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Meanings of modesty and the *hijab* amongst Muslim women in Glasgow, Scotland

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Based on interviews with 30 Muslim women in Glasgow, Scotland, the study explores the meanings that the women attach to modesty and the *hijab*. Fifteen of the 30 participants wear the *hijab*. The article begins with an overview of the debate between traditional Muslim scholars and Muslim feminists about whether the *hijab* is an Islamic obligation. It illuminates the significance of space, as veiling practices are deeply enmeshed and embedded in the spatial practices shaped by the local Scottish context. The findings and analysis reveal differences as well as similarities between wearers and non-wearers of the *hijab*. While the former regard the *hijab* as an embodiment of modesty, virtue and respect, the latter consider it an unnecessary piece of clothing. However, despite their contrasting views on veiling, both groups of participants hold remarkably similar views on the importance of female modesty.

**Keywords:** gender; *hijab*; Islam; modesty; Muslim; space

**Introduction**

Over time, the veil has been worn in different ways in a wide range of societies and locations. Whereas it is partly an expression of religious adherence, it is also cushioned in socio-cultural and political factors and has been ‘subject to changing fashion throughout past and present history’ (Hoodfar 1997, 424). This article is based on the views of 30 Muslim women regarding the practice of wearing the *hijab* and the importance of modesty. I argue here that the *hijab* as an embodiment of modesty is related to spatial relations: it offers women the opportunity to assert themselves in religious practice and allows them to integrate within society, but it can also be seen to restrict women’s mobility and freedom in public spaces. In examining the importance of spatial factors, I consider the meanings my participant’s attach to the *hijab* and whether their decision to wear the *hijab* is dependent upon spatial context.

Lane (1984) points out that there are several meanings of the term *hijab*: ‘a thing that prevents . . . ; a thing that veils . . . or protects, because it prevents seeing . . . The *hijab* also means a partition’ (Lane 1984, cited in Ruby 2006, 55). The terms veil and *hijab* are often used interchangeably, but the *hijab* has an Islamic significance that distinguishes it from the veil (Ruby 2006). The veil, which is often perceived in the west as a head-covering, does not reveal the intricacies of the practice. The term *hijab*, however, encompasses women’s behaviour/attitude, and studies have found that a vital feature of the *hijab* is modest behaviour (Ruby 2006, 58). I make reference in this article to the term *hijab* because it denotes the covering of the head as well as being a reference for modesty.

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and it was also the term used most frequently by participants. However, where appropriate, I employ the terms as they appear in the particular studies/research referred to (hijab, headscarf, veil and so forth). I begin this article with a review of how the hijab, its importance and its validity as an emblem of female identity, has been interpreted by traditional Muslim scholars and Muslim feminists. I then discuss how the local Scottish context influences the decision of some of the women to wear the hijab, also drawing attention to the emergence of Al-Meezan (a religious institute for women), which promotes and encourages women to dress modestly.

**Traditionalist and feminist interpretations of the hijab in the Qur’an**

In Islam, the human body is regarded as a cause of shame that must be hidden and covered, a view that relates back to Adam and Eve (Khuri 2001). Modesty and chastity are coveted and sacred aspects of one’s personality and character. However, a woman’s entire body is imbued with sexuality: bodily movements and the style, shape and colour of female clothing have the potency to instigate male sexual arousal (Tseëlon 1995). Advocates of the hijab highlight the distinctive masculine proclivity for untamed sexual desire and interpret the hijab as a divinely ordained solution to the seeming disparities in male and female sexual appetites. References to the Qur’an are integral to examining the hijab as ‘divinely ordained’, yet, although the Qur’an instructs both sexes to dress modestly, there is a particular emphasis on female modesty:

> Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them. And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband’s fathers . . . and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. (Qur’an 24:30–31)

According to Doi (1989), the rule is intended to guard not only women but also the spiritual virtue of men, because:

> Muslims in general, tend to believe that it is best to keep men and women segregated – in their separate, designated spaces. The intrusion of women into men’s spaces is seen as leading to the disruption, if not the destruction, of the fundamental order of things. If some exigency makes it necessary for women to enter into men’s space, they must make themselves ‘faceless,’ or at least as inconspicuous as possible. This is achieved through ‘veiling,’ which is, thus, an extension of the idea of the segregation of the sexes. (Hassan 1999, 252)

The posited difference in nature, temperament and social life of men and women, as Doi (1989) points out, means that more importance is allocated to women’s veiling and modesty than to men’s modesty. Muslim feminists contend that covering was decreed for the wives of the Prophet (Roald 2001): ‘O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad) . . .’ (Qur’an 33:59). According to Ahmed (1992), this verse supports the view that the practice of veiling does not extend to all women but is an obligation only for the Prophet’s wives (cf. Ruby 2006). Ahmed’s historical analysis of Islamic veiling suggests that there is a range of veiling practices, and these have varied in each period. Veiling is a cultural custom that was associated with high social status in Arabia, and preceded Islam as it was practised by women of various religions. Mernissi (1987) also criticises the wholesale adoption of the veil, arguing that there is no evidence in the Qur’an that makes it an Islamic obligation. Relating it to male domination and a repressive gender hierarchy,
she declares that the hijab represents a tradition distinguished by ‘mediocrity and servility’, and it is not a symbol to judge a Muslim woman’s commitment to Allah. She advocates that, in verse 33:53 of the Qur’an, a curtain/screen separates the Prophet and his wives from his companions:

> O ye who believe! Enter not the Prophet’s houses … but when ye are invited, enter; and when ye have taken your meal, disperse, without seeking familiar talk. Such [behaviour] annoys the Prophet: he is ashamed to dismiss you, but Allah is not ashamed [to tell you] the truth. And when ye ask [his ladies] for anything ye want, ask them from before a screen: that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs. (Qur’an 33:53)

In the Qur’an, the term hijab (33:53) deals with men’s behaviour towards the Prophet’s wives, that is, men must stay behind the hijab (screen) while talking to them. Mernissi (1987) employs the term hijab to maintain the issue of separation between men and women. The contemporary use of veiling, she argues, misinterprets the verse to mean that veiling is prescribed for all women, but it also suppresses women psychologically, physically creating oppressive patriarchal hierarchies that maintain male-dominated social structures. Yet, Roald (2001), a Norwegian scholar and a convert to Islam who wears the hijab, states that the term synonymous with ‘veil’ is the Qur’anic word Khimar, which refers to a covering material worn by women. She proposes that Mernissi chooses to disregard the verse in the Qur’an about Khimar in order to concentrate on the issue of segregation, i.e. the hijab. Roald notes that although this reference and the subsequent discussion of the verse are not incorrect, it should be borne in mind that the verse addresses the Prophet’s wives only in part. The verse also includes ‘believing women’. By concentrating on the issue of segregation, Mernissi (1987), Roald argues, neglects this aspect of the verse.

In response to orthodox interpretations, Muslim feminists employ new methodologies and hermeneutics for interpreting the Qur’an (Barlas 2002). The orthodox perspective, it is argued, relies on specific verses and particular terms that are used to defend female covering; however, these terms are both ambivalent and open to varying interpretations (Stowasser 1997; Barlas 2002). The primary approach of the revisionist position is to address the ambiguity associated with these terms. Barlas, for example, remarks that the orthodox schools of jurisprudence have conflated ‘interpretation with revelation’ (2002, 53), legitimising statements such as ‘Islam teaches us ...’ and ‘God says ...’ By sacralising ‘their own exegesis’, they invalidate alternative interpretations of the Qur’an. The emergence of a non-orthodox, scripturally based Muslim revisionist position argues that Muslim women are not obliged to wear the hijab to cover their hair, because there is no explicit and definitive commandment or scriptural justification. Women are only instructed in the Qur’an to conceal certain parts of the body (e.g. 24:31; 33:59), in particular their zeena (ornaments) and juyub (bosoms).

Certainly, the hijab remains a potent symbol of the female Muslim identity around the world in a myriad of cultures and societies. When one considers the socio-cultural aspect, it is crucial that discourses about religiosity, politics and identity are taken into consideration as to why women choose to veil. As Stowasser (1997) points out, the term hijab is complex and has entailed various uses in different periods of its development. Not only does the type of covering differ in each culture, but there is a wide range of styles or a ‘continuum of veiling’ from the uniform black cloaks worn by women in post-revolution Iran to the white haik of Algerian women and the burja of women in Oman (Watson 1994). Accordingly, one cannot make claims to a universal hijab/veil for all women, because the hijab is worn for a variety of reasons. In her examination of ‘voluntary veiling’ in Egypt, for example, Hoodfar (1997) found that young educated women wore the veil in order to
gain entry into the public sphere and to preserve their honour. The veil was used by her participants purposefully, allowing them to impose themselves publicly and visibly through their embodied difference. In a similar vein, Tiilikainen’s (2003) study of Somali women in diaspora in Finland demonstrates the various reasons why women choose to wear the veil. Some wore it due to an increase in religious observance and knowledge, and others because of the necessity to preserve their own culture and identity. For these women, dress provided a visible link to their homeland and affirmed their cultural and religious identities in response to exclusion and invisibility in diaspora. Somali mothers would also instruct their daughters to wear the veil to protect them in an ‘immoral and sinful’ western society. In Gibb and Rothenberg’s (2000) study, the wearing of the hijab for Harari immigrant women in Toronto was a manifestation of a move towards a standardised, global Islam, given that in Harar virtually no one wore the hijab. The hijab allowed these women to negotiate Muslim space in a non-sex-segregated environment; it was also a statement of their identification with, and participation in, the wider Islamic community.

**Spatial context and sacred space**

In any discussion concerning the hijab or veiling, one must consider the particular context in which it is worn, thus the politics of veiling is integral to the issue of Muslim women’s dress, and it influences the trends associated with women’s choices and social/political pressures placed on both the use and removal of the veil in public space. Similarly, Secor (2002) situates the headscarf within the context of dress and the ‘spacialized understanding’ that the headscarf produces. She observes that veiling is a ‘situated, embodied practice’ (Secor 2002, 7) with ties to space insofar as it allows, but also restricts, movement. In short, space provides meaning to the hijab.

In her study of the veil in Istanbul, Turkey, Secor argues that the city is composed of ‘regimes of veiling, that is, different, spatially realized sets of hegemonic rules and norms regarding women’s veiling’ (2002, 8). The regimes that involve not wearing the veil are formally enforced in the public sphere, especially in schools and universities. In the case of Turkey, the public space is a place where the enforcement of secularism comes to fruition (Göle 2002, 176), and wearers of the hijab calling for a place in public space challenge the concept of a Turkish secular society. Turkish women who choose to wear the veil, Göle points out, ‘instead of assimilating to the secular regime of women’s emancipation . . . press for their embodied difference (i.e. Islamic dress) and their public visibility (i.e. in schools, in Parliament) and create disturbances in modern social imaginaries’ (2002, 181).

In her research on British Pakistani women, Mohammad (1999) also highlights identity-construction processes based around women’s bodies. She describes how ideas about purity and community identity intersect to restrict women to ‘transparent spaces’ where their behaviour and dress can be observed by community members and family. Her research reveals how community norms of appropriate female dress are enforced upon and negotiated by young British Pakistani women. Hence, Pakistani women wearing Pakistani and/or Muslim dress are ‘linked to the assertion of “community” identity and the maintenance of female purity’ (Mohammad 1999, 386). Spaces beyond the home, particularly for British Pakistanis, ‘are regarded by the “community” as highly dangerous for women’s (hetero)sexual purity’ (Mohammad 1999, 382).

El Guindi (1999) associates issues of sacredness to space. She points out that, although sexuality in Islam is considered an essential aspect of human life, sexual activity is restricted to marriage; hence, contact between men and women in public places is
desexualised. The public and private spheres of Islam are not considered two separate realms, but instead there is a flexibility that fosters the creation of a sacred space around oneself in the public sphere. By wearing the veil, a woman’s bodily space is marked as specifically Muslim and sacred, even in public spaces. Dividing private and public spheres creates an inaccurate impression that Muslim women only interact in the private space. For instance, with the presence of men, a private space may become a public space and thus restricts women’s entry. Space may be imbued with sacredness with the placing of a religious mat to offer prayers. She concludes that the public and private polarity is ‘too rigid and static to apply particularly to Arab and Islamic space, which is characterized by the spatial and temporal interweaving pattern – the moving between sacred space and time and ordinary worldly space and time throughout the day, every day’ (El Guindi 1999, 48).

Using the example of a hajja (a woman who has performed the hajj\(^1\)), El Guindi reveals that this esteemed status means that the difference between the sacred and the public is no longer relevant:

> Women dress differently – austerely and modestly – in daily life after performing the hajj … It is as if having ascended to this state one does not ‘move in and out’ any more from worldly space to ordinary space. Having become a hajja … a Muslim woman, while engaged in worldly affairs is permanently in sacred space on earth. (1999, 774)

Thus, veiled woman can interact in the public sphere but still preserve a sacred state.

**The Scottish context and the emergence of Al-Meezan**

My own research was conducted in Glasgow, Scotland. The significance of place and the importance of geography are vitally important in shaping the experiences and everyday lives of Muslims in Scotland. According to the 2001 census, the Muslim population in Scotland stood at around 42,557 (0.84% of the total population).\(^2\) Glasgow has the highest proportion of Muslim people in Scotland (42%), accounting for 3.1% of the Glasgow population. In Glasgow, the Southside contains over half (56%) of the city’s Muslims, with the highest number of Pakistani Muslims living in Pollokshields (40%).\(^3\) The size and number of minority ethnic groups in Scotland has often created the assumption that racism does not exist in this part of Britain. Nevertheless, Miles and Dunlop have indicated that, ‘what distinguishes Scotland from England is the absence of a racialization of the political process in the period since 1945 rather than an absence of racism *per se*’ (1987, 119).

The number of minority ethnic population residing in Pollokshields (50%) is evidence of the high level of ethnic residential clustering (Hopkins 2008). The Scottish minority ethnic population tends to be middle class and, in comparison with their counterparts in England, more likely to reside in middle-class neighbourhoods. Hopkins concludes that, ‘it is not possible to transpose experiences of race, racism and ethnicity in England and assume that they are the same as they would be in Scotland’ (2008, 121). Indeed, studies have shown that amongst migrant and locally born Muslims, Islam is central in the formation of their identity (Saeed, Blain, and Forbes 1999; Hopkins 2004). Not only do Scottish young Muslims tend to define themselves as Scottish Muslims (Saeed, Blain, and Forbes 1999; Marranci 2007), but they also hold higher moral values compared to the wider Scottish society, because they regard ‘their ethical standards as better than others’ (Marranci 2007, 141).

Religious spaces are instrumental in creating and raising awareness about appropriate modes of dress and behaviour, inevitably binding followers to behave and dress in accordance with those customs and norms. In her book *Politics of Piety*, for example, Mahmood (2005) examined the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, which has become
part of a larger Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening across the Muslim world since the 1970s. Islamic revival is defined more generally as a religious ethos that has a real public presence in Egypt, reflected in the centres of Islamic learning, social welfare and the huge increase in neighbourhood mosques, which have seen a remarkable growth in attendance by men and women. The women’s mosque movement holds weekly religious lessons (\textit{dars}), given by a female preacher, as part of the growing sense of religious socialibility, such as the embracing of the veil and the production of religious literature and media (Mahmood 2005, 3).

In Glasgow, there are around 14 mosques, but there is no central institutional clergy, that is, there is no organised representation for all Muslims so mosques can be a strong ethno-religious space. Moreover, religious and ‘community’ leaders in Glasgow have largely been older, Pakistani males, who have been preaching and promoting their traditional conservative version of Islam. In recent years, however, there has been an emergence of what Cesari (2003) calls ‘vernacular Islam’, articulated through sermons, literature and public discussions in the local European language. Although the women in my research rarely visited the mosque, which continues to be a place of worship for men, this did not detract them from developing their own ‘self-conscious exploration of the religion’ (Knott and Khokher 1993, 596). My research supports the idea that there has been a development of ‘two novel elements: the growth of frequent religious gatherings among Muslim women, and an autonomous movement among Muslim women outside the mosque’ (Modood et al. 1997, 303).

Both these elements are characteristic of the Al-Meezan Institute in Glasgow, which is similar in character to the mosque movement in Cairo (Mahmood 2005) with respect to the efficacy of shaping the behaviour of Muslim women, especially in matters concerning dress and religious practice. Al-Meezan was established in 1998 by a group of Pakistani women who were dedicated to interpreting religion exclusively for women. In 2002, the group became more centralised through the Al-Meezan Institute in Pollokshields. \textit{Dars} are held every Friday, and there are various classes every day of the week. It is the first female Muslim centre in Scotland that is funded by private donations, and managed and run by women who preside over all the roles: religious teacher, interpreter and authority. The centre, which has around 600 attendants, is a designated female Muslim space that caters to women of all ages and young boys (up to the age of 16). The teachers at Al-Meezan follow and adopt the teachings of Dr Farhat Hashmi, a Pakistani female theologian, who wears the \textit{niqab} and pronounces a conservative traditional ideology. The interpretive stand of Al-Meezan, the literature and the particular religious ethos concerning dress advocate that women are integral not only in protecting their own sexual morality through their dress but also in helping men to exercise self-control.

Through \textit{dars}, Muslim women are discovering the meaning of the text of the Qur’an for the first time. At the \textit{dars}, the teacher will focus on a selected verse and examine each word within that verse in Arabic, and then discuss the \textit{tafsir} (commentary) in detail in Urdu/English. Attendants of Al-Meezan have the opportunity to discern between cultural Islam and ‘real Islam’ (cf. Cesari 2003). Interpreting and understanding religious texts in their own language means that there is a stronger identification with Islam than with their own ethnic culture (Cameron 2002). The \textit{dars} that bind these women to a community of believers (Ruby 2006) are conducted in English and Urdu. Those attending the Urdu \textit{dars} are dressed in \textit{salwar kameez}, often with an \textit{abaya} and a headscarf wrapped around their head, but women wearing the \textit{niqab} are relatively rare. In comparison, those attending the English \textit{dars} are generally dressed in westernised style of clothing, with very few wearing the \textit{salwar kameez}. Yet, the \textit{hijab} is worn in varying styles and coverage: whereas most
attendants wear the headscarf, covering their entire head, young teenage girls loosely wrap their hijab, revealing part of their hair.

It is also important here to discuss the significance of Pollokshields as a site that has fostered the cultivation of Muslim women’s identities. The Pakistani Muslim community has shaped Pollokshields as a place of belonging and transformed the neighbourhood into a distinctly Pakistani/Muslim space (cf. Ehrkamp 2005). For example, many shops have signs in Urdu and English, the Asian clothes shops have mannequins dressed in salwar kameez, and there are ladies-only beauty parlours. Religious practice is centred on the three mosques: Masjid Noor, Madrasah Zia-Ul Qur’an and Madrasah Taleem-Ul-Islam. Islam is reflected in material practices, from attending the mosque and buying halal meat to wearing the hijab and children attending the madrassah (McMichael 2002). Here, there is a ‘weaving together of different types of identity – moral, aesthetic and political’ (Werbner 2002, 57), that is, being Muslim, South Asian and Pakistani.

Methodology
My research employed the snowball sampling technique, where participants give the researcher the names of other possible participants, who may then provide the names of others. I contacted personal acquaintances and asked if they knew women who would like to participate. This was followed by a search for participants through universities and community organisations. Both methods elicited a total of 30 females, and data were collected through in-depth structured interviews with each participant between June 2001 and September 2002. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, and at the request of all participants the interviews took place at their homes. This setting was particularly significant in terms of the relationship that I, as the researcher, was able to form. The participants were relaxed and, within the privacy of their own home, were able to talk freely about their personal experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were all given a pseudonym to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality. I began each interview with questions based around religion, e.g. their understanding of women’s dress/modesty in religious text, the role of cultural and traditional customs in shaping their ideas about ‘appropriate’ female dress, and whether their family and upbringing had encouraged or influenced their decision on wearing the hijab. They were also asked to reflect upon the ways in which the hijab regulated social relations between the sexes. The data were analysed by examining the transcripts using manifest coding, which are the elements that are countable, such as the number of times a phrase appears in the text (Berg 1998). I also used latent coding, which takes into consideration the connotations of the phrases, i.e. the underlying implicit meaning in the content of the text (Neuman 1997). On each transcript, descriptive annotations were assigned to thematic segments (hijab, modesty and so forth). The analytical process included attaching word codes to the transcripts and comments and sifting through and categorising the data to identify the relationships between themes and emerging patterns.

The participants lived in Glasgow, with the exception of two women who lived in the neighbouring towns of Milngavie and Paisley. The sample consisted of women between the ages of 15 and 50 years (median 32.5). Of these women, 22 were married, seven were single and one was divorced. The ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 16 Pakistani, 2 Iraqi, 3 Indian, 4 White British and 5 Other. The educational level of the participants was high: one had a PhD, five had a masters degree, 10 had a bachelors degree, five were educated to school level and nine to college level.
With regard to researcher positionality, my Muslim background allowed me to understand the women’s perspective on the religious aspect of modesty. Being a British-born Pakistani and fluent in Urdu meant that I was not only aware of the customs regarding dress/hijab but also able to understand remarks made in Urdu (given that the majority of the sample were of Pakistani descent). My gender also facilitated my access to the women, as several participants made it clear that they would not have participated had I been a male researcher. However, the researcher’s position as either the insider or outsider is not rigid, as Mohammad’s (2001) research on Muslim women reveals: when she dressed in a westernised style, she was placed on the ‘insider’/’outsider’ border. While some women spoke to her only because of her western dress, for others this created a barrier. In my research, the fact that I wore the hijab conveyed my beliefs and commitment; however, my personal view was kept private. Nevertheless, my hijab clearly marked me as an outsider for non-wearing participants. Although it could have been an obstacle, the women in this group appeared to feel comfortable with me, and many of them spoke of friends and female members of their family who wore the hijab.

**Wearers of the hijab: respect, protection and modesty**

The participants who wore the hijab had varying styles of dress. For instance, Tahira (50 years old) and Rahat (49 years old), who had migrated to the UK, associated their apparel with Pakistani and Indian customs and wore traditional dress (salwar kameez). Others dressed in a westernised style (jeans, shirts, tops, long skirts). The 15 participants who wore the hijab either wrapped it firmly around their face or loosely covered their head and showed some of their hair. Asma, a 25-year-old project worker, explained what the hijab meant and represented for her:

> The hijab is a veil … for women to conceal their outer and inner beauty. It is to cover and protect the individual from lustful gazes of the opposite or same sex. Islam gives individuals the means to protect their modesty by enabling them to cover themselves while in public spaces and away from the eyes of onlookers who are not directly related to them.

For those born in Britain, wearing the hijab was based on a personal understanding of what they believed to be modest dress in Islam: ‘For me, somebody who was brought up in a western environment, the hijab was a personal choice. It has little to do with my husband’ (Faeza, 36 years old). Of the 15 women who wore the hijab, nine regularly attended the dars and all affirmed that it had been a contributing factor in shaping their decision to wear the hijab. This is not surprising, given that Al-Meezan strongly promotes the hijab to be religiously prescribed in the Qur’an. The hijab also served to further women’s access, integration and mobility in public spaces. Asma (23 years old), who was single and lived with her parents, stated that because she wore the hijab, was financially independent and educated, she was less inclined to abide by her parents’ restrictions on her movement. The hijab provided her with more negotiating powers when dealing with her parents: ‘When I go out … I’m out to learn about my deen (faith), I’m not out socialising with friends, so my parents can’t and shouldn’t complain. I feel comfortable when I’m in a mixed environment, because my appearance says something about me, my character and my intention.’ By wearing the hijab, women were able to cross gender boundaries, as it not only legitimated their presence in a mixed gender space but was also a marker of purity and intent; women who wore the hijab were able to interact in the public sphere, yet maintain a sacred state (El Guindi 1999). The covering of the head did not separate women from the world, but rather it allowed them access to public space and eased their movement outside the home (Ardener 1993).
For other participants, there was a strong element of expectation and influence to wear the hijab: ‘As you grow up, you feel that you have to do it and also to agree with it. When you’re young it’s hard, but as you grow up you see the meaning of it’ (Sara, 15 years old). This suggests that the practice of wearing the hijab is not always a personally motivated decision, but is open to subtle expectations and parental influence. Early socialisation of gendered space fostered by a set of moral teachings creates spatial identities and an acute awareness that men and women conduct themselves differently depending upon the space they occupy. Yet, when one enters the space of the other (male), it is women who preserve the boundaries. Nabeela (29 years old), a British-born Pakistani, was conscious at an early age that females should uphold personal private space through covering themselves. For instance, Nabeela was expected to wear the dupatta when out shopping, when attending the mosque and when male guests were visiting the house. However, although the dupatta was regarded as a sign of modesty in South Asian dress, it left the hair exposed and therefore it did not meet the correct requirements of modest dress in Islam:

I used to wear the dupatta rather than the hijab, but then I felt that the dupatta wasn’t covering me well enough. (Rahat, 49 years old)

I only started wearing the hijab a year ago. I knew if I just put it on it would easily come off, it’s something that you slowly develop. The hijab is the whole covering, the modesty, the clothes, the way you are inside. (Nabeela, 29 years old)

The dupatta is not a marker of an Islamic identity, because it is a popular form of dress across South Asia among Sikh, Hindu and Muslim women (Mohammad 1999). Wearing the hijab for Sajda (49 years old) and Abida (38 years old) came as a consequence of having completed the hajj. However, for Abida, a married mother of two, who worked in a bank, this was not an easy transition and still caused a degree of conflict:

I never ever wore the hijab until I went to hajj. I guess that was the hardest thing for me to do. It’s difficult living in a western society, and even now I sometimes feel I can’t wear it, I do wear it, but going to work I took it off. I thought I couldn’t handle it. It’s a big thing for me.

For all these women, wearing the hijab was motivated by religion. It visibly marked them as Muslim women in a non-Muslim environment:

The first day that I wore it … I was thinking ‘oh my God’, everyone was looking at me. But now when I go out to take the bins out, I can’t actually go without my hijab. It feels as though it is part of me. I want to show everyone that I am a Muslim. (Fariha, 22 years old)

For Amber (20 years old), a white Scottish convert, the transition to the hijab was not a dramatic one: ‘I would say the whole thing about the dress came natural to me. It was like an overnight transformation.’ Prior to converting, she went through a pre-hijab phase of dressing modestly. Others felt that the hijab was an embodiment of protection:

The hijab is a means to protect my respect, honour and modesty, which will envelop my beauty and emphasise my mind and intellectuality. The hijab is my method of protecting my personal view of myself. I can’t do this without hijab; it would leave me lacking control over what people see of my body, I would feel exposed to strangers. (Asma, 25 years old)

The hijab afforded women the ability to guard their reputation, because they were physically able to control what others saw of them, and as a result they were protected from the male gaze (cf. Ruby 2006):

The purpose of the hijab is so that other males can’t look at our beauty, and Allah wants us to keep that for our husbands. I feel that there is a beauty that a woman has. (Zaida, 27 years old)
Naseem (37 years old), a Pakistani-born mother of two, highlights in the following quotation how the hijab embraces not just covering the head but also a woman’s entire demeanour:

When you go out and see something beautiful in front of you, who is going to stop looking? Nobody will stop looking, because it looks nice. Important parts of your body have to be covered – because that’s your decency. The way she should speak ... has to be modest. If she is speaking to a man, she has to be abrupt, she shouldn’t be polite. The reason is you can give them the impression that ‘I am interested in you’, that’s where the problem starts.

The woman ‘acts as a symptom: she represents a threat while being constructed as a defence against that threat’ (Tseelon 1995, 24). Women were upheld as the defenders of social morality in society but at the same time ‘other’ women were sexually objectified:

Men cannot control their urges ... they have a lustful eye. [A] man is more of an animal, he has less control over his physical needs or urges. There are women who go out and pay the penalty of being raped; you do it for your own protection. Dressing modestly is a form of protecting yourself, definitely. (Saba, 26 years old)

If you go out on Friday night, you will see a big queue outside the clubs, and women go out half-naked. Why do they need to show themselves? Just to attract somebody, they want other people to look at them. There are so many rape cases! What were they wearing? A mini-skirt! A short blouse! (Naseem, 37 years old)

By nature, then, it was men who found it difficult to control their sexual urge, heightening the need for women to take responsibility and control their appearance, because it was their bodies that were sexually alluring. Interestingly, men are the ‘weaker sex’, given their inability to control their sexual urge. Bullock, who defends the hijab, states that when the woman wears the hijab it becomes easier for men to lower their gaze (2003, 207). Immodest women were described disparagingly and in dismissive terms, and Naseem (37 years old) believed her moral values were higher because of her modest dress and comportment (cf. Marranci 2007). Women should be conscious of the boundaries in place to protect their space, and thus must police thus presence.

These representations of men portrayed them as powerful and sexual, reinforcing stereotypes associated with the masculine identity. Research has shown that Muslim men, using religious discourses to legitimise their authority (Dwyer 2000), position themselves as the protectors of women/culture, yet they themselves do not feel the need for protection (Archer 2001). Archer’s (2001) study, which was based on interviews with 24 young Muslim men from the North of England, found that Muslim boys’ masculinity was constructed through positioning of self and others, particularly through the ‘ownership’ and ‘control’ of women. Macey (1999) similarly found that young Muslim men placed significant importance on appropriate gender roles, family authority, dress and marriage as a way to control the freedom and choice of young women. Indeed, the policing of women is an important means of affirming and asserting Muslim men’s adolescent masculine, religious and ethnic identity (Dwyer 2000).

Non-wearers: the importance of being modest

Of the 15 female participants who did not wear the hijab, several expressed their intention to do so in the future: ‘One day, hopefully, I will wear it [hijab]’ (Hala 28 years old). Maria (21 years old), a Bosnian university student, chose not to wear the hijab because she was not a ‘completely practicing Muslim’, but she believed and acknowledged that ‘it says in the Qur’an that you have to cover yourself’. Others had to grapple with the expectation of wearing it. Farzana, a British-born Pakistani and 16-year-old school student, stated that
since her mother had completed the *hajj* (and started to wear the *hijab*), religion had become more important in family life. She added: ‘I’ll probably be expected to wear the *hijab* in the future’. Nazia (32 years old) explained that her husband:

> [...] would love to see me in a *burqa*. He thinks that’s a proper Muslim woman in a *burqa*, but I think everybody would stare. I think if you’re a decent woman, you won’t need to cover yourself.

Similarly, Misbah (28 years old), a single British-born Pakistani, declared: ‘It is every Muslim woman’s duty. If they, however, choose not to wear it, then it is their prerogative … I don’t wear anything revealing. I’ve always had myself covered.’ Wearing the *hijab* was not necessary for maintaining the boundaries of modesty – this was possible by not wearing clothes that exposed the body. In the following extract, Afsha (33 years old) talked about a personal experience that caused her to consider wearing the *hijab*:

> One of my friends was telling me that some guy made a comment about my chest and it really, really upset me … You do you start questioning what you wear, maybe it’s a wee bit clingy, and it made me feel really uncomfortable. That day I thought, should I wear the *hijab?* I was speaking to one of my friends, and she said, well, it’s the whole thing about female sexuality, when you wear the *hijab* you become almost asexual so people don’t look at you in that manner.

While the participants who wore the *hijab* assumed the responsibility of covering their hair and dressing modestly as a way of controlling the male gaze, Afsha (33 years old) allocated this responsibility to men. Bushra (33 years old), a community worker, used personal experience to confirm her belief that how a female acts and behaves is far more important than her attire:

> I seen [sic] a cracker the other night in front of Masjid Noor (in Pollokshields). There was this girl who was in a BMW doing the rounds on Albert Drive. I was out with the pram, I thought ‘tinted windows can’t really see anything’. I saw it a couple of times, and I saw some boys standing outside Masjid Noor, and she actually stopped and did the window down. I didn’t know she was a woman at the time, and she did the window down and she had the radio on full, the *hijab* on, and she was speaking to the boys … I don’t think wearing a *hijab* necessarily makes a woman feminine or makes her behave in a proper way. I think that comes from within, which is why I took mine off.

Because the young woman was out at night in a public space and parked outside a place designated almost exclusively for men, it was deemed inappropriate and improper behaviour for a Muslim woman, especially one wearing the *hijab*. The *hijab* reveals little about the sexual and moral propriety of the wearer. Lubna (49 years old), a Kurd, discussed the same issue:

> A woman could be decent without the *hijab*. There are people who wear the *hijab* but they are doing stuff underneath that *hijab*. Why do girls have to cover themselves? They say the man will be aggravated by the women, why won’t the women be aggravated by the man?

The *hijab* was criticised because it positioned the woman as the temptress and absolved men of their responsibility to ‘lower their gaze’. In the following account, Bushra (33 years old) explained why she no longer wears the *hijab*:

> I took up the *hijab* for about three months, but I felt I was still getting stared at. I wanted to protect myself from people staring at me, but they stared at me even more in some cases. Now that I don’t wear the *hijab*, I don’t get a lot of looks even when I’m walking, because I march and also probably because (a) I’m too fat and (b) I don’t wear anything tight or revealing, and I think it’s the way you walk as well. I’ve always been a fast walker.

Bushra was safe from the intrusive gaze of men not by wearing the *hijab*, but because she felt her body was not a site for attracting attention. By being fat, she embodied the
antithesis of the contemporary western ideal of female beauty. Slimness is valued as a sign of beauty, self-discipline, good health and sexual attractiveness (Haavio-Mannila and Purhonen 2001), whereas a fat body is portrayed as ineffective, powerless or asexual (Kent 2001). Rather than choose to wear the *hijab* as a method of protecting herself from the gaze of others, she instead concentrated on other aspects of her behaviour, modulating her walk and dress. Since women are the cultural and symbolic bearers of community identity (Yuval-Davis 1997), Muslim women’s dress is often shaped by the degree of control imposed by their families and community upon their movement, attire and behaviour. Women are thus monitored and scrutinised through the ‘communal gaze’ – a gaze of surveillance:

I live in Pollokshields, which is a close-knit community. Most of my extended family live here, and my mum has lots of friends here as well. If they saw me talking to a guy or dressing in a way they didn’t think was appropriate, they’d be straight on the phone to my mum, saying ‘I saw your daughter talking to so-and-so’ or complaining about what I was wearing! (Noreen, 20 years old)

Places like Pollokshields, where there is a strong Pakistani presence, are important locations where meanings are ascribed to women’s gendered bodies. Discourses surrounding appropriate dress when going out symbolise that performances in physical locations, such as the house and street, are crucial to the construction of masculine and feminine bodies (Nelson 1999). Men and women’s movement through the gendered spaces of the streets are experienced differently:

Boys hang around street corners or stand outside shops. Whether it be the afternoon or at night, they’re always there . . . it’s like they own the bloody space! I’d never be able to go out and ‘hang out’ with my friends the way they [men] do, and it annoys me that because of them we have to dress appropriately! (Shireen, 19 years old)

With their strong male presence, Muslim men had colonised the streets, which constrained and controlled women’s movement. Afsha (33 years old) argued that men have imposed the *hijab* upon women to control their own sexuality:

Why should women have to wear a *hijab* just because men have a real issue with women looking pretty, because they can’t deal with it? That really pisses me off! I’m not prepared to be an asexual being. The only way I can avoid this is by putting on a *hijab*? I don’t think that’s the solution.

For Afsha, the *hijab* detached sexuality from women’s bodies, and women were expected to portray an idealised, yet disempowering femininity, which denied them sexual and social power. Non-wearing female participants understanding of religious prescription on modesty differed markedly from wearers of the *hijab*. In essence, their style of dress was a reflection of the importance of modest dress in Islam.

**Conclusion**

The debate concerning the *hijab* continues unabated, reflected in the conflicting arguments between Muslim scholars and feminists. For the former, the *hijab* represents the ultimate symbol of Muslim female identity, and those women who remain uncovered defy divine scripture, whereas the latter adopt a revisionist position and acknowledge that the issue of female dress in the Qur’an is ambiguous and should be explored using new methodologies of linguistics and hermeneutics (Stowasser 1997; Barlas 2002; Hajjaji-Jarrah 2003). The issue of modesty in Islam is crucial to the debate about veiling practices amongst Muslims. However, as Abu-Lughod (2004, 498) comments:
Although modesty sometimes finds its authoritative religious justification in the Qur’an and can be inspired by women’s desires to be pious, it cannot in all its daily social practices be derived solely from religious texts. Linked in many societies to a cultural code of honor that determines the respect and reputation of families, it both pressures and motivates women.

Thus, while religious customs and values strongly dictate appropriate forms of dress, the hijab is located and defined within a particular spatial context, which in turn creates a division of spaces that has associated value judgements. Indeed, wearing the hijab does not represent a homogeneous discursive reality for Muslim women around the world, but instead the fluid and changing meaning of the hijab depends upon the spatial context in which it is worn. Nevertheless, the various expressions of the hijab in different spatial contexts stem ‘from the formal symbolic and practical aims of hijab: to preserve modesty and conceal the shame of nakedness’ (Watson 1994, 141).

The participants who wore the hijab saw it as a positive thing, which they could use to control their perception of themselves as well as to enjoy the status and respect it provided. It was also a way for some women to demonstrate their obedience to their faith and a way to police the male gaze. These women saw the hijab not as a marker of exclusion but as a source of empowerment. The spatial context in which the hijab is worn in Glasgow has been fostered by Al-Meezan as a symbol of the female Muslim identity. Al-Meezan represents a wider connection to the global Islamic revival movement. For the 15 women who did not wear the hijab, there was a strong belief that it locates and locks women into a submissive and secondary position. Indeed, for some participant’s, religion provided a powerful discourse for men to sexually objectify women and assign them as the guardians of male sexuality. Both groups believed it was important for women to dress modestly, but there were different degrees of modest dress: at one end of the spectrum, women felt that this meant donning the hijab, and at the other end it involved dressing ‘appropriately’ (not wearing revealing clothes). Their shared views on modesty were influenced by the idealised feminine traits Muslim women are expected to demonstrate within Muslim culture, with an insistence on modesty, chaste deportment and manner of dress. All the females described being socialised about the importance of the separation of male and female space, thus accentuating the belief in the sexual and social difference between men and women.

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Notes
1. The fifth and final pillar of Islam, the pilgrimage to Makkah (Saudi Arabia).
4. Loose trousers and long tunic worn by people from the Indian subcontinent.
5. A loose black robe from head to toe.
7. A loose scarf worn over the head or over the shoulders.
8. Pollokshields has been experiencing a problem with Asian gangs [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/glasgow_and_west/8008362.stm].
Notes on contributor
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**ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS**

**Los significados de la modestia y el hijab entre las mujeres musulmanas de Glasgow, Escocia**

Basado en entrevistas con 30 mujeres musulmanas en Glasgow, Escocia, el estudio explora los significados que las mujeres atribuyen a la modestia y al hijab. Quince de las 30 participantes usan hijab. El artículo comienza con un repaso general del debate entre académicos musulmanes tradicionales y musulmanes feministas sobre si el hijab es una obligación en el Islam. Echa luz sobre la significancia del espacio, ya que las prácticas de uso del velo están profundamente entrelazadas y embebidas en las prácticas espaciales que han sido moldeadas según el contexto local escocés. Los resultados y el análisis revelan...
diferencias y similitudes entre quienes usan y no usan hijab. Mientras las primeras estiman al hijab como una encarnación de la modestia, la virtud y el respeto, las últimas lo consideran una pieza de vestir innecesaria. Sin embargo, a pesar de sus miradas contrastantes sobre el uso del velo, ambos grupos de participantes sostienen una visión notablemente similar sobre la importancia de la modestia de la mujer.

Palabras claves: género; hijab; Islam; modestia; musulmán; espacio

端庄与头巾 (hijab) 之于苏格兰格拉斯哥穆斯林女性之意涵

本研究根据对苏格兰格拉斯哥三十位穆斯林女性的访谈，探讨端庄与头巾 (hijab) 之于女性的多重意涵。三十位受访者中，有十五位穿戴头巾。本文将概述传统穆斯林学者和穆斯林女权主义者之间关乎头巾是否为伊斯兰之义务的争论做为开端。本研究描绘了空间的显著性，因为以面纱遮容之实践深植于由苏格兰地脉络所形塑的空间实践之中。研究发现与评析揭露了穿戴头巾者与拒绝穿戴头巾者之间的异与同。穿戴头巾者认为头巾体现了端庄、美德与尊重，拒绝穿戴头巾者则视此为不必要的衣着。尽管她们对于以头巾掩面持相异之观点，此二群体的受访者却对女性端庄的重要性拥有明显的相似看法。

关键词：性别、头巾、伊斯兰、端庄、穆斯林、空间