

AT HOME IN MY BODY: SARTORIAL PRACTICES OF YOUNG PAKISTANI WOMEN IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract

Dress, clothing and sartorial practices are important forms of self-expression and communication with the social body. However, some forms of dress and their meanings have been politicized: Muslim sartorial practices, seen as a homogenous embodiment of tradition, have been highly criticized in western European countries. This article looks at the sartorial practices of young Pakistani women in the Netherlands, arguing that heterogeneity is the main characteristic of Muslim minorities while dressing practices are as much the product of tradition as a continuous innovation and engagement with fashion.

Keywords: Islamic dress; Sartorial practices; Clothing; Fashion; Social body.

Resumo

Vestir-se, roupas e práticas de costura são formas importantes de auto expressão e comunicação com o corpo social. Contudo, algumas formas de vestuário e os seus significados foram politizados: práticas muçulmanas de costura, entendidas como personificações homogêneas de tradição, têm sido fortemente criticadas em países Europeus Ocidentais. Este artigo centra-se nas práticas de costura das jovens paquistanesas nos Países Baixos, argumentando que a heterogeneidade constitui a característica principal das minorias muçulmanas, sendo as práticas de costura um produto de tanto da tradição como uma inovação e um envolvimento contínuo com a moda.

Palavras-chave: Vestes Islâmico; Práticas de costura; Vestuário; Moda; Corpo social.



Clothing is a necessary part of our existence. The body has become the primary site of identity, both separate from others and in continuous communication with others. Dress and clothing are tools that aid communication. More than covering our body and sheltering it from the influences of nature, dress has meaning and is deeply connected with identity. The way we dress tells a story about who we are, allowing us to be recognised. Dress is an important form of social communication and is a way of connecting individual bodies to social bodies. They tell a story about the body wearing them to others. Dress and clothing, together with skin, are part of the boundary between the body and the outer world, an exterior shell that although separate and separable, becomes part of the self. Because '*the dress frames our embodied self, it seems to serve as a kind of visual metaphor for identity*' (Davis, 1992), representing the body as much as the self behind it. Through dress the body acquires the possibility to express itself socially, to communicate and enter into an active relationship with its environment. While the body is incomplete without the clothing covering it, the same can be said about clothes; any dress is incomplete without the body wearing it.

From an individual point of view, clothes can reveal, but also conceal, identity: the dynamics behind this relationship become complex in a context where different people meet in a variety of situations. We can identify two different sartorial techniques: one of them is based on the idea that the identity of a person needs to be reflected in ones outer appearance, i.e. clothes worn reflect the substance they are concealing underneath. This aspect reveals through clothes the true essence of a person. Another way of wearing clothes is based on the idea that appearance is a game meant to deceive, an artificial construction which does not need to have a direct relationship to identity. This aspect obscures the true essence of a person, clothing becoming costume. All forms of dress and clothing are endowed with the ambiguity and contradiction presented above, with the repercussion that while seeking the truth behind a certain look, we are aware that it might serve as mere decoration or it could be meant to deceive (Finkelstein, 1991).

If we look at dress and clothing from the point of view of the social body, we need to deal with issues of conformity and non-conformity. The civilized body is expected to adjust to its social environment through appropriate dress and clothing, needing an attentive and continuous tuning. Knowledge of possible situations is needed in order to ensure for a



smooth relationships between self and others. Although some forms of deviation and sartorial creativity are allowed, they are often social signs themselves. Of importance is to recognize the requirements a certain social context presents for the individual, requirements neatly codified in a cultural and social way. The clothed body carefully needs to navigate different sartorial codes in order to fit in, deviate or present just a touch of harmless individual creativity.

Clothing remains a crucial element of the relationship between individual and the social world. In exploring people's choice of dress and clothing at various moments, in different situations, we have a chance of looking at the relationship between individual choices, themselves a complex product of various degrees of constraint and agency, and collective codes, be they cultural, religious or social.

Fashion Versus Costume

Non-western cultures, and especially their material culture, have long been seen as embodying tradition and as such, being unchanging. Objects, art, clothing and other tangible and visible aspects of non-western cultures have been the first to come under the gaze of the colonizer. Looked upon from a position of power, they were considered as unchanging elements in a world of structure and order (Mitchell 1988). The colonizers took these material artefacts out of their contexts, confining them to museums. Objects that were not classified as valuable were not worthy of attention and thus inherently inferior (Said, 1978).

When looking at non-western culture's dress and clothing, the western eye saw costume and denied fashion. Thus the term of fashion has seldom been used in reference to non-western cultures:

'The term fashion is rarely used in reference to non-western cultures. The two are defined in opposition to each other, western dress is fashion because it changes regularly, is superficial and mundane, and projects individual identity; non-western dress is costume because it is unchanging, encodes deep meanings, and projects group identity and membership. In either case, dress is taken out of its 'lived' resonance and theorized in structural or functionalist terms to account for beliefs located elsewhere.' (Craik, 1993, p. 18).



Clothes, dressing and other forms of adornment were seen and collected for decades as proof of the savage primitivism of 'different' cultures. Clothes considered 'traditional' by the western eye, were preferred. These traditional clothes were transformed into stereotypes of clothing. On the other hand, clothes that were affected by fashion, by time or by the colonial presence were neglected and not considered 'real'. In this way people were robbed of their history, their pre-colonial culture was regarded an unchanging a state of being. The culture of the 'natives' was a static culture based on traditions, with no changes and most importantly no history.

Notions such as traditional dress or culturally authentic clothing neglect both of the diversity in forms of dress and the influence of fashion. Such concepts diminish both the agency and creativity of the person who wears a garment and the importance and influence of the context in which clothing is worn. Dress and clothing practices are dependant as much on historical time and space, as on the situation in which they are worn. The same person might wear completely different clothes at different times at the day, in different social contexts. Besides the fluctuation of personal choice, larger influences such as trends and fashion have their own impact on the choice of what is being worn and how. At the confluence of all these influences, personal as well as communal, timeless and much as a product of their time, dress and clothing come to meaning through being embedded in the social world.

However, as an effect of the crumbling of the colonial order, globalization and migration, followed by an intense commercialization of cultures, the neat distinction between nations, cultures and traditions has become porous. While in colonial times arduous journeys had to be undertaken to encounter different cultures, at present most western countries are multicultural, meanwhile colourful 'fusion' wear has become fashion. Non-western dress has become both decontextualized and it has become more familiar. As such, it has gained a history while also adding many similarities with western fashion. It is not necessarily traditional anymore, and it certainly does not only reflect cultural customs, social structures and beliefs. The dress itself has changed together with the context in which it is worn.



Secularism – Visibility – Belonging

My starting point for this discussion will be concerns of Western European nation-states regarding the recognizable visibility of the Muslim female body in the public sphere. This politicized discussion is based on concerns regarding the increasing number of migrants who, even after becoming citizens of western European countries, remained visibly different from the majority of the population. This difference, fuelled by discussions regarding Muslim extremism and radicalization, is seen as a barrier to equality which is considered to be at the basis of the principles of citizenship and belonging:

“Notions of belonging are often at the heart of popular and political discussions about migration and may have very real, inclusive as well as exclusive effects. Belonging is usually taken to involve subjective and discursive elements of commitment, loyalty and common purpose. On the one hand, there is no exact correspondence between belonging and formal membership, on the other hand ‘membership in the formal sense is inextricably tangled with social constructions of belonging that make it meaningful” (Crowley 1999 cited in Gustafson 2005: 6).

This discussion has dimensions in different western European countries. In the Netherlands, it is being framed as concerns surrounding the (lack of) integration of populations with migrant origins. As in other countries, Muslim populations are at the core of this debate, in the case of the Netherlands’ Turks and Moroccans, the most numerous groups of migrant origins being discussed. The Pakistani population, along with other smaller and in the eyes of the state less ‘problematic’ groups, is not discussed as Muslims.

However, Muslim dress in general has been both a political and a social focus for some time causing the unveiling of the ‘politics of discomfort’, especially regarding veiling practices. At the core of such discussions are concerns about the loyalty of people with multiple attachments, concerning their true belonging and the system of values motivating it. These discussions are based on politicized concerns about group membership and the rights and responsibilities group membership brings with it. The context of discussion about Muslim dress in Europe is a specific understanding of secularity, a distinction between the public and the private sphere and a concrete vision about gender roles, all forming the core self-image of western nation-states.



The large body of literature existing on veiling practices mentions various reasons for wearing the *hijab*. Mentioned are honour, status and the attitudes of men to unveiled women in public places. Others referred to the embracing of their personal, individual religious practices. Older women sometimes refer to parental or male pressure (Gole, 1996), the younger respondents often mention agency and the unfavourable reaction of their family (Bowen, 2007). For younger women, the process of taking on the veil often appears as a symbol of change resulting from introspection and involving a personal moral decision (Brenner, 1996). Another reason were the practicalities of wearing the veil in public and it facilitating employment (Zuhur, 1993), and its connection to the various life stages such as motherhood (Gade, 2007). Also mentioned are the feelings of sisterhood and solidarity the women feel when veiled (Naghbi, 2007). Some of these themes popped up regularly around the discussions that I had with the respondents wearing the veil.

The way the veil is perceived, interpreted and argued for by the person wearing it might be in contrast with the perceptions others have about it. The veil might be perceived as a sign of the oppression of women (Bullock, 2002), as a sign of religious piety (Tong, 2008), lack of emancipation, as an obstacle towards integration in a majority – minority context (Ajrouch, 2007).

The increased intensity of political attention, and the differences between national discourses and national political ideologies, has proved a fertile ground for the investigation of visible performances of identity, such as clothing. Islamic dress and clothing was considered a measurable form of intrusion of religion into the neural and secular public sphere. However, what most of the studies neglect, while concerned with dichotomies such as tradition versus modernity, authentic versus westernized which remain unproductive by analytically recreating their theoretical standing point, is that Muslim women '*do what people do everywhere, that is to accommodate to the style of dress appropriate in their social circles*' (Moors, 2003).

At one level, what happens to these women with immigrant background is quite specific to them, but it is also typical of our global world. Their identifications are complex dialogues between cultures and consist of multiple exchanges. Their choice of dress is based as much on sartorial inventions as on survivals of culturally specific traditions regarding clothing. But the choice of dress must also be seen as a form of dialogue with the nation-state, creating personal narratives and engaging political struggles. Through

their transformative cultural, social and consumer practices, migrant women consciously or unconsciously decode and reconstruct the Dutch social landscape. Through the choice of clothing, they relate to other political, cultural, national or transnational entities, and to the social body as a whole. Dress and clothing stands in the middle of this debate as it presents the link between the individual and the social body through a playful combination of tradition and modernity and a careful adjustment to context. Stories about sartorial practices need to be read as social critiques as much as stories of belonging.

The respondents of this study interchangeably used the term 'western', 'cosmopolitan' and 'Dutch' dress or fashion to identify the codes of dress which they perceived as 'the majority' and described with term such as casual, normal, usual. Within this large category they distinguished styles, trends, manners of wearing clothes which they related to situations, individual preferences and ethnic/religious markers just as in the case of Pakistani dress and clothing. In this paper I will use the above mentioned terms interchangeably as well, without excluding the fact the *salwar kameez* can also be seen as a form of cosmopolitan dress, or that certain forms of *salwar kameez* or of wearing Pakistani clothes can be thought of as 'western' and maybe even 'Dutch'.

They all identify themselves as Pakistani and they all identified themselves as interested in fashion. Their articulation of who they are and how they define their own style come from their ability of sustaining themselves on the strengths of their diaspora roots and cultural heritage, as much from the power of being part of another culture, with another fashion tradition. Their interpretation of clothes is clearly part of a cultural pride and is maintained despite negative comments or stereotypes from the majority population. In order to protect themselves, the girls choose to wear recognizably Pakistani clothes only in situations where they are protected by their community, only seldom in places where they will be considered as minority, such as school, work place, on the street. However, protection is not the only reason for wearing clothes within the community, the *salwar kameez* and the other ways of dressing specific Pakistani are part of the group membership, are part of the statement of belonging.

Most of the girls that I have interviewed described themselves as having a way of dressing which is in some way or another Pakistani. For most of them this meant wearing from time to time a *salwar kameez* also called the suit. Eight respondents admitted to wearing other kinds of Pakistani clothing besides the large variety of suits, and they



mentioned *lenghas* and sometimes *sarees*. The regularity of wearing the suit changed, most of the girls wore it regularly at events associated with family and with the Pakistani community. Other forms of Pakistani dress were mentioned as worn at parties. Most of them thought of the *salwar kameez* as the only choice for them if they would return or visit in Pakistan. Some of them were wearing the suit also in their daily life, in public spaces, at work or at school. Seven respondents identified themselves as Muslim in their way of dress, while only three of them were wearing a *hijab* or a headcover of sorts in their daily life. Some preferred wearing cosmopolitan fashion if circumstances allowed, while most girls have more than one pair of jeans that they wear regularly.

Methods

Within the many different nationalities of immigrants or citizens with immigrant background living in the Netherlands, many of them Muslims, people coming from Pakistan are a neglected subject. Because of their relatively small number in comparison with other foreigners of Muslim origin such as Moroccans and Turks, and their relative lack of visibility in the public sphere, little is known about their community. This research does not aim at presenting a complete picture about a community, rather it attempts to invite the reader into the female world of dress, clothing and fashion, where concerns about culture, ethnicity and religion as materialized through sartorial self-expression, shed light on larger issues of individual and group identity.

The exact number of Pakistani people living in the Netherlands is not precisely known. Different measurements distinguish between nationals of Pakistan and Dutch nationals with Pakistani origin. More to that, besides the people living legally in the Netherlands, there exists a rather large but not precisely known number of people with invisible or illegal status. Estimates of 1990 counted 10 to 15 thousand Pakistanis living in the Netherlands (Selier, 1990), while less reliable sources approximate this number to have reached to 40.000 by 2008 (Goel, 2008). If we compare this number with other estimates we may expect that the number of legal residents, if is approximately the half of the total population.

The Pakistani population residing in the Netherlands is the result of chain migration. Many Pakistani migrants come from the same area in Pakistan and following *biraderi*

connections, they settled in the same areas of the Netherlands. One of the most important structuring principle of the community, in the Netherlands as in other diasporas is the *biraderi* networks, groups of relatives 'whose members are from the same caste; usually the *biraderi* is identified by its caste or sub caste name' (Shaw, 1988). These *biraderi* kinship networks provided as much the basis for immigration as for further settlement, labour market placement, marriage, etc. These connections meant social as well as financial commitment for their members, obligations which provided one with a safety net of relations when abroad. The *biraderi* groups formed subdivisions of the community at large, and thus no single unified Pakistani Dutch 'community' can be identified. Further, Selier, talking about Pakistani migration to the Netherlands, makes a distinction between three waves of immigration: low-educated migrants motivated by economic reasons, educated refugees or 'opportunity tourists' originating from cities and later on family migrants with a mixed level of education (Selier, 1990). Initial migrants did not have work contracts at arrival; they were helped to work by their family and friends already residing in Holland. Later on they attracted a wave of family reunion consisting of spouses and children. Most of the settled Pakistanis have family members living in the Netherlands.

In this study all the interviewees are part of the group formed by children of first generation migrants, most of the girls coming from families originally living in urban areas in Pakistan. All but two interviewees were born and raised in the Netherlands. The two interviewees mentioned were born in Pakistan but educated in the Netherlands. None of them spent more than two months continuously in Pakistan, while most of them regularly go 'back'. Although all respondents have been educated in the Dutch context from early childhood, the degree of exposure to the Dutch culture is far from being at the same level, being mainly influenced by the parents' ambitions, beliefs about the education of girls and attitudes towards the society at large.

The research had 24 respondents. All of them are young, aged between 17 and 29 and are born and have lived most of their lives in the Netherlands. In the case of the two young women which were not born in the Netherlands they both moved to this country together with their family at an early age (2 and 4 respectively) and have lived their entire lives here. They have followed their education in the Dutch system, they talk fluent Dutch and they have one or both parents of Pakistani origin, born and raised in Pakistan. All are highly educated, some of them following academic studies at university level (WO), others



higher vocational education (HBO). Three girls are still following secondary education, two of them VWO (pre-university education), the other HAVO (senior general secondary education). All of them have made clear choices about their vocation or their career, and all of them expect to work after finishing their education. Most of them are interested in studying, while the ones who are not interested, study in order to achieve a better social position than their parents, or to have better prospects of marriage. Work and education are mostly coupled with the need for independence and individual recognition; however, most of the girls have mentioned that after marriage they would not mind to stop studying or working.

Their parents mostly come from the province of Punjab, some from Sindh. Most of them come from completely Pakistani families, their parents being immigrants of first generation. The exceptions are two half Dutch, one half Bengali family. They are nearly all unmarried, except one, live with their parents and 13 of them have their own income. Their families, with only three exceptions, are all involved in small-scale commerce or have a small business on their own. This means owning a shop mostly in immigrant neighbourhoods. There was only one exception, a wealthier entrepreneur who had three stores in different parts of one of the Dutch large cities and lived in a upper class, mostly white neighbourhood. The division of labour within the family follows the *purdah* system of separation of genders and spheres of life connected to them, which means that in all cases mothers were unemployed housewives. The families had an average of four children. Seven respondents described their own economic situation as relatively poor compared to other people in the Netherlands, closer to middle class in six cases, while some of the respondents avoided the question. When talking about their choice of dress, clothing and fashion, a distinction was made between the income of the family which was spend on dress and clothes as necessary items, and less on 'fashion', unless the situation required it (ex. wedding), and the girls own income which was freely spent on what they described as fashion.

The method used is a combination of initial questionnaires followed up by qualitative interviewing. As the focus was upon understanding the subjective interpretations and choices regarding dress, clothes and fashion, and the decision-making process and possible sources of inspiration motivating decision, semi structured interviews were considered more suitable. After a previous introduction of the research through personal



contact, a questionnaire consisting of open questions was used in order to gain some preliminary information about the respondents and their relationship with the topic of this study. The combination of these methods allowed for the information gained from the questionnaires to be compared with the one given in the interviews – also made possible for the respondents to answer questions alone, taking their own time to do so, and spontaneously, when we met face to face. The questionnaires also had a role in diminishing the reservations some of the respondents felt at first with participating in a research. The semi structured interviews permitted a better, more detailed understanding of the contexts into which the answers to the questionnaire were given, and also permitted me to explore in depth my choices of aspects. In total 24 questionnaires were filled out and they were followed by 21 interviews focused on sartorial choices, the meaning of worn dress and the reasons behind sartorial practices. The findings will be presented in the following parts.

Veiling Practices

Some young Pakistani girls prefer a visible form of identification as Muslims through a dress item, through wearing the Islamic scarf, the veil. Interesting enough the veil worn by the Pakistani girls who mainly point out their Islamic belonging is not a 'traditional' Pakistani one, where the head would be loosely covered with a *dupatta*.

Pakistani dress offers the possibility of veiling through the third item of the traditional *salwar kameez*, the *dupatta*, the shawl whose varieties might reach a length of up to three meters and a width of one and half. The *dupatta* is usually made of transparent or semi-transparent floating materials, with its fluidity having the function of covering all needed parts: the head, the chest, or even the overall shape of the body. By definition, the *dupatta* is a multifunctional, fluid item of dress which is used according to context. The *dupatta* is as different as the *salwar kameez*. Besides their size, they vary in their colour, richness, decoration and texture which always matches the *salwar of which* they are a part.

In traditional Pakistani dress, the *dupatta* is a flexible and multi-purpose piece of the wardrobe, sometimes used as a shawl covering the bust, shoulders and arms, sometimes as a flexible and changeable head cover, to be used according to situation and personal desire. The style in which the respondents wear the *hijab* is similar to what they identify as



the way of the Moroccan girls in the Netherlands. Wearing a *hijab* in the Moroccan way, or improvising variations on it, means opting for a more stable, crystallized and permanent way of covering the head and neck than does the covering the Pakistani *dupatta* offers. However, the Moroccan way of wearing the veil is far from unitary, even in the Netherlands. What is described as Moroccan by the Pakistani girls is the almost invisible bonnet which is worn under an outer scarf, which may be tied up in different ways, leaving the bonnet party visible around the face. While one girl wears the same style over and over again, bonnet slightly visible under a carefully draped shawl, using only black, opaque materials, others like to experiment with the shape and colour and texture of their veil, using the *dupatta* when wearing the *hijab* with *salwar kameez*, or matching fabrics when worn with cosmopolitan fashion. They also have different opinions about how much of the hair, neck, face should be covered. While they agree that they need a more stable form of veiling than the Pakistani way of wearing the *dupatta*, they interpret the *hijab* according to the occasion, to their overall 'look', or to their mood:

“Wearing the hijab for me is a question of choice, with ups and downs, sometimes I have it very tight sometime I put it loose, but I always have my scarf and in this way, I am connected to my god, while still being able to show my mood.”

Using the *dupatta* in different ways, loosely or tightly worn around the head, leaving little or more hair visible is the specific Pakistani way of veiling. However, in the Netherlands, veiling refers to specific ways of headcovering, which are worn by Moroccan and Turkish women. When some of the young girls wanted to be recognized as young Muslim women, they tend to adopt practices of veiling which are recognized by the society at large. This often creates tension between what is considered culture or tradition and what is considered religion:

“Why do you want to wear it, my mother asked when I started wearing the hijab. You are not Moroccan, Turkish or Arabic, they wear it, but we do not. But for me it is and it was more Islamic, I told her that I am a Muslim and I want to wear the hijab. My mother felt a bit strange about the whole thing. You will not be recognized as an Asian anymore, she told me.”



A Pakistani girl wearing a hijab is more interesting because of the colour of her skin. She is visibly not Turkish, an association that would be brought up immediately by her style of wearing the veil – so it attracts a lot of attention. However, being part of the young woman's identity, she defends her choice of wearing the veil in this specific way: *“This is how they know me, it is me. In the beginning everybody finds it very strange, as in Pakistan the scarf is not a big issue. My mum who would rather have me more traditional than more religious.”*

Few of the Pakistani girls I have been talking with have chosen to veil. Those who did took the *hijab* as a conscious choice, a reflection of whom they are and what they want to say about themselves as Muslims instead of the following of traditions, cultural practices or family customs. By choosing to wear the *hijab*, the girls were openly opting for a break with tradition as perceived by their family. The parents, especially the mothers, would be surprised, would argue that it is against tradition, against the Pakistani and Asian culture or they would fear that their girl was becoming a religious extremist. Thus the choice of wearing the hijab is both a religious and a social choice:

“One year long I was waiting, thinking, should I do it, will it change me as a person? I have decided that the hijab alone will not change me. I started to change things for myself: going other ways, making new friends and finally I had that craved peace. I started to read books, to think about my religion, to know what the hijab means and then I thought: there is not enough time, I have to do it now.”

When talking about it, most of them identify the *hijab* with the mark of a truly religious person, which not only lives an inner religious life but also ‘dares’ to express it to the outer world. *“Only a girl who is very much interested in religion, practicing it in all its parts would cover her head”*.

Other girls aspire to be more pious: *“I am not yet ready for it”*, I heard many times during the interviews from the girls who did not (yet) wear a headcover, but thought of it as an outer symbol of religious commitment. Besides commitment, the fact that they talk about being ready supports the underlying idea of the decision being made maturely. Almost all girls who do have an interest in religion have an ideal of religious life – a state of being to be reached when one is truly in harmony with the will of God. The outer form of the commitment to the religious path, the material shape of this inner path is taken to be



the *veil*, or in some cases modest or covered dress. The veil is perceived as the first step towards a more pious self – a state of being which would culminate symbolically in a recognizably Islamic covered dress as the *abaya*. However, none of the girls considered the *dupatta* as being a pious way of covering. Even when the fabric of the *dupatta* was used in the practice of veiling, the tying style was clearly not Pakistani.

Besides a sign of spiritual maturity, the *hijab* and the modest, covered dress have also been identified (by girls not wearing them) as signs of fulfilment. Only a woman who is married and has children, thus “*has accomplished her faith*”, will be able to fully wear the *veil*, from within. From the point of view of the girls who were wearing the *hijab* on a regular basis, their choice was an expression of their religiosity and not a religious practice in itself. The veil was meant to communicate something to others and reinforce that choice in them, visually. While some of the girls perceive the relationship between wearing the *veil* and being close to God as a direct one, others describe it in terms of inner qualities which are attained by practicing religion, and is a practice which has an outward expression in modesty, materialized as much in the choice of clothes, as in behaviour.

Besides the spiritual advantages of wearing the *hijab*, there are other, more practical issues that the girls mention. One of these is their relationship with men. Some feel that by wearing the *veil*, they point out that they are good Islamic girls who are not interested in certain types of behaviour. Others, on the contrary, find that the role of the headscarf is dual; on one side it encloses the wearer in a stereotype of the “good” Islamic girl. But this also means that any deviation from the “norm” provokes surprise and comments, while wearing a scarf does not necessarily influence the essence of the encounters with men:

“The men still say something to me on the street. When I was without headscarf they would say something nasty in Dutch, now they say Islamic things like: oh mashala now I am ready to marry, or oh Leila...these kind of things. The language changed but the habit of the men did not change. I am wearing it because God tells me to wear one, that’s my reason – not for any man.”

Some girls would like to transcend their ethnicity through wearing the *hijab*. By wearing it in a style associated with another ethnic community they succeed in shifting their ethnic belonging from one group to the other. Some girls argue that the veil connects them to the larger Islamic community, the *ummah*, which makes no distinction based on



ethnicity but on faith. Belonging to the Islamic community is also important from the point of view of personal security. The girls wearing the veil either live in a neighbourhood with dominant Islamic population, or move in circles that are predominantly Islamic. Being recognized as “one of them” invites respect, or at least indifference.

The distinction between the social and the cultural function of the veil is also expressed by some of the interviewees who wear it in daily life. Specific Pakistani parties favour the *dupatta*, yet not necessarily in its function as a headcover. They say that the veil would look strange, too serious and out of place in a festive, Pakistani environment. In making a choice for veiling, they distinguish between the Pakistani community, perceived as the larger family and the people they encounter in their everyday life, on the street or in public spaces. To wear a hijab at a Pakistani gathering means to exclude oneself from the group, by accentuating difference. However, not to cover one's head in a public space would mean ignoring what the girls call ‘my muslimness’.

By choosing not to wear the hijab at public Pakistani events, the girls who opt for a headcover in their everyday life are capable of managing multiple attachments and group belongings. According to circumstances they play with their appearance, choosing clothing between different registers of meaning and priority. One of the interviewees named this capacity a power tool. The way she explained it, the veil had the power to cross over boundaries of Pakistani culture and tradition, from where being a woman meant having an inferior status in relationship to men, to a more equalitarian world, defined by Islamic rules:

“I started to read about the position of women in Islam and about how they should be treated and I was a bit surprised; it was not the source of the restrictions that I experienced in my childhood as a girl. I then used my scarf as power method. If I want my rights as a Muslim woman, as a Muslim girl then I have to behave like one, I have to be a Muslim woman, I cannot say I choose some aspects that I like and leave out some which are not appealing.”

The choice to transcend cultural traditions with religious belonging is seen in this case a conscious assuming of rights and responsibilities and dressing in a proper Islamic way. The hope behind this choice is the possibility of escape from the culturally-determined gender roles, which are preserved fiercely in the diaspora. The *hijab* has the possibility of becoming a power tool as it draws on already existing traditions and



discourses of veiling, present in the Pakistani community, the Muslim communities and the Dutch society. The coupling and decoupling of religion and culture is indeed an instrumental power tool, as each element may serve as an immanent critique to the other. The respondent further elaborated that religion can be used as a critique towards cultural practices and tradition, which are preserved through generations. In the same time, religion together with culture, in this case wearing the *hijab* and being Pakistani, can be a critique towards the Dutch society. The ambiguity behind the meaning of this piece of cloth can thus be properly exploited according to occasion.

What is important for all of the girls wearing the *hijab* is the construction of an in-between hybrid space, one between the Pakistani background, the Islamic 'requirements' and the Dutch culture into which they are born and socialised. By choosing to belong visually they try to negotiate their identity as perceived by others. While in the Netherlands most of the Pakistani girls are perceived as having a Hindustani (Surinamese) background, the girls wearing a veil are either perceived as Moroccan due to the style of *hijab* worn, or as Muslim. By wearing the veil, two respondents mentioned that they have managed to escape distinctions made on race and ethnicity (Hindustani Surinamese) and low socio-economic position associated with religion (Islam). In this way they maintain the perception of being '*migrants of some sort*': they cannot avoid categories of race, but they risk shifting perceptions in terms of ethnic belonging. Two of the interviewers explicitly used the term underclass in order to define the public perception about the Hindustani Surinamese group – poverty, crime, single motherhood were also mentioned. Rather than being excluded from society through criminalization by being perceived as one of the Hindustani Surinamese people, they prefer to present themselves as Muslims, which for them is a 'better sort of people'. In all these examples, the choice for (or, specific ways of) veiling blurs race, class and social position.

The specific ways of veiling and wearing the *hijab* in the Turkish and Moroccan ways were either learned from friends or were simply imitated in a trial-error fashion. The materials and accessories (especially the under-bonnet) are bought in Moroccan shops or at the market. While mostly Pakistani girls talk about being fashionable by wearing the latest trends which are considered personally advantageous ('*first I have to see if it suits me*'), they also think a lot about combining the *hijab* with different kind of clothing, to balance the practice of veiling. Besides using *dupattas* which are colourful and rich in



pattern and varied in texture, they combine different fabrics, matching or opposing the patterns of the dress they wear, imaginatively constructing a look of their own. They also experiment in tying them up in different ways, from revealing hair, the ears, and the neck to colourful turbans. The textiles are held together by fashionable pins with beads, chains and semiprecious stones, sometimes small jewels or broaches.

Being fashionable and wearing a *hijab* is, for them, a statement against the alleged backwardness of the Islamic woman as much as a tribute to their femininity. One of the interviewees explained that all the attention that she used to give before choosing a *hijab* to her hair, now goes into having on fashionable, matching clothes. Her way of being beautiful is now combining fashionable, cosmopolitan clothes in a covering way, matching her scarf to the rest of her outlook, and wearing make-up.

Modest Dress

The question if they do belong to the larger Islamic community by their choice of dress is pondered by the girls themselves regarding the general shape of their clothes:

"I wear the scarf but I do not dress always in an Islamic way, my clothes are not loose, they fit me well, so they show the shape of the body. For some Muslims I am too..., I do not know how to call it, unislamic I guess. But for myself it is alright, you know, I participate in this society, I work here, I cannot wear a long abaya, I would have to change all my network for that. I would feel very strange."

Some girls feel that their clothes are too tight or too revealing of their body shape; so even if they do wear a *hijab*, they do not conform to other norms of modesty of the Islamic dress. Although they try to cover the body as completely as possible they often feel regret at not being able to wear all encompassing, all covering forms of Islamic dress as the abaya. The abaya, the full body-cover, or wearing ankle long coats together with a *hijab* is considered to be 'a bit too much of a statement'. They feel that an abaya would be out of place with the place in which they live, study and work, so they perceive their manner of dressing as a compromise. From their words, it also becomes clear that some forms of Islamic dress can be seen as a symbol of the modern urban Islamic woman, as the *hijab*, which in society is perceived as a symbol of Islam above everything else. Fully covered



forms of Islamic dress are seen as an expression of culture and not one of the 'pure Islam' (also de Koning, 2008).

In order to fit in both environments – the world of day-by-day life, with neighbours, work, school and appearance in public spaces – in order to counterbalance their Islamic appearance, the girls wear the *hijab* with a specific combination of what they call 'western' clothes. Taken one by one, none of the garments are recognisably Islamic. Although in combination, they do create a look which is defined by the interviewees as Islamic in character. Short sleeves are worn over long ones, skirts and dresses over long pants or longer skirts; thus a layered way of clothing which attempts to cover the body is used, while leaving visible its overall shape. Albeit covered, the shape of the body is revealed, sometimes even accentuated:

“When I go out I try to wear a bit western because I wear a headscarf. When I go to the supermarket I just wear trousers and a dress over it. If I wear a headscarf and Pakistani salwar kameez and I go out people look at me like what are you wearing. Mostly they think oh my God it is the Taliban, because they have the idea that these clothes mean danger.”

More than the shape and cut of the clothes, the *hijab*-wearing-girls also pay more attention to fabrics, trying to use jeans or plain cottons more often and fabric with a 'tribal' touch less. They mostly feel that the headscarf expresses their religiosity, thus their identity, 'the real me'. All their other clothes should be neat and as common as possible. In general, clothes have to be 'a bit' fashionable. They try to avoid clothes with an ethnic connotation, in their case the *salwar kameez*, or embroidered garments which are also seen as not 'western'.

All girls interviewed wearing *hijab* wear make-up and different kind of jewellery. When asked if this had to do with being Pakistani they replied, while laughing, that make-up depends on gender and not on ethnicity, every woman wears it. While pointing out gender differences which they perceived as universal they introduced a different level of perceiving themselves as women, transcending both ethnic and religious barriers. They repeatedly pointed out that these levels of 'being' were not smoothly adjustable. For most of them it was a continuous struggle, a fight, and an on-going negotiation between these different levels of identity:



"I want to be the woman that I am, I do not want to hide that, but on the other side I want to live by the book, doing what God wants for me. It is not a conflict, it is a compromise. I will not wear short things, or too tight. I can be a Muslim but I can also look good: not terrible and not boring. This is the right combination for me, and maybe in the future it will change. This is the freedom that I have: to make my own choices, and if I want to I can make tomorrow another choice."

Although they mostly talk about choice, it is clear that there is a certain social pressure on what to wear. As I have mentioned before, the community does have its own dynamics, as much as every family has them as well. Another form of pressure is from the direct environment in which these girls move: neighbours, colleagues and friends, but also unknown people on the street, in shops or on public transport:

"When a person is dressed in a certain way they expect a certain kind of behaviour but I think I am just as human and I have just as much right to make mistakes. It's a shame that a girl with a scarf is not allowed to do mistakes as much as they want – but I am experimenting."

Another form of pressure is from the Islamic community itself:

"You know some Muslim girls say with the scarf it is not a joke, if you wear it then do not take it off, but I think if you don't feel happy with it take it off, if you regret the choice than take it back – they say once you take it off, you are not allowed to take it on again."

One of the girls argued that the only way for being a Pakistani and a good Muslim is to keep both the cultural norms of dressing, and the religious ones. Her understanding of the veil is different: *'No, I do not wear revealing clothes in the way you see too much skin; I do not wear clothes that reveal my figure. I do not wear a scarf, but I do always keep away from men. This is what hijab means.'*

Following the argument of my interviewee, she also mentioned that from this perspective, the *hijab* is seen not a style of dress, but a set of rules. Pakistani fashion is unique, from her point of view, because it matches the 'rules of *hijab*', while leaving intact individual choice and change. Even when a person participates in new trends and



fashions, she said, one can *'still see that the person wearing these clothes is a Muslim'* because the style of dress obeys the principles of Islamic dress (complete visual separation of the male and female body), and because there are rules about how and where these clothes should be worn.

While some Pakistani girls choose to wear the veil as a visible expression of their religious commitment, others opt for covering, modest dress as the Islamic way of being pious. Defining themselves as both Muslim and Pakistani, the associated girls do not choose for the visible side of the Islamic identity. Their choice of clothes is determined by the wish to cover their body in a non-revealing way. They do not wear the *salwar kameez* on a daily basis, although they like to combine elements of the *salwar kameez* with other fashion items. Mostly they choose for the *kameez* to be worn with long skirts, straight trousers or jeans, or they wear *salwar* like tunics in the same way. They do not cover their heads, but they do like to wear the *dupatta*, more like a 'western scarf'.

The way they understand the Islamic way of dressing is by covering the body, being modest: *"For me it is important to cover up my body. Although I wear short sleeves and tight jeans. I never wear sleeveless shirts, backless tops, short tops where my belly is not covered. I make sure that I do not show off too much of my body."*

As for what defines too much and what is proper, opinions vary. While some girls worry about uncovering the neck and the legs, others are trying to cover the back and the belly. Other think that tight, body hugging or transparent, revealing clothes are unacceptable from an Islamic point of view: *"I should be less revealing to be called fashionable from an Islamic point of view. My clothes are transparent, sometimes short and tight and I do not wear a hijab."*

Other girls feel that by wearing the *hijab* they would attract attention, which would go against the principle of wearing the headcover as part of the modest dress required by Islam. They feel that by wearing jeans and cosmopolitan fashion, by wearing clothes that are not too tight and trying to cover up their body, they would remain 'invisible' or less noticed in their environment than by wearing recognizable Islamic clothing. For them, wearing the *hijab* means being different, and thus not following the precept of modesty: *'In the Netherlands if one wears the hijab one attracts more attention, so I really do not understand why we should do that.'* Moreover, recognizably Islamic clothes are not



necessarily an indicator of faith or piety: *“I do not think that all covered women are interested in Islam”*.

The girls which define modest clothing as *‘true Islamic clothing’* try to construct the appearance of a good girl with a proper conduct. They do not try to avoid racial categories, but are rather concerned by moral ones. Keeping their Dutch identity with the choice of their clothes while also observing the Islamic standards of body covering at least partly, they create fluid identities which fit in more than one context. The trade off between cultures is perceived by some as a struggle, while for the other is just a way of dealing with their environment.

Clothes and fashion are important, especially so in connection with religion. Pakistani girls go to excruciating lengths in order to find information about the latest trends, to find out if a style suits them, or acquiring the wanted clothing. Multiple sources of information are used, a large variety of people are consulted and involved into the self-fashioning process, and many real or virtual commercial structures are visited across national boundaries. Clothing should be seen a continuous process of experimentation which uses sources of inspiration and combines them with traditions and customs, in order to achieve an ultimate unity which relates the individual to a concrete situation and to the social body behind it. It is also part of an intricate process of translating piousness into materially visible and recognizable forms. It is as much a form of coming to terms with personal beliefs as a way of belonging and communicating to the social body to which Pakistani girls belong.

Conclusions

Dress, clothing and fashion offer valuable information about the relationship between social bodies, their identification and strategic representation in relationship to the environment serving as their context. Without clothing, the social body is incomplete. Pakistani Muslim girls feel incomplete without wearing a form of pious dress, be it through the personal interpretations of the practice of veiling, or through wearing what they define as an Islamic modest dress.

Through wearing a certain type of clothes, or by wearing them in a set manner, the individual might be recognized as being a member of certain groups, of certain categories.



This possibility of generalisation which starts from the embodied practice of clothing gives to the individual the possibility of being recognised. Once visually present, the individual communicates something to the outer world through the use of dress, clothes and fashion. The social reality provides models, upon which style can be recognized, perceived as well as enacted as a role. Pakistani Muslim girls strategically use different clothes in order to be recognised: at events with the family or the Pakistani community they wear the *salwar kameez* which is recognized as Pakistani. In public spaces, where they want to be recognized as Muslims, they borrow style of clothing from other ethnic groups in the Netherlands, which are spontaneously recognised as Muslim. Most of the girls combine what is perceived as cosmopolitan or western clothing with either recognisably Islamic dressing items or layer western clothes in a way which is considered Islamic. This sartorial bricolage gives them the opportunity to present themselves both as fashionable and traditional, belonging in the same time to two different social bodies.

The meaning of dress is flexible. It depends on the complex intersection of time, space, social dynamics and the segments of class, race, ethnicity and culture. The same item of clothing has different personal meanings and is perceived as having different meaning according to the situation, context and the person wearing it. The meaning of the veil in the case of the Pakistani young women can be an expression of inner religious maturity, a religious practice itself or can mark changes in social status attained through marriage. To wear a *salwar kameez* at home means a different thing than to wear it in public. While in the private realm of the house, the *salwar kameez* means the comfort of feeling at home; in the public space of the Pakistani community, it signals belonging, acceptance and membership; while in front of the Dutch neighbours it may appear as a sign of religious fundamentalism.

Dress, clothing and fashion, and their flexible meanings make categories of race, ethnicity and culture blurred and exchangeable. A kameez worn with jeans creates, through the mixture of seemingly disparate elements, an outfit which is not easily recognisable in terms of ethnicity and culture. The veil worn with a *salwar kameez* intersects categories of religion with ethnicity. When the *hijab* is tied in a way characteristic of other ethnic minority groups, a vacuum of meaning is temporarily created, vacuum which becomes a strategy to transgress race and ethnic categories.

Not only the meaning of the garments is mobile; clothes are diverse, their variety and variability is almost infinite. Dress and clothing changes both due to fashion and to personal creativity. This is true of clothes which pertain to 'mainstream', 'western', 'normal' categories, as much as to those which are described as 'exotic', 'oriental', 'traditional' or 'Islamic'. Islamic fashion(s) exists, and they are passionately followed. A large array of clothes is preferred by Muslim women, some of them connected to religion, while some of them not. The salwar kameez is perceived and worn as fashion and not necessarily as a 'traditional' garment.

Clothes are also flexible. Most of the clothes might be worn in different ways, with multiple functions. The *dupatta* may interchangeably function as a veil, a shawl or a belt, covering alternatively the head and neck, the bust or the arms. Same is true of the jeans. When worn with a *kameez* they look exotic, while with a shirt, casual. Accessories, jewellery and make-up contribute to the flexibility of dress. The same *salwar kameez* worn with intricate make-up and plenty of jewellery becomes transformed from casual dress to festive attire. All these possibilities are contextual and thus need to be understood as statements of specific bodies relating to specific social situations.

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