

Identity and Control Among Muslims in Diaspora

Margaret Hoyt

Abstract

This essay explores the multiple negotiations that must be made on the part of the Muslim community upon immigration to the West with a focus on how women demarcate and convey Muslim identity and community solidarity.

Approximately one-third of the world's Muslim populations currently reside in countries in which they constitute a religious minority.¹ Particularly in the west, Muslim diaspora communities are not able to associate their cultural and religious identity to a specific territory that is Muslim, as they are no longer situated in an environment where they practice their religious and cultural rituals as part of the greater majority. Muslims who have immigrated to the west find themselves relegated to a minority status in which their cultural and religious values are at odds with those of the dominant host society to which they have immigrated. Thus, they must find ways in which to neutralize their anxiety surrounding the preservation of their ethnic, cultural, and religious identity that stems from the position they occupy vis a vis the dominant society. There are multiple strategies that may be used to achieve successful integration into a culturally diverse host country, such as assimilation, or the marking of cultural identity which usually involves female gender. The use of this last option, which will be explored here, entails the placing of boundaries around Muslim identity and the putting in place of symbols that designate a strong, unwavering declaration of this identity to both themselves as a united community and the host society that would assimilate them.

Specific and unique characteristics are linked to a specific population in order to both identify and protect its members. Among diaspora Muslim populations, one of the ways by which this is handled quite successfully is through the "collective control of female behavior and the use of female representations."² Muslim populations within the immigrant context make use of the female body to declare and preserve their identity; female sexuality and issues deemed to express female sexuality and gender such as dress and social behavior are then used to express collective Muslim identity in an environment that threatens its values and beliefs. Muslim communities define themselves then, by the characteristics that are associated with the women in their community and how these differ greatly from the characteristics they associate with western women; "men not only turn women into markers of collective identity but also make them the very stakes of cultural competition. In so doing, they claim to be able to speak for Islam".³ Control

Margaret Hoyt is a fourth year Anthropology Honours student at Mount Allison University.

¹ Azzam, 1980, x.

² Rachel Bloul, *Engendering Muslim Identities: Deterritorialization and the Ethnicization Process in France in Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996), 234.

³ Ibid., 235.

of women, and especially control over women's sexuality, becomes the means by which men assert their cultural and religious identity, and perhaps even claim their cultural and religious superiority within the immigrant context.⁴ The Muslim man's identity, as well as the larger collective Muslim identity, hinges on the adequate use and presentation of cultural symbols, which might be translated into control over the Muslim woman's body. The women become concrete and visual markers of Muslim identity in the west through their dress and chaste behavior, as well as symbolic markers of segregation and seclusion through their absence.

Muslim anxieties concerning migration

Immigrants, along with second generation Muslims, find themselves forced to cope with the fears, anxieties, and uncertainties that arise from the need to integrate themselves into a society that is predominantly white, Christian, and classified as *dar al-harb/dar al kufr* (the land of war/the land of the infidel),⁵ while at the same time retaining the core of their religion. Immigration carries with it important religious and cultural consequences that necessitate the formulation of new strategies to reshape and maintain the bonds of the community within the diaspora context.⁶ The affirmation of a collective identity through the use of identifying symbols and criteria is necessary to preserve the cultural and religious values and beliefs that are challenged within the new host society. This is accomplished through symbolic boundaries that are preserved around the community by the enforcement of signs and codes of meaning that fit into an established framework denoting membership in the Muslim community.

Many Muslim communities believe that the state of the family in North America is appalling, and consequently feel the need to guard themselves against "sex, alcohol, drugs, and family breakdown".⁷ Muslim parents have a very real fear that their children will lose both their cultural and religious identity by conforming to Western standards. An effort to protect the Muslim family from this perceived Western decadence is evidenced by strict dictated norms of behavior for women in many Muslim diaspora communities. The Muslim woman is seen as the most essential member of the family in the preservation of traditions, values, and spiritual mores.⁸ Women are also expected to be modest and keep interaction with males to a minimum, making activities outside the home difficult.⁹ Consequently, women are depended upon to keep Islamic values intact in the face of Western corruption by protecting both their families and communities. This is accomplished by offering themselves as examples of what the proper Muslim woman should be, and by dutifully conforming to the expectations of the community.

⁴Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2(2):(1990), 19-20.

⁵Sami A Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, "The Islamic Conception of Migration," *International Migration Review* 30(1)(1996): 37-57.

⁶Chantal Saint-Blancat., "Islam in Diaspora: Between Reterritorialization and Extraterritoriality," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26(1) (2002): 139.

⁷Linda S. Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 175.

⁸Anne Sophie Roald, *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁹Asmia Gull Hasan, *American Muslims: The New Generation* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

¹⁰Shahnaz Khan, *Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity* (University of Florida Press, 2000), 74.

The role of the Muslim mother in preserving collective identity

Women themselves are expected to ensure the boundaries around female sexuality by fulfilling their obligation of being proper Muslim mothers. The way in which the upcoming generation of girls are mothered has become an important issue for Muslim women, as it is through these girls that the continuity of cultural and religious identity will be secured. The successful mother is required to impart values of chastity on her daughters and maintain "social and sexual control of the girl child".¹⁰ These mothers are responsible for the morality, sexuality, chastity, and overall molding of their daughters into good Muslim women that will allow their community to flourish.

This may become problematic since both mother and daughter are attempting to carve out niches for themselves by redefining their Muslim identities in a manner which will fit into their traditional cultural boundaries, but will allow them to be comfortable within the new host society. This difficulty is enhanced by the fact that the daughters may be pulled more in the direction of the new culture while the mother attempts to impart traditional values. Many Western Muslim women face the dilemma of wanting their daughters to enjoy educational opportunities which will provide them with the status, freedom, and autonomy not available to them in their home culture, but being equally concerned about the risks that they will be exposed to while obtaining this education.¹¹

The experience of Muslim women within the immigrant context

Most Muslim women immigrate to the West with their families and are typically obliged to adhere to their wishes concerning religious practice, dress, and lifestyle in order to communicate their membership to the Muslim community. The Muslim community in the Western diaspora is often small, but extremely powerful and influential among Muslim families.¹² These women are under great pressure to modify their behavior and dress to maintain the integrity and identity of the community. The burden of the visibility and honor of the Muslim community is carried by women as the issues of dress and chaste, modest behavior is unique to them. Muslim women carry "a much larger burden of establishing their community identity and moral values than their male counterparts, the great majority of whom wear Western clothes entirely and do not stand out as members of their community."¹³ Beginning around the age of twelve or thirteen, restrictions are placed on Muslim girls that do not apply to their male kin in the same age group.¹⁴ Women are forced to deal with issues such as

¹¹ Shahnaz Khan, *Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity* (University of Florida Press, 2000), 75.

¹² Marcia Hermansen, *Two Way Acculturation: Muslim Women in America Between Individual Choice (Liminality) and Community Affiliation (Communitas) in the The Muslims of America* (New York: OxfordUniversity Press, 1991), 191.

¹³ Homa Hoodfar, *The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women in Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 440.

¹⁴ Homa Hoodfar, *More than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy in The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2003), 18.

freedom of movement, dress, and chastity, all of which men are not. Young Muslim girls are expected to exemplify chaste behavior by avoiding "any references to sexuality in their dress and behavior, especially in mixed company, and are not to associate with any males other than those next of kin."¹⁵ Women and their behavior are used as a representation of the values of the community; the symbolic importance they hold in their countries of origin is reproduced in an even stricter manner in the diaspora context in order to ensure its preservation.¹⁶ Issues surrounding the sexuality of women such as chastity, virginity, sex segregation, and modest dress are key in Muslim societies and are thus a focal point among Muslim communities in the West. The values placed on women's chastity serves as "symbolic markers of the boundaries between their own community and the surrounding society."¹⁷

Muslim women must constantly negotiate appropriate spaces for themselves where both the dominant society and their ethnic community wish to section them off as "Other". The way in which these women negotiate a place for themselves must be a reaction to how they are categorized by their own culture, as well as the Western one in which they find themselves. Within a diaspora context, Muslim women must negotiate a new identity for themselves on multiple levels; it must be negotiated within families and communities, within the new dominant culture, as well as on a personal level.

The Islamic understanding of sexuality

Sexuality is not considered to be purely an issue of personal choice for Muslims. It is responsible for the creation of families and thus acts as an expression of the spiritual nature of marriage.¹⁸ Celibacy is not required in order to dedicate one's life to God; however, it is essential that sexuality should be practiced within the framework of morality that the Qur'an dictates.¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that the honor and self image of most Muslim men "revolves around the orbit of women's sexuality, which is seen as a male possession"²⁰ and a woman's virginity and chaste behavior is her male kin's responsibility.

The Islamic concept of female sexuality is an active one in which the seclusion and surveillance of women is necessary to prevent social disruption that will inevitably be caused by the powerful agent of aggressive female sexuality.²¹ This dangerous power is feared due to its potential to challenge the social order, and subsequently must be subjugated in order to "neutralize its disruptive effects".²² Men are thus assigned the duty of keeping it in check by

¹⁵ M.W. Buitelaar, "Negotiating the Rules of Chaste Behavior: Re-interpretations of the symbolic complex of virginity by young women of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25(3) (2002): 465.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 466.

¹⁸ Leila Badawi, *Islam in Women in Religion* (New York: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 95.

¹⁹ Riffat Hassan, *An Islamic Perspective in Women, Religion, and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 117-118.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

²¹ Fatima Mernissi, *The Muslim Concept of Active Female Sexuality in Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Indiana University Press, 1987), 217.

²² *Ibid.*, 219.

ensuring the preservation of female virtue. The male's adequate control of female virtue reflects directly on their honor, prestige, and identity as Muslim men. Since the desired social order within the diaspora setting is tenuous and uncertain, it is crucial to keep female sexuality, and by association the Muslim male identity, intact.

Sexuality as defined by clothing and veiling in the western context

Clothing is a social institution that communicates gender, social group, and ideology²³, and within the context of immigrant Muslim women, it becomes an instant symbol that ties them to the Muslim community. Both the modest covering of the body and the veil understood in these terms become immediate identifiers of the woman's commitment to her religion, culture, family, as well as to her modesty. The woman who adopts proper Islamic dress "represents respectfulness and she is a sign of a healthy and decent society where sexuality is restricted to taking place inside a marriage, where everybody fulfills their obligations and obtains their rights".²⁴ It is an instant visual boundary that communicates her membership to the Muslim community, her availability, and her dedication to chastity. This is crucial since the female body is seen as a provocation to the male sexual instinct and female sexuality is a defining boundary around Muslim identity in the West.

"Veiling has been intertwined with Islamic ethics"²⁵ and thus serves to separate the woman from the dominant Western society by marking her as off limits. The use of the veil creates boundaries to demarcate women as Muslim, and as such, allows them to pursue educational and employment opportunities that would be closed otherwise due to family opposition. Muslim men use "female attire and behavior as markers of a distinct collective Islamic presence and identity".²⁶ The modest, unique appearance of Muslim women in public is used as an instant marker of membership to the Muslim community; this is striking since the majority of Muslim men dress themselves in Western attire.²⁷ For most Muslim families, dressing modestly, whether with or without a headscarf, is still considered of paramount importance in protecting oneself against the onslaught of American sexual freedom.²⁸

The personal autonomy of Muslim women is often limited due to the important role they play as symbols and protectors of the collective Muslim identity. Many Muslim men display the belief that "we are Muslim, our women behave/look this way".²⁹ The collective use and control of the Muslim woman's body and sexuality has become the site in which Muslim identity is

²³ Homa Hoodfar, *The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women in Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave.Hoodfar, 2001), 42.

²⁴ Anne Sophie Roald, *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 289.

²⁵ Homa Hoodfar, *More than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy in The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2001), 425.

²⁶ Rachel Bloul, *Engendering Muslim Identities: Deterritorialization and the Ethnicization Process in France in Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 239.

²⁷ Ibid., 242.

²⁸ Linda S. Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 181.

²⁹ Rachel Bloul, *Engendering Muslim Identities: Deterritorialization and the Ethnicization Process in France in Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 242.

displayed and preserved in the diaspora context; this is carried out in most instances without the individual choice, opinion, or consultation with the women involved.

In the Western world, the Muslim diaspora community protects itself, identifies itself, and places boundaries around itself through the control of women's sexuality, behavior, mobility, and dress. With the diaspora, females are used as markers of a collective Muslim identity, as well as a kind of cultural interface that mediates the cultural and religious encounters between Islam and the West. The Islamic norms surrounding women are contrasted with those of the host society that is threatening them, and the Islamic norms are deemed morally superior and consequently must be enforced to prevent these corrupting Western influences. Chastity and the subsequent control over women's sexuality is considered to be the responsibility and concern of the community as a whole.³⁰ Cultural affirmations are made by means of strict prescriptions of morality, chastity, purity, behavior, and dress for women, which keeps them rooted within the Muslim community.

Muslim women living in the western diaspora must then attempt to locate themselves between the pressures exerted on them by the dominant Western society and the pressures placed on them by their family and community. They are faced with the burden of delineating boundaries around their Muslim communities in order to preserve their cultural and religious identities against the powerful pressures exerted on them by host societies through the symbolic use of their bodies.

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³⁰ M.W. Buitelaar, "Negotiating the Rules of Chaste Behavior: Re-interpretations of the symbolic complex of virginity by young women of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25(3):481.

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