

Chapter 3

Translating Muslim Women's Bodies: The Semantic Battle on the Hijab

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ABSTRACT

In the chapter, the author briefly analyzes the turbulent semantic and semiotic confrontation that accompanies the process of decoding the significances of the hijāb. The current mythologization of the hijāb unveils diverse mechanisms of constructing and regulating Muslim women's bodies and their right to autonomy. In the first part of this chapter, eight meanings attributed to the hijāb by Muslim interpreters are discussed: a local social convention, a symbol for and a protection from the fitnah of women's bodies, a manifestation of religiosity, a feminist practice, a political statement, a cultural tradition, a subversive strategy of regaining autonomy, an artistic expression. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to some peculiar translations of hijāb that are usually validated by non-Muslim interpreters: hijāb as a religious symbolic object, a symbol of alterity, a sexist cultural manifestation, a reminder of terrorism. The chapter ends with a succinct analysis of the transformation of hijāb into a condensation symbol that manifests a mobilizing emotional power.

INTRODUCTION

Some Muslim women choose an attire which does not clash with Western norms that regulate what has been agreed upon as acceptable for the female body to reveal to the public gaze. Other Muslim women do not follow these rules of benign sartorial integration, bringing out difference in the form of *hijāb* or of the less common *niqāb* (not to be analyzed here). *Hijāb* was rooted in an abstract, culturally conditioned, ethico-moral concept of modesty and diversely transposed into a specific practice of administering the exposure of Muslim women's bodies. Consequently, *hijāb* was semantically interpreted in a very dynamic, various and fluid manner. Moreover, in our contemporary settings, more often than not

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hijāb was translated as a symbolic object, more precisely, as a non-verbal condensation symbol that was finally directly substituted ontologically by the Muslim women's bodies themselves. In what follows, a brief analysis will be developed regarding this turbulent, often reactive and authoritarian semantic and semiotic confrontation that accompanies the process of decoding the significances of the *hijāb*, especially in today's socio-political and cultural contemporary circumstances. This clarification is especially relevant from a gender study perspective because the current, often highly politicized, mythologization of the *hijāb* unveils diverse mechanisms of constructing and regulating Muslim women's bodies and their right to autonomy.

In the interest of simplification and clarity, two social contexts that defined the *hijab* will be emphasized: the original historical context, specific to the Muslim cultural space, and the contemporary Western social context that includes Muslim minority communities. Moreover, the analysis will underline the double conflict that exists, on the one hand, between translating the *hijāb* in the sphere of non-symbolic, individual practices and its recent categorization as a symbol, and, on the other hand, between the symbolic constructions of *hijāb* legitimated in the Muslim culture and *hijāb*'s symbolic constructions created, overlaid and validated in the Western society. Therefore, in the first part of this chapter eight strategies used by Muslim women (and men) in attributing meanings to the *hijab* will be analyzed, taking into account their historically complicated evolution: *hijāb* as a local social convention that protected Muslim women in the public space from the non-Muslim men's rampant aggressions; *hijāb* as a symbol for and a protection from the *fitnah* of women's bodies and sexuality, a mode of regulating women's sexuality in order to protect the patriarchal honor and Muslim women's bodies from the Muslim men's aggression; *hijāb* as a manifestation of religiosity; *hijāb* as a feminist practice; *hijāb* as a political statement; *hijāb* as a simple cultural inherited tradition; *hijāb* as a pragmatic, subversive strategy of regaining Muslim women's autonomy and their presence in the public space; *hijāb* as an artistic expression, here including the aspect of the modest fashion.

In the second part of the chapter, some new, contemporary translations of *hijāb* will be succinctly presented, which are usually, but not exclusively, created, disseminated and validated by non-Muslim interpreters: *hijāb* as a religious symbolic object, a controversial categorization that throws into crisis Muslim women's collective right to religious freedom and their individual right to autonomy; *hijāb* as a symbol of alterity, an irreconcilable, dangerous cultural alterity that could jeopardize Western values and way of living; *hijāb* as a sexist, homogeneous cultural manifestation; *hijāb* as a reminder of terrorism and its corollary, *hijābophobia*, the gendered dimension of Islamophobia. The unbalanced space dedicated to the explanations of these different types of *hijāb* is unavoidable and reflects the various complexity of the reasoning involved in the process of signification relevant to the main goal of this chapter, that is the contemporary definition of the *hijāb* as a nonverbal condensation symbol.

The last part of the chapter discusses the transformation of *hijāb* into a condensation symbol. Nowadays, the practice of *hijāb* has started to function as a nonverbal condensation symbol that accumulated a series of intense connotations and acquired significations, often without any connection or in clear antinomy with the initial meanings. Once *hijāb* manifested a mobilizing emotional power, it was efficiently used both in the Islamophobic rhetoric of the extreme right parties, but also in the politicized, patriarchal hysterical call on cultural identity of the Muslim fundamentalists.

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