Wearing Meaning: Hijab, Critical Knowledge, and Gendered Responsibility

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ABSTRACT: This instrumental case study explores how a sixteen-year-old American Muslim girl of Indian descent negotiates the layered meanings of hijab across educational and religious spaces. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial frameworks, the study examines how hijab becomes a site of religious devotion, embodied identity, and negotiated responsibility. Based on interviews, observations, and thematic analysis, the paper highlights four themes: evolving meanings of hijab, dual responsibility of confronting gender inequality and religious bigotry, responsibility to educate others about Islam, and enabling roles of Qur'anic knowledge and women-only spaces. The findings reveal how critical religious literacy and supportive educational contexts empower Muslim girls.

Keywords: Hijab, religious identity, U.S. educational contexts, Orientalism, American Muslims

For many visibly Muslim girls in the United States, the hijab is not a fixed symbol but a dynamic and deeply situated practice shaped by intersecting commitments to faith, gender equity, and social responsibility. While often misread through reductive lenses as either imposed religiosity or cultural tradition, hijab can also heighten one's visibility and vulnerability to religious discrimination. At the same time, it becomes a means through which girls negotiate patriarchal expectations, respond to public scrutiny, and assert their voice within Islamic and educational settings. This paper explores the narrative of Nessma, a sixteen-year-old American Muslim of Indian descent, who chose to wear the hijab in early childhood and continues to critically engage with its meanings. Through an instrumental case study grounded in feminist, postcolonial, and interpretive frameworks, the study traces how hijab becomes a site of visible strength, ethical commitment, and gendered responsibility across home, school, and mosque. Before turning to her story, I first situate this work within broader scholarly

conversations surrounding hijab, Orientalism, religious knowledge, and Muslim girls' agency.

This article draws on a larger qualitative study that examined how Muslim adolescent girls negotiate identity across Islamic weekend schools and public schools. The present paper focuses on one focal case from that study to examine how hijab, religious knowledge, and gendered responsibility are negotiated in the everyday life of a visibly Muslim adolescent girl. Guided by an instrumental case study approach, the analysis is organized around the following analytic questions:

1. How does a Muslim adolescent girl negotiate the evolving meanings of hijab across family, Islamic weekend schools, and public school contexts?
2. What shapes her sense of responsibility as an educator, representative, and critical agent, and how does she negotiate when to engage and when to resist?

To situate these questions, the following section examines how hijab and Muslim girls' identities have been framed within broader scholarly traditions. Drawing on literature on Orientalism, feminist critiques of veiling, and religious literacy, it contextualizes the conditions under which girls like Nessma negotiate meaning, responsibility, and belonging.

Layered Meanings and Discursive Tensions: Understanding Hijab in Context

Through the lenses of European colonial powers, the Orient was constructed as an oppositional Other that affirmed Europe's modernity and superiority. This discourse depicted the East as static, inferior, and incapable of self-representation, justifying political and cultural dominance (Said, 1978, 1985). As Said (1978) argued, these representations were part of a systemic knowledge–power structure that persists into the present.

Within this broader Orientalist framework, gender played a key role. Orientalist discourse frequently portrayed Muslim women as passive, veiled victims, using the figure of the "secluded Muslim woman" to reinforce European gender norms and justify imperial intervention (Kahf, 1999). These narratives persist in contemporary discourse, where Muslim women are framed either as compliant participants in their own oppression or as attempting to escape it (Haddad et al., 2006; Hussein, 2016). Feminist scholars further argue that some strands of Western feminism reproduce these Orientalist logics, positioning Muslim women between resisting patriarchy within their communities and being "rescued" by frameworks that equate religiosity with submission to male dominance (Chan-Malik, 2018; Khan, 1998; Sheth, 2022).

At the same time, resisting Orientalist portrayals can generate internal essentialisms, including idealized constructions of the "good Muslim woman" (Zine, 2009). Hall (1992) theorized such responses as a strategic retreat into

defensive identities shaped by exclusion, and Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism (Danius et al., 1993) illuminates how collective identity claims can be politically empowering while also risking the reification of rigid gender norms (Eide, 2016). Karim (2009) and Mir (2009) similarly argue that reactive identity strategies, even when rooted in resistance, can reproduce restrictive expectations within Muslim communities.

This dual struggle underscores how Muslim women continually negotiate multiple discursive pressures: The victimizing gaze of the West, restrictive norms within communities, and their own evolving convictions. Abu-Lughod (2002) and Ahmed (2011) have explored this double bind, with Ahmed describing feminist scholars from Muslim contexts as having to "fight on two fronts: gender bigotry and also racial or religious bigotry" (p. 291). Amid these tensions, Muslim women are also reshaping gender roles within Islamic spaces through direct engagement with religious knowledge and participation that challenges male-dominated authority (Bhimji, 2009; Hamzeh, 2011; Ramji, 2008; Schmidt, 2008).

These dynamics shape how hijab is constructed and interpreted in contemporary contexts. Hijab is often positioned as either a symbol of submission or a marker of imposed religiosity and, following 9/11, Orientalist representations intensified in Western media, frequently using hijab as visual evidence of subjugation (Sacirbey, 2010). Such portrayals heightened scrutiny of visibly Muslim women, placing them at the center of suspicion, surveillance, or pity (Meetoo et al., 2011). Rather than accepting imposed meanings, many Muslim women reinterpret hijab as a visible, self-defined practice of identity and agency. Research demonstrates that hijab functions as a site through which women negotiate belonging, resist dominant narratives, and make situated ethical choices (Dwyer, 1999; Hamzeh, 2011; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010; Siraj, 2012).

Recent empirical studies further document how hijab operates as both a spiritually meaningful practice and a socially consequential marker of visibility in Western contexts. Quantitative research shows that hijab visibility is associated with higher reported discrimination among Muslim women in the United States, particularly in settings where women experience heightened visibility or isolation (Hashem & Awad, 2024; Hodge et al., 2023). Other studies highlight how Muslim women navigate this visibility through strategic negotiation, including sartorial choices and boundary-setting, underscoring hijab's dual role as a moral practice and a site of social surveillance (Abd Kadir, 2024; Karaman & Christian, 2022; Marzouk, 2021; Rahaman & Rahaman, 2023; Unal, 2023).

To conclude, Orientalism is not merely a legacy of colonial Europe but an enduring system in which knowledge and power intersect to sustain essentialist representations of Muslim women. These representations can limit full participation while also prompting visible identity affirmation through markers such as hijab, particularly during periods of heightened racial and religious hostility (Halliday, 1993; Khan, 1998, 2002; Zine, 2006). This complexity frames the analysis that follows, as the paper centers how one visibly Muslim adolescent negotiates hijab, responsibility, and belonging across Islamic weekend schools and public schools.

Methods

Guided by a feminist, postcolonial, and interpretive framework, this study explores how one American Muslim adolescent negotiates the layered meanings of hijab across familial and institutional spaces within her local community and the broader society. This instrumental case study centers on Nessma as the focal participant, while including her mother, Zimal, and six of her teachers as peripheral participants who provide contextual insights. Drawing on Stake's (2005) notion of instrumental case studies, the purpose here is not only to understand Nessma's individual journey but also to illuminate broader social, cultural, and religious contexts that shape the meaning and purpose of hijab in the lives of visibly Muslim girls. By foregrounding Nessma's narrative and contextualizing it through the voices of those around her, the study examines hijab as a multilayered site of religious expression, cultural negotiation, responsibility, and resistance.

Research Settings

This study took place in a small Midwestern US city and focused on the institutional spaces Nessma inhabited, including two Islamic weekend schools and two mainstream schools. All school names used are pseudonyms.

Islamic Weekend Schools

Nessma's religious education occurred across two distinct Islamic institutions, each offering unique cultural contexts. She attended Al-Furqan and Al-Noor. Al-Furqan is affiliated with a large Arab-majority Muslim community center and conducts instruction primarily in English, with frequent use of Arabic. Al-Noor is located within the city's main mosque and serves a more ethnically diverse population, hosting weekend classes alongside interfaith events, Ramadan programs, and community support services. Together, these schools illustrate the intra-community diversity of Islamic educational spaces.

Mainstream Schools

Complementing her Islamic education, Nessma attended Stowe Middle School, a small private girls' school emphasizing academic achievement and confidence-building, followed by Marbury High School, a public school with a predominantly white and Asian student population. These secular environments provided additional contexts in which hijab was interpreted and negotiated.

Participants

The focal participant in this study is Nessma, a sixteen-year-old American Muslim girl of Indian descent living in a small Midwestern city. Participants were recruited through criterion-based purposeful sampling, specifically targeting adolescent Muslim girls of diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds who attended both public schools and Islamic weekend schools. I identified and reached out to these participants by interacting with members of the local Muslim community who sent their children to one of the two Islamic schools involved in the study. This recruitment was part of a larger doctoral research project consisting of three collective case studies, which ultimately included six students: two of West African descent, two of Asian descent (including Nessma), and two of Arab descent. Nessma was selected as the focal case because her experience illuminated key tensions central to the study: She chose to wear hijab at age seven despite her mother not wearing it, actively negotiated responsibility for educating others across multiple contexts, and demonstrated critical engagement with religious knowledge and gender norms. Her case offered insight into how hijab becomes a site of meaning-making, resistance, and negotiated visibility. At the time of the study, Nessma attended a public high school and participated in Islamic education through two weekend schools.

While Nessma was the focal participant, six teachers served as peripheral participants who offered contextual insight into institutional norms, pedagogical practices, and school cultures shaping her experiences. Nessma's mother, Zimal, also participated, providing family perspectives on religious identity development.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign Institutional Review Board (IRB #20361). Written parental consent and adolescent assent were obtained. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms are used and identifying details have been removed or modified to protect confidentiality.

Positionality of the Researcher

As a Muslim woman of Egyptian background and an Arabic speaker, I brought both proximity and distance to this research. I shared a religious affiliation with Nessma and her family but differed in race, ethnicity, nationality, and linguistic context. Reflexive identity memos (Maxwell, 2012) documented how early assumptions of shared experience gave way to deeper attention to contextual difference.

One pivotal moment occurred when Nessma described her commitment to answering difficult questions about Islam at school. When asked whether this felt like a burden, she responded firmly, “It’s a responsibility.” This exchange challenged my instinct to frame representation as imposed rather than chosen and underscored the importance of centering participant agency. I position myself as an in-betweener, occupying overlapping but non-identical identities that allow for both empathy and analytic distance.

Data Collection

Initial data collection occurred between September 2019 and March 2020, with follow-up contact in 2022 to provide longitudinal perspective. Data were collected through multiple sources to ensure depth and contextual understanding. I conducted three classroom observations of Nessma at Al-Noor Islamic weekend school (approximately 50 minutes each). I also conducted two in-depth interviews with Nessma and two interviews with her mother in early 2020 (approximately 60 minutes each). Follow-up contact occurred through brief phone calls and text-based interviews in 2022. Six teachers were interviewed to provide contextual insight into institutional expectations, pedagogical norms, and school cultures. Across the broader study, 53 reflective memos documented positionality, analytic decisions, and emerging interpretations.

Interviews explored Nessma’s experiences with hijab, religious identity development, school interactions, and navigation of multiple educational contexts. The semi-structured protocol allowed for emergent topics while maintaining focus on meaning-making processes, moments of tension or affirmation, and identity negotiation. Interview questions included: *How do you describe what hijab means to you? Can you tell me about a time when someone asked you about your hijab, what was that like? How do you decide when to share information about Islam and when not to?* All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Consistent with feminist and postcolonial commitments, interview approaches resisted both Orientalist narratives that frame hijab as inherently oppressive and patriarchal expectations that frame it as unquestionable obligation. Open-ended questions allowed Nessma to define hijab's meanings on her own terms, revealing nuanced positions that refused imposed binaries of victim or agent, oppressed or liberated.

Observations focused on classroom interactions, pedagogical approaches, and Nessma’s participation in religious education. I adopted an observer-as-participant role, taking fieldnotes on instructional content, student–teacher dynamics, and the presentation of religious concepts. Fieldnotes were expanded immediately following observations to capture contextual detail and preliminary analytic reflections.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2008) inductive thematic analysis. Analysis began with repeated, active reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and reflective memos to identify initial patterns of meaning. Initial codes were generated across the data set and reviewed, compared, and clustered into broader themes through an iterative process.

For instance, codes such as answering classmates' questions, feeling responsible to explain Islam, distinguishing curiosity from judgment, and setting boundaries on explanation were grouped under the theme *negotiated responsibility to educate others*, capturing both Nessma's embrace of educational responsibility and her active negotiation of its limits. Similarly, codes related to questioning dress code enforcement, critiquing protective rhetoric, and seeking female scholars' perspectives informed the theme *addressing dual responsibilities of confronting gender inequality and religious bigotry*. Four interrelated themes ultimately structured the analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was supported through prolonged engagement, triangulation of interviews, observations, and reflective memos, as well as iterative analytic review. Reflexive memos documented positionality and analytic decisions across the research process. Thick description supports transferability, and interpretations grounded in participants' accounts support confirmability. Table 1 provides an overview of the study design, participants, data sources, analytic approach, and trustworthiness strategies. The following section presents the findings that emerged from the analysis of interviews, observations, and fieldnotes.

Component	Description
Research Design	Instrumental qualitative case study
Focal Participant	Nessma (16), American Muslim of Indian descent
Contextual Participants	Mother; six teachers (contextual informants)
Research Settings	Islamic weekend schools and public schools
Data Sources	Interviews, observations, reflective memos
Timeline	2019–2020 data collection; 2022 follow-up
Data Analysis	Inductive thematic analysis
Trustworthiness	Prolonged engagement, triangulation, reflexivity

Table 1
Overview of Study Design and Methods

Findings

The following findings are organized around four interrelated themes that emerged from the analysis: (1) multilayered meanings of hijab; (2) dual responsibilities of confronting gender inequality and religious bigotry through visual Muslim identity; (3) negotiated responsibility to educate others; and (4) contextual enabling resources that support this responsibility such as Qur'anic knowledge and women-only spaces.

Multilayered Meanings of Hijab

Nessma is a sixteen-year-old American Muslim of Indian descent who identifies as a Muslim Indian American. For her, religion comes first: "I am an American citizen. Both my parents are Indians, so I still carry that with me." Her journey with the hijab began in the second grade, a decision she made independently. Although her mother, Zimal, does not wear the hijab, she supported her daughter's choice and viewed it as a form of strength. "She walks down the street, and anyone can understand she is a Muslim. Nessma is very strong. For me, it's about carrying my religion on my shoulder—I don't have the strength to do that."

For Nessma, the hijab holds layered and evolving meanings. Initially, it was a personal act of religious devotion: "In the beginning, it was about my commitment to Allah and trying to please Allah in the way He prescribed. It was also a constant

reminder that Allah is with me." Over time, it became an embodied and inhabited practice, an inseparable part of her daily life and sense of self. "If I don't put on the hijab, I feel almost naked." Eventually, hijab became a visible marker of her Muslim identity, communicating it before she spoke. "Her representation shows that she's a Muslim," her mother explained. For Nessma, this visibility required courage and brought with it a sense of responsibility to educate others and challenge misconceptions about Islam.

Zimal reflected on her own upbringing in a particular region of India, where women were not welcomed into mosques and the headscarf was often associated with restricted mobility and conservative gender norms. "Back then, in India, a headscarf was a sign of repression, dictated backward norms." After immigrating to the U.S., she encountered a different mosque culture, one where women of diverse backgrounds actively participated in religious, educational, and leadership roles. "The mosque was for everyone, not only men." These contrasts shaped her evolving understanding of hijab, not as a symbol of restriction, as in her past, but as an emblem of religious strength and collective identity in her daughter's present. Unlike her own childhood, Nessma grew up surrounded by strong Muslim women in the mosque, which deeply influenced her early view of hijab as a symbol of belonging to a visible collective identity of strong women.

Although Zimal does not wear the hijab, she sees it as a symbol of strength that she admires in her daughter. At the same time, she emphasizes that one's relationship with Allah is not contingent on appearance: "It is not the appearance. It is the values. It is knowledge. I'm as much of a Muslim as Nessma." Nessma expressed that her parents would support her if she decided to remove the hijab, but her mother admitted she would feel concern: "If this is taken away from me, I would question what went wrong. We didn't force her. It was her choice." While Zimal emphasized that she would stand by her daughter no matter what, she also acknowledged the symbolic weight the hijab carries. To her, Nessma's hijab is more than a religious garment; it is a visual reminder of her daughter's bravery, independence, and visible strength. Her concern would not stem from judgment, but from fear that something had disrupted her daughter's confidence or shaken the strength the hijab had come to represent. Her wish was to understand, not interfere, ensuring Nessma's choice still reflected that same confidence and sense of self.

Nessma's narrative reveals that the meaning of hijab shifted across developmental stages. When she began wearing hijab in early childhood, around age seven, it functioned primarily as a devotional and familial practice, an expression of faith that was normalized and supported within her immediate community. During early adolescence, particularly in middle school, hijab became more embodied and relational, tied to comfort, confidence, and belonging within an all-girls educational environment. By age sixteen, however, hijab took on a more explicitly social and public dimension. In high school, where her visibility as a hijabi Muslim girl intensified, hijab became linked to questions of representation, responsibility, and ethical decision-making. This trajectory underscores that hijab

is not a fixed symbol, but a practice whose meanings evolve alongside social context, visibility, and developmental change.

Dual Responsibilities: Confronting Gender Inequality and Religious Bigotry through Visual Muslim Identity

In her Islamic weekend schools, especially Al-Noor, hijab was widely upheld as a visible symbol of religious commitment. Dana, her Islamic studies teacher, mediated a classroom moment in which one student listed hijab as an example of a good deed while another challenged its status as a religious obligation. Dana emphasized that appearance does not determine a woman's faith and used the moment to discuss humility. Sanaya, a teacher of Pakistani descent, also led sessions that questioned outdated and problematic justifications for hijab, such as linking it to controlling male desire. "We're oversexualizing men… metaphors like women as lollipops that attract flies [men] are really inappropriate," she explained. Sanaya encouraged students to reframe hijab in ways that felt personally relevant and empowering.

Through these conversations, Nessma developed a critical stance on hijab and other gender-related issues. She distinguished between hijab as a meaningful spiritual practice and hijab as an obligation framed by male-dominated interpretations. Her mother, Zimal, admired Nessma's critical engagement with religious matters: "There are multiple interpretations of the Qur'an. She's able to have those different viewpoints that make her very critical. When it comes to modesty, it's something only women can determine." Despite her admiration, Zimal herself preferred a more traditional and deferential approach to religious authority. "In the past, when a sheikh or an Imam explained something, you would see it as the only explanation. It was like we had blinders. Nessma is different; that does not work for her."

During question-and-answer sessions with the Imam, Nessma posed questions about gender equity: "We ask questions, and the answer is that women need protection. But that raises the question, why do women need to be protected? Why can't we defend ourselves?" While she valued these spaces for dialogue, she often found the responses insufficient. Nessma wished for broader inclusion of youth and women in religious discourse: "I wish there were more teenage and female voices, multiple perspectives and talking points."

Negotiated Responsibility to Educate Others

When Nessma began wearing the hijab in the second grade, her classmates asked questions like, "Are you bald?" or "How do you wash your hair?" Nessma never interpreted these questions as malicious. "We were so young; we were just questioning the people around us. I didn't feel any ill will behind them."

To her, these questions were no different than when classmates asked about the Indian food she brought for lunch or when teachers inquired about summer plans and she spoke about visiting India. She interpreted these moments as forms of cultural curiosity and opportunities to educate others about her religious and cultural background.

She also viewed these questions as opportunities to deepen her own religious knowledge. “They come to me with a question that they want clarification on. So, I feel responsible for bettering their understanding.” This sense of responsibility was strongly encouraged by her parents, especially her mother: “I always tell her we have a responsibility to answer questions, and while doing that, we may increase our knowledge. If I don’t know enough, I can say I will ask the Imam and let you know.”

Although Nessma embraced this role as an informal educator, she also clarified its boundaries. She emphasized that she could only speak from her personal experience, not on behalf of all Muslim women: “I may not speak for every Muslim woman in the world, but at least I can speak for myself.” This self-ascribed responsibility was shaped by her visible identity. As she explained,

> I take a higher responsibility than non-hijabi women or men. That is primarily why I decided to wear the hijab. I want to be identified as a Muslim; it is my responsibility as a Muslim and a representation of Islam.

Nessma recognized that her public visibility amplified expectations to represent her faith, expectations she sometimes welcomed but did not always embrace.

She drew a clear line between choosing to educate others and being pressured into doing so. Nessma resisted the moral burden often placed on visibly Muslim girls, especially when enforced through gendered social norms: “Men are given more liberty to do what they want. If someone sees me doing something wrong, they will describe me as a bad Muslim, and that’s unfair.” She also distinguished between genuine curiosity and intrusive questioning. Curiosity-driven questions were welcome, while those that challenged her personal decisions felt discriminatory. For instance, when a male classmate asked why she wore the hijab while her mother did not, Nessma was frustrated: “I get annoyed when men think that they have an opinion on what I wear or what my mom wears.” In that moment, she offered only a brief response, unwilling to explain something so personal under judgmental scrutiny. While she maintained her commitment to educating others, Nessma carefully negotiated that responsibility on her own terms.

Contextual Enabling Resources: Qur’anic Knowledge and Women-Only Spaces

The visual identity of criticality, strength, and bravery that Nessma associated with hijab was further nurtured by two supporting factors: Her growing Qur’anic knowledge and her access to female-only educational and communal

spaces. Qur'anic knowledge played a key role in shaping her critical approach to gender equity and religious identity. At Al-Furqan, the weekend school she first attended, students took three core subjects: Qur'anic memorization and recitation, Arabic, and Islamic studies. Instruction emphasized rote memorization and pronunciation, with Arabic classes focused on decoding rather than comprehension. This approach posed a challenge for non-Arab students like Nessma. She explained: "I memorized [Qur'an] and would just forget it. I didn't understand what it meant, so I didn't feel I was learning very much."

Her mother, Zimal, also expressed frustration with this instructional approach, noting that the emphasis on decoding over understanding limited her daughter's participation: "As a South Asian student, she could offer a great deal, but the program didn't allow her to fully contribute due to its narrow focus." When Nessma transferred to Al-Noor, she took a more active role in shaping her learning. One of her first requests was for English translations of the Arabic verses she was asked to memorize: "I started asking my teacher to read the translation. It helped my understanding, and then I could retain it better." Nessma described Al-Noor as a more diverse and inclusive environment, where she could move beyond surface-level decoding and gain the Qur'anic understanding she needed to ground her identity and uphold the responsibilities she embraced.

In addition to deeper religious knowledge, women-only spaces in her community and schooling contexts also supported Nessma's negotiated responsibility to share knowledge about her faith across interfaith spaces. At Al-Noor, Dana and her husband co-taught high school Islamic studies and later divided the class into gender-separate halaqat (study circles), with Dana teaching the girls. Every other week, the groups came together for a joint question-and-answer session led by the community imam. Dana reflected, "I felt the difference. I could hear the girls in an authentic way. They were being themselves." Nessma also appreciated the shift: "I feel more comfortable. I can ask questions about Islam that are relevant to me as a female."

While Nessma valued the reflective space created in girls-only settings, she held inclusive views on gender interaction in religious life more broadly: "Whenever they [men] don't talk to a woman, I wish it was less of 'religion says so.' I want them to feel more comfortable having a conversation with the other gender." Her experience with women-only spaces began earlier in middle school, where she attended a private girls' school and engaged in rich discussions on race, gender, and culture. Zimal reflected on the lasting impact of that environment: "The confidence and relationships she developed there stayed with her. I saw her flourish in that context as a girl and as a Muslim more than any other context."

Discussion

This discussion is guided by feminist, postcolonial, and interpretive frameworks, highlighting how hijab becomes a site of visible strength, religious

devotion, and social negotiation. It explores how Muslim girls like Nessma use hijab to challenge gender inequality, resist religious bigotry, and navigate the responsibility of educating others across both Islamic and mainstream educational spaces.

Hijab as a Multifaceted Symbol and Site of Resistance

Hijab, as a visual expression of Muslim female identity, carries religious and political connotations shaped by historical and sociopolitical contexts. Hijab's contemporary resurgence is commonly traced to the late 1970s and 1980s, emerging alongside broader Islamic revival movements and shifting sociopolitical conditions (Ahmed, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 2013). In colonized nations, hijab was often a form of political resistance against Western imperialism (Haddad et al., 2006; Karim, 2009; Sheth, 2022). In other contexts, it has offered Muslim women social mobility or financial independence (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Sheth, 2022), as well as helped them navigate local Muslim networks (Karim, 2009).

For Nessma, hijab held multiple evolving meanings: An act of devotion, an embodied practice, and a visual symbol of Muslim identity that enabled her to confront both religious bigotry and gender inequality. She wore the hijab to emphasize inward qualities over outward appearances and to challenge objectification. In doing so, she rejected widespread narratives, still present in some communities, that frame women's modesty as a means to shield men from temptation. Scholars like Zine (2009) caution that framing hijab as a desexualizing shield wrongly places the burden on women to prevent male behavior and reinforces gendered power dynamics.

In this study, Nessma's teachers also pushed back against these outdated metaphors. They critiqued analogies such as the "wrapped candy" or "lollipop" example used to equate modest women with protected sweets and unveiled women with exposed temptations. Unlike the teacher in Sarroub's (2002) study who used such analogies to convince girls of hijab's value, Nessma's teachers, especially Sanaya, deemed these narratives humiliating and inappropriate. Their rejection created space for a language of choice, confidence, and resistance to gendered and sexualized objectification. This reframing allowed girls to connect their modesty practices with broader struggles against the commodification of women in American society, forging intersections with the experiences of other marginalized groups. This reframing enabled girls to link modesty practices with broader struggles against the commodification of women in American society, aligning their experiences with other marginalized groups.

Identity, Visibility, and the Burden of Representation

The findings highlight how Nessma's identity was shaped at the intersection of being an American-born Muslim post-9/11 and a believer in the Islamic ethic of dawah, the responsibility to share knowledge about Islam. These intersecting forces fueled her commitment to educate others. Wearing the hijab made her visibly Muslim, and with that visibility came frequent questions about her religion and culture. She embraced this responsibility while carefully setting boundaries between voluntary engagement and unwanted scrutiny. She distinguished between curiosity and interrogation, pushing back when the questions crossed into judgment or gendered assumptions such as when asked why she wore the hijab while her mother did not.

Importantly, her sense of responsibility was not merely a reaction to Islamophobic contexts but grounded in Islamic tradition. As several studies have noted, young Muslims see dawah not only as a religious obligation but also as a form of civic participation and resistance to misrepresentation (Bayoumi, 2010; Haddad et al., 2006). Within this American landscape, dawah became both a spiritual and political act, anchored in authentic knowledge and tied to legacies of social justice.

Qur'anic Knowledge and Distinguishing Religion from Culture

Nessma's narrative also revealed how Qur'anic knowledge served as a critical tool for distinguishing religious values from inherited cultural practices. She used this distinction to question patriarchal traditions and to assert gender equity grounded in Islam. Like participants in Sarroub's (2002) and Khan's (1998) studies, Nessma employed religious texts to critique male-dominated interpretations and challenge norms around marriage, relationships, and modesty. Her teachers reinforced this distinction through their pedagogy. Educators like Sanaya addressed topics often ignored in Islamic weekend schools such as dating, drugs, and gender roles with nuance and openness. This empowered students like Nessma to reconcile their faith with contemporary social realities and to voice their religious understandings with confidence.

However, gaining religious knowledge came with challenges. Liturgical Arabic often acted as a gatekeeping language in Qur'anic instruction, posing barriers for non-Arab students like Nessma. The traditional focus on memorization without understanding left her feeling disconnected. In response, she advocated for English translations, and teachers shifted to prioritize comprehension and reflection over rote recitation. This pedagogical shift was crucial for affirming students' religious and cultural identities, especially those from non-Arab backgrounds (Rosowsky, 2006, 2012).

Women-only Spaces as Sites of Learning and Empowerment

Nessma's confidence and religious agency were significantly shaped by women-only spaces, specifically at her Islamic weekend school and her former all-girls' middle school. These settings temporarily offered safe, intentional environments for critical dialogue, deeper Qur'anic engagement, and open questioning of patriarchal norms. At Al-Noor, gender-separate Islamic studies classes enabled female students to speak more freely and develop religious arguments in a supportive atmosphere. Both teachers and students described these spaces as allowing for more authentic discussions and increased comfort.

However, these settings were not isolated or permanent. Girls, including Nessma, actively transferred insights from these women-only classrooms into co-educational contexts such as a joint question-and-answer session with the mosque Imam, where they publicly challenged dominant interpretations using perspectives cultivated in their girls-only group. While prior research has shown how Muslim women use women-centered religious spaces to claim voice and spiritual authority (Chan-Malik, 2018; Karim, 2009), this study extends that work by framing such spaces as temporary pedagogical bridges, not ends in themselves but means of fostering more confident, egalitarian participation in mixed-gender dialogue. Rather than endorsing gender segregation, this interpretation invites a reimagining of women-only spaces as tools that can provoke more balanced and collaborative communication between Muslim men and women.

Ultimately, this study offers a textured understanding of how hijab served not merely as a religious obligation, but as an act of devotion, an embodied and inhabited practice, and a site of negotiated responsibility. By centering Nessma's voice, the research challenges both Orientalist portrayals and static inherited expectations, foregrounding the agentive, contextually rooted ways young Muslim women navigate the intersections of gender, religion, and social responsibility. These findings suggest that hijab is not a fixed symbol but a lived, evolving practice shaped by girls' spiritual commitments, educational contexts, and dual acts of resistance, both intra-communal and societal, that reflect the layered complexity of their experiences. For educators, this study points to the need for more inclusive and dialogic religious instruction that values comprehension over memorization. For mainstream educators, it is important to recognize that, while some visibly Muslim girls may embrace dawah, which in this context refers to respectfully correcting misconceptions about Islam, they should not be burdened with the expectation of serving as cultural or religious representatives. Although this engagement may reflect personal conviction and sincere faith, assigning such responsibility to youth is neither developmentally appropriate nor ethically just.

Implications for Practice

Grounded in the aims of multicultural education, this study offers several implications for educators working in religiously, culturally, and linguistically diverse school contexts. First, non-Muslim educators should avoid positioning visibly Muslim students as informal representatives of their faith. While some students, like Nessma, may choose to educate others, this responsibility should not be assumed or imposed, as doing so reproduces inequitable expectations.

Second, educators should approach intercultural understanding as a shared institutional responsibility, rather than an individual obligation placed on minoritized students. The findings demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between respectful curiosity and forms of questioning that function as surveillance or intrusion. Developing classroom norms that support critical, respectful dialogue can foster inclusion without demanding personal disclosure.

Third, this study highlights the need for more expansive definitions of literacy and knowledge within multicultural education. Religious literacies, including engagement with sacred texts and ethical traditions, are often treated as separate from academic learning, despite their role in students' intellectual, moral, and identity development. Recognizing these forms of knowledge supports more equitable participation for religiously minoritized students.

Finally, the study underscores the value of intentionally designed dialogic spaces, both within and beyond classrooms, that allow students to question dominant narratives, articulate critique, and develop critical consciousness. Such spaces enable students to navigate complex global, cultural, and religious identities while shifting the burden of intercultural learning from individuals to educational institutions.

Limitations

This study employs an instrumental case study design that privileges depth and situated understanding over breadth or generalizability. Nessma's experiences were shaped by particular advantages, including supportive family relationships, access to quality Islamic education, and economic resources, that may not be available to all Muslim adolescents. Her case illuminates how hijab and religious responsibility are negotiated but cannot speak to the experiences of Muslim boys, girls who do not wear hijab or who remove it, or youth in communities with fewer educational resources. Methodologically, the study is limited by reliance on participant retrospection for early childhood experiences and by asymmetric access across settings; Islamic weekend schools were more readily observable than public school contexts. The analysis is also shaped by the researcher's positionality as an Arabic-speaking Muslim woman of non-South Asian background, which may have influenced what participants chose to share and how accounts were interpreted. These limitations do not diminish the case's analytic

value but mark the boundaries of its claims. The findings contribute conceptual insight into processes of negotiation, resistance, and meaning-making that invite empirical exploration across diverse Muslim communities, contexts, and educational settings.

Though centered on one participant, this study underscores the layered negotiations involved in wearing hijab as a form of devotion, responsibility, and resistance. It invites further inquiry into how Muslim girls across diverse settings reinterpret visible religious identity in response to both inherited community expectations and dominant societal narratives.

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