Hijab: Negotiating Religion, Culture, and Personal Identity

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Abstract

This mini-unit seeks to demystify the role of hijab, or veiling, in Islam and in the lives of Muslim women. As a visible marker of religiosity, the hijab -- and the bodies of the women who wear it, or not -- has become a battleground for the formation of Muslim identity. Widely misunderstood, the hijab is often seen by non-Muslims as a symbol of an inherent oppressiveness in Islam, or a signifier of a rigid, conquering Islam that threatens to devour the liberal ideals and freedoms of Western civilization. For American Muslim women in particular, the decision of whether or not to wear the hijab is a crucial part of identity formation as they try to represent themselves in a society where their place is still being negotiated, all the while balancing the various pressures they feel from family, community, peers, and their own religious convictions.

This is a topic often skirted around because of some fear of being able to discuss it politely, but I sense a real yearning to understand from my students in general, and especially in my Muslim students, who want to bring this discussion to their peers. Where does the idea of hijab come from? To what extent is it obligatory in Islam? Is it even Islamic? Is it even religious? These are the questions I seek to address (if not answer) in this mini unit. Thus, rather than provide clear answers, my goal is to initiate my students into the discussion and debate within the Muslim community surrounding the hijab.

Curricular Context

This mini-unit is intended to be taught as part of a larger unit on World Religions within the context of a Global History course. World Religions are introduced after ancient and classical civilizations. Students will previously have had exposure to the historical origins of and essential characteristics of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and will continue on to learn about Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shinto. As a key precursor to the Religions unit, students will already have discussed religiosity as a spectrum and taken a look at different forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
A framework for conceptualizing religion will already be in place -- a mental picture (and a literal graphic, as in little bubbles on a worksheet) that asks students to think about religion as living at the intersection of **doctrine** (text, mainstream consensus beliefs), **place** (history, culture, nation, etc), and **self** (family, community, personal convictions). This unit refers back to that framework, so it is necessary to do this, or something like it, first. The ASKR protocol for posing good questions (what **Assumptions** are being made in the question? / is it actually a **Statement**? / what **Key words** are problematic? / how could we **Rephrase** this?) will also have been taught and practiced during classroom discussions.

**Classroom Context and Differentiation**

I teach English Language Learners (ELLs) and Special Education (Sped) students in a Title I public school in the Bronx, so this unit is meant to be accessible to students with limited language skills, including some who are struggling with attention or processing issues. However, that said, I haven’t yet created all the necessary scaffolding for these lessons. There are a lot of visuals, and I’ve highlighted vocabulary that is important to explicitly teach and repeat throughout this unit. Vocabulary and sentence exercises would be an important addition for any ELL class. Although full online text links are provided, if you’re modifying this for ELLs or Sped I’d suggest paring it down to just a few examples and doing more scaffold checks for understanding (like guided questions, complete-the-sentence, paraphrasing/summarizing, etc).

**Essential Questions**

- What is veiling?
- How has the meaning of veiling changed over time and space?
- How do Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries negotiate their identity via hijab?
- Is hijab a religious signifier or a cultural signifier?
- How do people interact with religious texts to make meaning?
- What is the dynamic role of hijab in Islam?
- How does the interaction of doctrine, place, and self shape religion?

**Content/Understanding Goals**

- the doctrinal ideas of Islam are deeply informed by the Quran, Hadith, Sunnah, and the clergy’s interpretation of all of the above
- veiling is a practice that predates Islam and has been present in a variety of cultures around the world
- most Muslims consider “hijab” to mean covering everything except one’s face and hands, and wearing loose clothing
- many Muslims consider hijab obligatory, but NOT ALL Muslim women wear hijab
- there is debate within Muslim communities about the purpose and nature of hijab
- hijab is a visible marker of Muslim religiosity; thus, for women who have a choice whether or not to veil, the decision is often a deliberate part of identity formation
Lesson Plans

Part 1 – Clothing as Signifier: Veiling in pre-Islamic Cultures, and Head Covering in Diverse Religions/Cultures

Lesson Framework:

1. Begin with a discussion of the purpose of clothing in general, helping students connect personally. Under what circumstances might you wear more clothing? Less clothing? What about hats? When do we wear them? When do we take them off? What would/wouldn’t you wear to a job interview & why? Are there any pieces of clothing that have special significance to you? Are there any pieces of clothing that make you feel more you? Are there any types of clothing you avoid because you don’t want to be seen a certain way? Etc. Pop some pictures up: cowboy hat, big gold necklace, hoodie, rosary/cross, suit, baseball cap, high heels, etc→ what do you THINK you know about a person who wears these things?

2. Introduce the concept of the veil, showing a few pictures of various forms of Muslim hijab. Show pictures of head coverings from various religions. Discuss similarities/differences, and invite speculation on what the head covering might signify (respect for God, etc).

3. Read excerpt about pre-Islamic veiling (highlight Persian empire & Byzantine Empire), discuss the use of veiling as a both a marker of class and a function of seclusion/control over property inheritance

http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078457?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Aim (on the board): What is “veiling” and what are some of its functions throughout history?

Key Questions:

-What does it mean to veil?
-What were the various roles of veiling in history?
-In which cultures was the practice of veiling common for women?

Vocabulary: veil, seclusion/seclude, inherit

SUMMARY - clothing has meaning, the veil is a type of clothing that also has meaning, and the historical meaning of the veil has been as a method of secluding and controlling women as well as a marker of high social class
Part 2 – Doctrine: The Interpretation of Texts, Debates within Abrahamic Religions, and Specifically Debates over Hijab

Lesson Framework:

1. Begin by reviewing our graphic organizer for religion, indicating that today we’re talking about doctrine, a big part of which is religious holy books. Ask students to reflect on the 3 Abrahamic religions--what’s in the texts of these religions? What is the meaning of these texts? (stories, rules adherents should follow, advice and guidelines on how to live your life) → Is it always clear what rules mean? Do we always follow rules? Ex: dress code at our school, arguments w/ principal about what counts as “jeans”, etc

2. We tend to think of religious texts as static, unchanging, very clear dictations of religious rules, but it's not that simple→ discuss some problems with religious texts, including translation error (Ex: Bible), selective canon (Ex: formation of Bible), and vagueness (Ex: “Thou shalt not eat a kid in its mother’s milk” in Judaism leading to a host of varying debates about restrictions on eating dairy with meat)

3. Readings of the Quran - remind students that most Muslims consider the Quran the revealed word of god
   -Look at a “traditional” interpretation of the verses in the Quran pertaining to hijab
   -Look at a “modern” interpretation:
   What do you notice about the translations? What kind of reasoning was used to create meaning from the text? Is there a clearly “right” way to understand hijab if we look only at the text?
   → in practice, Muslim doctrine isn’t simply from the text--Muslim scholars had to read the text and make a ruling about what it meant. Sometimes scholars look at Hadith (sayings of and about the Prophet) and Sunnah (consensus about what the Prophet did or approved of during his lifetime based on the hadith and biographies, etc)

4. Watch video and discuss questions:
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J5bDhMP9lQ
   -According to Samina Ali, how did the history and culture of the Arabian Peninsula influence the development of the hijab in Islam? From her view, what was the original purpose of having women cover themselves?
   -In what ways does the Quran give women options regarding how to dress?
   -What problems have Muslim women faced over the years? According to Ali, what does the traditional reading of hijab have to do with these problems?
   -What are some extreme rulings scholars have made about women based on their interpretation of the Quran? What is Ali’s opinion of these scholars?
Aim: How do Muslims engage with text to understand the role of hijab in Islam?

Key Questions:
- How do people interpret holy texts to create doctrine?
- Why do people sometimes disagree about the meanings of holy texts?
- Where does the mainstream Muslim concept of hijab come from?
- How are people challenging mainstream interpretations of the hijab?
- What role do history and scholars play in the interpretation of texts?

Vocab: doctrine, Hadith, Sunnah, revealed, hijab, interpret, scholar/cleric, modesty, obligatory, traditional/traditionalist, modern/modernist

SUMMARY - Is text a definitive authority on what “Islam teaches”? Why not? What other forces influence the meaning that we get from text? (History/cultural context, people’s understandings→ Place) Where do the “rules” of Islam really come from? In what ways do people help create the religion they practice?

Part 3 – Place: Hijab Around the World

Lesson Framework:

1. Now that students know the theory/rationale behind hijab, let’s take a look at it in action. Watch these videos that give a 100 year overview of various hijab styles:

https://www.buzzfeed.com/nylawissa/100-years-of-hijab-in-under-a-minute?utm_term=.ygowpq7RmL#.chybQR0Vvy

https://www.buzzfeed.com/hannahgiorgis/their-roots-are-wholly-african?utm_term=.btBaYPWvKm#.yrbc7MqgN0

And this tutorial: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-XRGlclD08

Look at some of these websites together as a class:

http://imgur.com/gallery/sYvKv
https://theveiledbeauty.wordpress.com/2017/02/06/hijab-around-the-world/
http://www.hijabiworld.com/different-hijab-styles-for-muslim-woman-around-the-world/

or divide students into groups to view on computers, asking them to look for certain things:
- What definitions are given for hijab?
- What seems to be the purpose of the site? (to inform, give fashion advice, to argue about hijab, etc)
- If there are comments, what points of disagreement are there?
- If there are comments, what types of reactions are there to a post about hijab?

2. Where is hijab more common and where is it less common? Take a look at the maps of degree of hijab use by country. Invite students to speculate on patterns, etc. For instance, a student might notice that the strictest veiling seems to be in the heart of the Middle East (Egypt to Pakistan), where veiling has been in practice since ancient times. Typically, in Southeast and East Asia (in china, for example, there are many Muslims), wearing hijab is not so common. Take a look at general perceptions of what “correct” hijab for women is by country. You’ll notice that the standard hijab (this time meaning headscarf that leaves face, not the practice of veiling in general) appears to continue to be the most mainstream, accepted version. Ask students to notice which countries have a more open conception of hijab? Which countries have a stricter interpretation?

3. Dynamic meaning of hijab:

- The state plays a big role in how people dress. Have students look at the maps of countries that either ban or require hijab. Discuss the motivations of the states in either banning or requiring. As a Muslim, how might living in a country where hijab is banned/required change your personal opinion or feelings about it?

- Notice that Indonesia, the country with the largest population of Muslims, has only general modesty guidelines, and that hijab is not very common. Indonesia is actually a place where veiling was quite uncommon many years ago but that is now quickly changing. Here are some sites that give further insight into the changing meaning of hijab there:

  http://curiouscentral.weebly.com/indonesia-blog/unveiling-the-meaning-of-hijab-in-indonesia


Aim: How is hijab worn and perceived in different cultures worldwide?

Key Questions:
- Does specific place or culture affect a people’s interpretation of the role of hijab in Islam?
- Is hijab a function of religion or culture or both?

Vocab: ban
Part 4 – Self: Muslim Women’s Voices on Hijab

Lesson Framework:

1. Return to the idea of clothing having meaning and signifying something about that person. Discuss the hijab as a visible marker of being Muslim, which renders those who wear it “Very muslim” and those who don't invisible. Add to that the common perception by outsiders of Muslim women as being oppressed, and getting dressed in the morning becomes an exercise in self-messaging. What do Muslim women living in predominantly non-Muslim countries (where they have a choice) think about wearing hijab?

2. Read these opinion pieces and quotes by Muslim women about the hijab and discuss the different meanings of hijab to different women:
   https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/28/world/muslim-women-on-the-veil.html

   Questions to consider:
   - What are the benefits of wearing hijab? What are the problems or consequences of wearing it?
   - What pressures are women under to wear or not wear hijab? Who is the source of this pressure?
   - How does the hijab help women express “who they are”?
   - How do different women view the hijab in terms of religion? Is wearing it an act of religion for them? Or not?
   - Does it seem to make a difference where women are from? Do women from different places see the hijab differently?
   - What is the relationship between the hijab and freedom?
   - What is the relationship between the hijab and power?

3. Possible mini-assignments could include filling out a graphic organizer with different viewpoints, making a T-chart (to veil or not to veil), or assigning groups to create some kind of poster for a specific girl to show what hijab means to her. Fun HW assignment--music video:
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ER-Si3ceQFs

Aim: How do Muslim women create their own understandings of hijab?

Key Questions:
- How can hijab be an important part of a Muslim woman’s identity?
- What does hijab signify to Muslims? Non-Muslims?

Vocab: identity, oppression
Good Background Readings on Hijab:


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*For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: [www.religiousworldsny.org](http://www.religiousworldsny.org).*
Hijab: Resources and Appendices
Women’s Head Coverings in Different Religions

Mennonite  Amish  Buddhist Nun  Catholic Nun  Catholic  Druze

Eastern Orthodox  Hindu  Orthodox Jewish  Muslim  Sabian  Sikh  Taoist Nun
**Niqab**
A veil covering the head and face, but not the eyes, usually worn with a loose black garment (abaya) that covers from head to feet.

**Hijab**
A general term meaning ‘to cover’ or ‘veil’, most commonly refers to a headscarf that covers the hair and neck, but not the face.

**Burka**
A veil that covers the entire body and face, with a mesh window or grille across the eyes for a woman to see out of.

**Chador**
A full-length cloak worn by many Iranian women, typically held closed at the front by the wearer’s hands or under their arms.

**Dupatta**
A long scarf loosely draped across the head and shoulders, common in South Asia and often paired with matching garments.

% who say woman is dressed most appropriately

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Source: University of Michigan Population Studies Center, The Birthplace Of The Arab Spring: Values And Perceptions Of The Tunisian Public In A Comparative Perspective. From the Middle Eastern Values Study.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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Note: The images of women shown are the same as those used in the survey.

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National ban
Country bans women from wearing full-face veils in public

Local ban
Cities or regions ban full-face veils

Partial ban
Government bans full-face veils in some locations

Proposed ban
Laws under consideration to ban full-face veils

Source: CNN reporting
EVERYTHING COVERED BUT HER EYES, WHAT A CRUEL MALE-DOMINATED CULTURE!

NOTHING COVERED BUT HER EYES, WHAT A CRUEL MALE-DOMINATED CULTURE!