qtd. in Taber, sec. 3). Similarly, Alidost, a Muslim blogger, chooses to wear the hijab not only to symbolize her faith and obedience to God but also her womanhood (Alidost, l. 60). Alidost believes the "hijab is a threat to consumerism"; thus, wearing it sends the message to women to stop being vain and materialistic but to focus on the health of their souls (Alidost, l. 77). For Alidost, the hijab therefore has religious and social meanings.

Contrarily to Alidost, Muslim women such as Dr. Ismail, who lives in Australia, wears the hijab for cultural and fashion purposes (qtd. in Vyer, sec. 1). In an article posted on ABC News, Dr. Ismail describes how she has been wearing her hijabs for years: "I'm so comfortable wearing them that I can't imagine myself without them. I wear it for cultural reasons, but there are many women who wear it for religious reasons" (qtd. in Vyer, sec.1).

Other non-hijabi Muslim women, such as the German Islamic scholar Lamya Kaddor, believes Muslim women can "be modest and behave honorably with and without a veil or head-scarf" (Kaddor, par. 2). Many devoted Muslim women feel that they either have not reached that level of dedication in their faith to bear the spiritual responsibility of wearing the hijab or, like Kaddor, believe that they don't need to prove anything to society with an outward symbol of faithfulness. As Rasmieyh Abdelnabi, a 27-year-old Muslim woman who grew up attending an Islamic school in Chicago explained, "When you put the scarf on, you have to understand that you are representing a community, and that is huge. That's a huge responsibility. And I don't know if it's for everyone" (qtd. in Khalid, sec. 2). At the same time, Muslim women such as Abdelnabi also choose not to veil because they don't want unnecessary attention drawn unto them. "'I'm the kind of person who likes to walk into a room and be unnoticed,'" Abdelnabi says. "'When you wear the hijab and you walk into a room, everyone notices you; everyone stares at you; everyone makes assumptions about you'"(qtd. in Khalid, sec. 2). To these women, Islam is in the heart, and is a personal relationship with God; it does not necessarily need to be public to be proven.

On the other hand, there are also American Muslim women, such as Nomani and Arafa, who see differently. These women passionately condemn the "false religious interpretations" of the hijab because of its distortion of actual Qur'anic teachings, its support of political Islam, and its sexist and paternalistic message (sec. 4). They continue:

> To us, the "hijab" is a symbol of an interpretation of Islam we reject that believes that women are a sexual distraction to men, who are weak, and thus must not be tempted by the sight of our hair. This ideology promotes a social attitude that absolves men of sexually harassing women and puts the onus on the victim to protect herself by covering up. We are trying to reclaim our religion from the prongs of a strict interpretation. Like in our youth, we are witnessing attempts to make this strict ideology the one and only accepted

> face of Islam. In exploring the "hijab," they are not exploring Islam, but rather the ideology of political Islam as practiced by the mullahs, or clerics, of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic State. (sec. 2)

These real-life examples showcase the fact that Muslim women have various dispositions towards veiling. Whether they are in favor, against, or ambivalent, these dispositions towards the hijab are complex, not universal, and cannot be categorized as one because they vary with the personal beliefs of each woman and girl.

Western Perceptions of the Hijab

To the west, however, Muslim women are still seen as oppressed victims, entrapped by their religion and controlled by men. The veil serves as a clichéd symbol of "Muslim oppression, tyranny and zealotry" which has led to discriminatory laws against Muslim women and girls over the years (Murphy, sec. 5). Multiple instances of Muslim schoolgirls and women being expelled from French public schools or their jobs after refusing to remove their headscarves, caused an uproar throughout France between 2003 and 2010. The French government then enacted laws which banned all public school students from wearing any "conspicuous religions symbols and prohibits the concealing of one's face in public areas" (Aboulkeir, sec. 5-6). These laws that were meant to defuse tensions only exacerbated them by criminalizing the choice of Muslim women to veil. The French government claims that the bans passed in 2004 and 2010 are an "unapologetic effort to keep religious expression private, and to uphold the country's republican secular identity" ("Why the French", par. 3). However, such bans which are principally directed towards Muslim women, have deeper implications firmly rooted in distorted western stereotypes. Nicholas Sarkozy, and former minister of education, Francois Bayrou, sought to unveil Muslim female students in order to remove the "inordinate pressure" to veil, and encourage a society based on "living together" (Ahmad 18). However, these measures rest on the inaccurate assumptions that all girls wear veils against their will, and that veiling precludes integration (Ahmad 18).

Chimamanda Adichie, a prominent Nigerian writer, when arguing against homophobic arguments in Africa said something that aptly relates to the hijab debate. "We may not understand homosexuality; we may find it personally abhorrent but our response

cannot be to criminalize it. A crime is a crime for a reason. A crime has victims. A crime harms society. On what basis is homosexuality a crime?" (qtd. in Ross, par. 2) The same idea applies to the banning of the hijab. Regardless of how uncomfortable one may feel about Muslim women wearing the hijab, it is not in any form a crime. A Muslim woman's religious practice is not creating victims or threatening anyone's safety in a society. Banning a form of religious expression for a group that makes up a significant amount of France's population not only further isolated this community, but contravenes the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity that the French strive to uphold. Such laws do not foster good social relations but encourage intolerance and separatism. Furthermore, those who fail to understand the complexities linked to the hijab as previously highlighted should simply stay out the hijab debate.

Western Feminists Interpretations of the Hijab

French government officials also attach their arguments to western liberal feminists' ideals, denouncing the veil as damaging and oppressive to women (Daly 294). According to French politicians such as Nicholas Sarkozy, Bernard Stasi, and Ivan Riouful, the veil is not only "a symbol of female subservience and debasement, but it stands for the alienation of women and does not promote gender equality" (Daly 294). On this view, bans on the hijab supposedly are a "liberation to women" and showcase France's solidarity with Muslim women worldwide who are oppressed by the hijab (Daly 294). Western liberal feminist, Anne Zelensky, believes the veiling of Muslim women is "detrimental to the feminist movement path to emancipation" (Mumeni 3). According to Zelensky, the veil "symbolizes the place of women in Islam, which is in the shade: it is a symbol of a woman's relegation and her submission to men" (Mumeni 3). Juliette Minces, a French writer and feminist, also believes that the veil stands for "Islam's belief that women are inferior, sexually dangerous and in need of protection" (Mumeni 3). To western feminists, veiling cannot possibly be the personal choice of a woman but can only be from the coercion of her backward community, patriarchal religion, and oppressive male counterparts. As British-Muslim feminist writer, Natasha Walter summarized:

> Many women in the west find the headscarf deeply problematic. One of the reasons we find it so hateful is because the whole trajectory of feminism in the

> west has been tied up with the freedom to uncover ourselves. It is hard to imagine any journey that doesn't take the same trajectory, that doesn't identify moving bareheaded into public sight with independence of mind and body. (Mumeni 3)

What western feminists fail to recognize, in other words, is that other versions of feminism are as legitimate as theirs. As Adichie said in her 2015 commencement address at Wellesley College, "Feminism should be an inclusive party, not an elite cult with esoteric rights of membership; feminism should be a party filled with different feminisms" (Wellesley College, scr. 13:40). Yet, western feminists still tend to perceive "women from other cultures paternalistically and perceive Muslim women as being in constant need for salvation" (Mumeni 4). Because of the west's cultural superiority complex, western feminism often seeks to "liberate" Muslim women with one of the symbolic gestures used by the western feminist movement: the removal of clothes. However, during that process, they fail to consider the spiritual and personal meanings of the veil. By doing this, western feminism steps into a patriarchal role as it criticizes Muslim culture.

Muslim women, however, do not need an intervention, and the countless paths to emancipation are not only those rooted in western feminist ideals. A woman pressured by her society to be thin, reveal her body, and look a certain way is as oppressed as the woman who is coerced to completely cover herself. In both cases, these women have internalized patriarchal norms to the point of self-oppression. Yes, it is impossible to ignore the women who still live in patriarchal Muslim societies in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq who are "flogged, tortured or killed for not complying to cover their heads and bodies when outside their homes" (Brown, par. 14). Nevertheless, we must also acknowledge the millions of other Muslim women who have a choice.

The oppression of Muslim women has less to do with the Islamic faith and more to do with the particular culture and society they live in. As Fatima Mernissi exposes in her work, Muslim male elites in certain areas have distorted and manipulated sacred texts in an effort to isolate women and maintain male privilege (Mernissi 7). In nations such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, the teachings in the Quran and the Hadith have been deliberately misinterpreted and manipulated to seclude and oppress women (Mernissi 7). For instance, some see the niquab and burqua as "oppressive cultural traditions rather than Islamic ritual

or rule" (Murprhy, sec. 41). An important point however, is that the hijab must be understood in these cases as a mechanism of state control rather than an instrument of religious oppression. Some may object that the state and religion are the same in places like Saudi Arabia and Iran, but I would argue, with Mernissi, that these states have ignored Qur'anic guidelines in order to advance the state's control of women's bodies.

While we cannot ignore the Muslim women who may feel oppressed by the veil, it is equally important to acknowledge that not all Muslim women feel this way. Muslim countries such as Turkey and Tunisia do not require women to veil themselves; they leave it up to the woman to decide (Stacey, par. 1). The Quran, the prophet Mohammed, and Allah himself do not force women to veil and do not condone men forcing women to veil themselves ("Women's Dress Code," sec. 2). Instead, these decisions are to be based on one's religious dedication and faith ("Women's Dress Code," sec. 2). Not only is Islam a religion that preaches peace and equality between the sexes; it is a religion in which women are encouraged to be proactive throughout their communities and to seek as many economic, political, and academic opportunities as their male counterparts (Bala 3145-3146). A woman is meant to be cherished, embraced, and preserved according to the Quran, not hidden or oppressed (Bala 3145-3146). The veil, according to the Quran, is not meant to keep a woman in bondage.

Non-Western Feminist Perceptions of the Hijab

In addition to Natasha Walter's argument, non-western and Muslim feminists further assert that western stereotypes of the veil, and the 2004/2010 French bans are forms of reverse oppression, anti-feminism, and a denial of self-expression. The idea of controlling a woman's attire and penalizing her for wearing what she chooses to wear is as oppressive as a Muslim man coercing a Muslim woman into wearing the veil in public. As Ajay Chaudhary, author of *The Simulacra of Morality: Islamic Veiling Religious Politics and the Limits of Liberalism* noted "the concept of forcibly unveiling women as an expression of those women's liberty invokes the idea of forcing people to be free. It is self-defeating" (Chaudhary 358). Similarly, Myriam Hunter-Henin, a senior lecturer of law at the University College of London criticized the coercive nature of the French laws as being anti-feminist: "Penalizing women who veil themselves does not liberate them, fighting the veil with these measures

may go against the feminist tradition of claiming equal rights" (Hunter-Henin 627). The vast majority of Muslim women who veil themselves have done so on their own terms (Sadar, sec. 1). For example, Malala Yousafzai, an 18-year-old Muslim Nobel Peace Prize recipient and activist, was asked by Diane Sawyer in an interview whether she believed in veiling and she responded, "Yes this is my culture, this is my own choice. It's not been implemented on me" (Crime, scr. 35:19). For Malala, and many Muslim women and girls, the veil is an integral part of their identity and spirituality. Malala is a particularly powerful example because she used to live in Afghanistan, a highly patriarchal society where women are flogged for not veiling themselves. Yet, she risked her life by choosing not to veil herself in specific instances because she believed this decision was her choice ("Unbreakable," scr. 10:15). Today, however, she proudly dons a veil, on her own terms of religious dedication. Other arguments for veiling by Muslim feminists include an "unspoken expression that they do not want to be judged by their beauty but to be valued for their character" (Abedi, sec. 4). As Nadiya Takolia, a Muslim columnist at the *Guardian* protested, "this is not about protection from men's lusts or necessarily about religious dedication. It is me telling the world that my femininity is not available for public consumption. I am taking control of it, and I don't want to be part of a system that reduces and demeans women" (Takolia, sec. 11).

From its earliest inception, feminism has been centered around the principle of equality and giving women more opportunities. As Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the earliest feminist philosophers, advocated, "I speak for the improvement and emancipation of the whole sex" (Powell, par. 3). Feminism should be about giving women the freedom to choose their distinct paths towards emancipations. For some that is uncovering; for others that is covering fully. No woman or girl should be stifled or condemned for the choices she makes, just as Wollstonecraft promoted. If western feminists and governments claim to support these ideals, they cannot reasonably stop women from making deliberate choices about their attire simply because these choices trouble liberal western values.

Implications

The practical reality, furthermore, is that unveiling laws do not liberate Muslim women and girls, but oppress, alienate, and imprison them further. The various girls who were expelled for wearing veils in schools are not only humiliated but miss out on their right

to an education. The women who veil themselves will not feel comfortable leaving their houses for fear of being fined or reprimanded in some way (Mumeni 4). These discriminatory laws lead to increasingly isolated veiled Muslim women, which is even more oppressive, and actually anti-feminist" (Mumeni 4).

Alice Walker's theory of womanism applies here. Womanism originated from black women in America, who felt excluded and alienated by American feminism in the 1980s. Today, however, womanism outstretches to all women of minority demographics who feel that western feminism fails to capture the complexity and fullness of their different cultures and struggles ("Womanism," par. 1-3). In this view, western feminists exemplify a form of neocolonialism as western cultural pressures are being deployed to the Arab community in order to enforce new cultural norms upon Muslim women. To a degree, westerners are trying to impose a cultural change throughout the Islamic community as they persistently seek to westernize Muslim women into rejecting the veil. Thus, womanism comes in as a counter-discourse, acknowledges the diversity amongst all women, and provides a platform for a variety of women to voice their individual experiences and their different conceptions of feminism. By veiling themselves, women can literally and symbolically reject the sexualization of female bodies by covering themselves, and can actually gain a sense of self-respect without adhering to western norms of beauty (Sadar, sec. 4). Muslim women promote a new version of feminism where a woman embraces her freedom to choose not only her own form of dress, but also to shape its meanings, whatever they may be without societal or cultural pressures (Sadar, sec. 4). These are facts that are hardly ever considered in the west. As Malala Yousafzai, affirmed "I believe it's a woman's right to decide what she wants to wear and if a woman can go to the beach and wear nothing, then why can't she also wear everything?" ("Don't think," sec. 4).

The veil is a symbol of female empowerment and emancipation as it represents the choices that millions of Muslim women have individually made to either embrace their spirituality or to fully own their femininity. It is paramount that the west respects these choices so they can stop categorizing and victimizing every Muslim woman. The distorted stereotypes negatively reflect on the west, who are presumably "advanced," and promote the misunderstanding of Muslim women, which ultimately undermines the feminist and womanist causes.

Today we live in a diverse world where we will not necessarily understand the intricacies of each other's religious beliefs, but we must to learn to allow for those differences. When attacks such as 9/11, the 13 November Paris terror attacks, the Mali attacks or the recent Turkey attacks occur it is easy to resort to condemning Islam and all of its adherents. However, it is in such cases where tolerance should be paramount while denouncing the acts of the select few. With the surge of Syrian refugees fleeing to the west due to such attacks, it is distorted stereotypes such as the ones associated to the veil that preclude Muslim migrants from fleeing persecution in their home countries. We cannot condemn terrorists' organizations for being discriminative, uncompassionate, and opponents of diversity while resorting to the same prejudices when called to moral action.

Works Cited

Abedi, Zehra. "No One talks about What Malala is Wearing." *Thought Catalog*. The Thought & Expression Co., 30 Dec.2014. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

Aboulkeir, Rajia. "Hijab Debate Returns to France after Student Asked to Remove Her 'thing'." *Al Arabiya News*. Al Arabiya Network, 1 Oct. 2014. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

Abu-Lughod, Lilia. *Do Muslim Women Need saving?* 1st ed. New York (2013): Harvard University Press.

Ahmad, Moshtayeen, "An Analysis of Recent Legislation on Religious Attire in France" (2012): Pg.4-41. *Honors Theses.* Paper 103. http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/uhm/103

Ahmed, Leila. "Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate." *The Middle East Journal* 47.2 (1993): 350. *ProQuest.* Web. 30 Nov. 2015.

Alidost. "Why She Wont wear the Hijab." *Islam Women: Jewels of Islam.* Islam,2014. Web. 15 March 2016.

Awad, Abed. “5 things you didn't know about religious veils.” *CNN News.* Cable News Network, 2015. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

Bala, Haliru, Phd. “Socio-Economic Status and Role of Woman in Islam Towards Gender Equality.” *Gender & Behavior* 8.2 (2010): 3143-51. *Proquest.* Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

Brown, Yasmin. "As a Muslim Woman, I See the Veil as a Rejection of Progressive Values." *The Guardian*. Guardian News, 20 Mar. 2015. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

Chaudhary, Ajay Singh. ""The Simulacra of Morality": Islamic Veiling, Religious Politics and the Limits of Liberalism." *Dialectical Anthropology Dialect Anthropol* 29.3 (2005): 349-72. Print.

Crime Investigation. 20/20 – “Unbreakable: One Girl Changing the World.” Online video clip. Youtube. Youtube, 2016. Web. 16 March 2016.

Daly, Eoin. “Laïcité, Gender Equality and the Politics of Non-Domination.” *European Journal of Political Theory* 11.3 (2012):292-323. *ProQuest.* Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

“Don't Think a Woman Should Wear a Veil in Court: Malala Yousafzai” *NDTV*. NDTV Convergence Limited, 8 Oct.2013. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

Hunter-Henin, Myriam. "Why The French Don't Like the Burqa: Laïcité, National Identity And Religious Freedom." *International and Comparative Law Quarterly ICLQ* 61.3 (2012): 613-39. Print.

Kaddor, Lamya. “Why I as a Muslim Woman Don't Wear a Headscarf.” *Qantara.de.* Qantara.de, 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

Khalid, Asma. “Lifting The Veil: Muslim Women Explain Their Choice.” *NPR-Special Series: Hidden World of Girls.* NPR, 2016. Web. 15 March 2016.

Mernissi, Fatima. *The Veil and The Male Elite*. New York. Perseus Books Publishing,LL.C, 1991. Print

Mumeni, Sarah. “Are Recent French Laws Concerning the Muslim Veil Anti-Feminist?” *Politics, Hisory and International Relations- Loughborough University.* Loughborough University, 2014.(pg 1-8) Web. 25 Oct. 2015

Murphy, Caryle. "Behind the Veil: Why Islam's Most Visible Symbol Is Spreading." *The Christian Science Monitor*. The Christian Science Monitor, 12 Dec. 2009. Web. 18 Oct. 2015.

Nomani, Asra Q., and Hala, Arafa. "As Muslim Women, We Actually Ask You Not to Wear the Hijab in the Name of Interfaith Solidarity." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 21 Dec. 2015. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

Powell, Jim. "Mary Wollstonecraft--Equal Rights for Women-Wollstonecraft Established the Individualist Roots of Equal Rights." *The Freeman.* Fee,1996. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

Ross, Elliot. "Chimamanda Adichie Lines up the Homophobic Arguments and Knocks Them down One by One." *Africa Is a Country*. Africa Is a Country, 19 Feb. 2014. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

Sadar, Pina. "Muslim Feminists Reclaim the Hijab to Fight the Patriarchy." *The Conversation*. The Conversation US,Inc, 5 Sept. 2015. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

Segran, Elizabeth. "The Rise of the Islamic Feminists." *The Nation: Instigating Progress Daily.* The Nation, 4 Dec.2013. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

Stacey, Aisha. "Why Muslim Women Wear the Veil." *The Religion of Islam*. IslamReligion.com, 28 Sept. 2009. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

Taber, Kimberly. "Isolation Awaits French Girls in Headscarves." *Feminist.Com-WomensEnews.* Feminist.com, 2004. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

Takolia, Nadiya. "The Hijab Has Liberated Me From Society's Expectations of Women." *The Guardian*. Guardian News, 28 May.2012. Web. 25 Oct 2015.

Vyer, James. "Explained: Why Muslim Women Wear a Burka, Niqab or Hijab." *ABC News*. ABC, 02 Oct. 2014. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

Wellesly College. "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 2015 Wellesley College Commencement Speaker."Online video clip. Youtube. Youtube,2015. Web. 15 March 2016.

"Womanism – Bibliography." *Science Encyclopedia.* Net Industries, 2015. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

"Women's Dress Code According to the Quran" *Submission.org.* Sumbission.org,2013. Web. 25 Oct 2015.

"Why the French are so Strict about Islamic Head-Coverings." *The Economist.* The Economist Newspaper Limited, 6 Jul. 2014. Web. 25 Oct 2015.

Reflective Essay on Research Methods

For years, Islam and its adherents have been stigmatized and attributed a negative single story throughout main stream western culture. These negative perceptions have only intensified over the years with attacks such as 9/11, the 2015 Paris attacks, 2015 Mali attacks and the recent attacks in Turkey. Such events, tend to lump an entire religion as violent, and its followers as extremists and terrorists. With this is in mind, I was very interested in understanding the role of women in Islam and why the common belief tends to be that Muslim women are oppressed, alienated, and controlled by Muslim men. My initial research questions were: What Does the Quran and the Prophet Mohammed say about the role and status of Muslim women? How are those religious interpretations similar or different to the current treatment of women in Muslim societies? What are some of the monolithic images of Muslim women that the west has institutionalized and why are they so salient today?

After some preliminary research, I choose to focus my project on the hijab, a piece of clothing predominately worn by Muslim women that has caused an uproar, and is controversial in several western countries. I sought to explore why this religious veil has been misjudged, misunderstood, manipulated. In addition, how the hijab has facilitated the discrimination and victimization of the vast majority of Muslim women by western culture and feminism. Library resources such as ProQuest, the WRLC catalog, and the library Journal Finder that include numerous scholarly journals, reports, essays and books that were pertinent to my topic, were extremely helpful when starting my research. In addition to that, in order to gain a more personal understanding of the issue at hand, I asked Muslim friends on campus and back home about their thoughts on the hijab and what they had to say about the stereotypes and controversy surrounding it.

Being submerged with a vast array of sources was at first overwhelming, however, this allowed me to construct my own authentic voice and plan the form my project would take. Once I got an in-depth understanding of the controversy behind the hijab, and the historical and cultural meanings of the hijab, I was able to formulate an original thesis. Through my thesis I analyze the deeper implications of 2004/2010 French bans of the Hijab, how those bans support distorted western political, and feminist perceptions of Muslim

women, and the impact those bans have on Muslim women in general. I also focus on the differences found between western and non-western feminists' perceptions of the hijab and the implications of their respective arguments.

Tools such as ProQuest, the WRLC catalog, and the library Journal Finder were great resources to start with because I was able to gradually become exposed to credible authors and sources that I would not have come across easily if using search engines such as google. In addition, meeting with the school librarian and getting help on how to locate books and novels that were at AU or other local schools was beneficial to me because I had a wealth of information at my disposal. However, throughout my project I was careful not to limit myself only to using academic and scholarly sources. I was sure to incorporate different genres throughout my work to create a balance of sources and to show either similarities and differences between the various voices that I highlight in my work. Thus there is everything from documentaries, YouTube videos, poems, blogs, essays to scholarly articles, journals, reports and books.

This research project was a wonderful learning experience for me because not only was I genuinely interested in my topic, but I learned how to collect information and effectively synthesize that information in a comprehensive manner. Furthermore, I learned how to maintain an original voice throughout my paper without letting my outside sources overshadow my arguments, which I believe is an important skill.