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COVERING UP AND SPEAKING UP! A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF HIJABI NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

In the debate concerning the state of women in Muslim societies, scholarly literature on the hijab or the Muslim dress code is often relayed by observers and not by those who enact the religious obligation. Post 9-11 and recent developments on both the local and global stage have heightened the focus on Islam and its followers. Hate, Islamophobic, and extremist rhetoric have unfortunately overwhelmed the moderates. This state of exigency needs to be addressed. Focusing on Muslim women and the hijab, this paper attempts to address the hegemonic discourse on the dress code while bringing to the fore the narratives on hijab from personal conversations as well as texts from the media. Using bell hook's enactment as a rhetorical option and standpoint theory as a theoretical framework, this study seeks to contribute to existing literature by highlighting the voices of moderate, conscious, and practicing Muslim women who offer their views on the hijab. In expressing their faith and their practice of hijab, the women indirectly contribute to the act of da'wah while demonstrating their agency. Conversations with the women in this study revealed that the act of hijab for them correlates with the notion of agency, emancipation, and self-reward.

Keywords: Standpoint Theory; Enactment; Rhetoric; Narratives; Malaysian Women - hijabis.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In April 2017, Shiva Amini, an Iranian female professional soccer player who once played for the country's national futsal team spoke out in opposition of a ban imposed on her by the Iranian government for not covering her hair while engaging in a sport during a private trip abroad ("Iranian female soccer player publicly decries ban", 2017). In the same month and year, a Muslim teenager in Minnesota by the name of Amaiya Zafar, won the right to box while wearing the hijab (Das, 2017). On the home front (Malaysia), the question of being "Muslim enough" often relates to how much, or how little one covers (Cunico, 2017). Not too long ago, the launching of "Operasi Gempur Aurat" (Operation Aurat Attack) by the Kelantan state government, which penalizes non-hijab wearing Muslim women drew a mix of praise, criticism, as well as debates from the public (Mohammad Ahmad, 2014; Azhar & Habibu, 2014). Instances of hate crimes against hijab-clad Muslim women are also aplenty, particularly in societies where Muslims are a minority e.g. (Corcoran et al., 2014; Emporor, 2014). In a nutshell, examples of misunderstanding and debates concerning the hijab are many, both locally and globally. Current trends may be taken as a sign that this issue will linger for a while. To a non-believer or observer, one may ask, why do some women (like

the Iranian soccer player) choose to uncover, while some women (such as the teenage boxer) are adamant in the practice of hijab? This situation of uncertainty and contradictions may be seen a state of exigency. An *exigence* is a state of imperfection, which calls for discourse (Bitzer, 1968). The discourse would then modify the exigence either partially or completely¹.

Besides the issue of exigency, this paper aims to address concerns from Senior (2007) regarding the lack of literature from those who *enact* the wearing of hijab. Numerous studies have been done on the topic of hijab. Yet, for the most part, they have been written by those who are mostly observers and not by those who are actually performing the act. Senior (2007) describes,

Many of the voices that one hears are those of people who are not directly affected; they would not themselves have to consider whether or not to wear the veil. The majority of those who have written on the matter are white men (i.e. of European ancestry); a considerable number of women of European origin; some are Muslim men. Women who are either practicing Muslims or of Muslim tradition are a minority among those who express their opinions (p. 4)

In response to Senior's observation, this paper aims to add to the conversation on hijab by offering perspectives from those who are not mere observers. Instead, insights from Muslim women who are actually adhering to the religious requirement are highlighted. True, though there are some women who don the hijab due to cultural or societal pressure, many adhere to the dress code out of their own free will. Some may see the act as a symbol of oppression, while some actually see it as a sign of liberation. For *some* Muslim women, wearing the hijab is a test of their faith. Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is not only to offer personal standpoints, but to also unveil some of the issues, challenges, and misconceptions that many have towards Muslim women who choose to cover their hair and adhere to a specific dress code.

Of course, some may argue that Senior's (2007) position is dated and may no longer be relevant today. While this may hold some truth, to the best of my knowledge, literature on the hijab from a *rhetorical perspective* is either absent, or is lacking at best. Most literature on the practice of hijab address issues related to fashion (e.g. Amrullah, 2008), cultural identity (e.g. Droogsma, 2007), and hijab in the media (e.g. Hassim, Ishak, & Mat Nayan, 2015, 2016). Additionally, to counter negative narratives regarding the status of women in Islam (especially concerning those who choose to cover), it is crucial that more personal standpoints from Muslim hijabis are included in both academic and mainstream discourse. This would hopefully help reveal the women's agency. Additionally, in light of the current political climate surrounding Islam and the accusations that the women may be oppressed (see for example Alibhai-Brown, 2015), this paper hopes to communicate a different narrative of the religion by highlighting the voices of independent, moderate hijabis.

In this paper, I begin with the notion of modesty in Islam. Next, I deliberate the links between rhetoric, da'wah, and hijabis. I subsequently discuss the theoretical framework and method used in this paper. This is followed with an analysis of narratives from three hijab-wearing Muslim women by highlighting major themes related to the topic of hijab. Finally, I conclude with reflections based on the narratives and analysis.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The concept of modesty in Islam

“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband’s fathers, their sons, their husband’s sons, or their sisters’ sons, or their owner or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments ...” (Quran 24:31).

While the Quran mentions modesty in its text, it should be noted that the concept of modesty or modest dress is not a new invention, nor did Islam initiate it. The three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam all place an importance on one’s level of righteousness, modesty, and piety. Islamic teachings require that both men *and* women preserve their modesty. The only difference is that men are required to avoid tight clothing and must cover at the very least, areas between the navel and the knees (though most Muslim men will cover more than what is required). For Muslim women, concealing all areas of the body except the face and hands is prescribed. Articles of clothing that are deemed too tight or transparent should also be avoided (Tatari, 2008). Tatari maintains that the difference in requirement between men and women should not be misinterpreted as gender inequality. Instead, it is primarily due to the difference in physical nature between the two sexes. It is reported that, during the Byzantine Empire and Hellenistic era, the practice of covering one’s hair was used to differentiate the noblewomen from their lesser counterparts such as slaves or those who were unchaste (Tatari, 2008). Today, this is no longer the case. In this age of latest fashion and trends, covering one’s hair may often seem out of touch for those who do not see the need in doing so. Current trends often dictate that for women to be seen as “successful” or “liberated”, she must not only be intelligent, but also be able to keep up with the latest style and way of dress that celebrates her beauty and her youth. Common or widespread reasoning states, *if you’ve got it, flaunt it*.

Controversies surrounding the hijab is nothing new. However, the fear and hatred have intensified post 9/11. With the recent election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, instances of hostile rhetoric against Muslims seem to have heightened. Besides France’s decision to ban the hijab, other countries have also taken steps to follow suit. In a study conducted by Kahn (2007), it was reported that, while most of German society saw the headscarf as a political symbol (i.e. an accessory to aid the spread of Islam), American society perceives the hijab as a tool for potential terrorists. In Turkey, many hijab wearing women face hostility amid fears that they are a threat to the secular state and if such a practice were allowed to become a norm, women who are uncovered will feel the pressure to conform (Labi, 2008). In Singapore, where Islam is the second largest religion next to Buddhism, there have been cases whereby Muslim girls were suspended for wearing the hijab to school. Though schools are said to be “secular places” where students are encouraged to hold common ties, many believe the hijab ban was discriminatory since Sikh students are allowed to keep their turbans on school grounds (Burton, 2002).

2.2 *Linking Rhetoric, Da'wah, and Hijabis (as da'i).*

Rhetoric, according to Keith and Lundberg (2008), is the study of how, when and why a discourse is *persuasive*. It is discourse that causes people to act or think in a certain way. Rhetoric also relates to the use of symbols (to create change or influence an audience). This aligns with the idea of *da'wah*.

Al-Faruqi (1976), in his article on the Nature of Islamic Da'wah explains that da'wah concerns "the effort by the Muslim to enable other men to share and benefit from the supreme vision, the religious truth, which he has appropriated" (p. 91). One can claim that da'wah specifically concerns the idea of spreading the religion of Islam (akin to missionary work in Christianity). Further, if we take into consideration the hijab as a rhetorical symbol, specifically one that identifies itself to the religion of Islam, then it may not be far-fetched to consider one who wears the hijab to be a *rhetor*, or even a *da'i* (one who engages in the act of da'wah). Extending this notion one step further, we may infer that one who wears the hijab (or a hijabi) is engaged in the act of da'wah, whether she is aware of it, or otherwise. Placing this link in a larger context, and taking into account today's political climate concerning Islam and accusations that it marginalizes women, it is important to highlight positive messages about women in Islam, focusing on voices from the moderate and independent women who subscribe to the religion.

3.0 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Standpoint Theory and hooks's Enactment

Swigonski (1993) explains, "from a particular social standpoint, one can see some things more clearly than others" (p. 172). Swigonski claims that this particular theory involves not only an individual's position in the social structure, but also that position's relation to the individual's *lived experience*. Following this understanding, our position in society relate to factors such as gender, culture, color, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Echoing Swigonski, Kinefuchi and Orbe confirms, "the world looks different depending on your social standing" (Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008, p. 72).

Swigonski (1993) further affirms that the Standpoint Theory is based on the claim that those who are in a less powerful position experience a different reality as a result of their oppression. In the case of this study, the group that is being discussed involves Muslim women in hijab who are "oppressed" not by their religious community, but by those who mistake their identity as individuals who lack agency and are in an inferior position. As a result of this, the women involved must not only learn the ways of the society, they must also be able to assert their independence in thought so that they may be better at coping in a modern society which defines women's liberation in a non-religious manner.

Rhetoric traditionally looks at hierarchy as a persuasive tool (Foss et al., 1999). Unlike this view however, bell hook'sⁱⁱ, rhetorical perspective outlines options or ways of doing rhetoric that does not see hierarchy as paramount. She lists the rhetorical options as enactment, confession, dialogue and cultural criticism (Foss et al., 1999). For bell hooks, "rhetors" refer to individuals who are not only capable of addressing an exigence, but those who are consciously engaged in critical thought (Foss et al., 1999). Without critical thought, one is unable to move forward and grow. In other words, to be a strong rhetor, one must not be content with parroting a message. Rather, one must be fluent and critical of the substance of a

message. This paper specifically focuses on *enactment* as a rhetorical option, which refer to instances where, "individuals, particularly from oppressed groups, 'practice speaking in a loving and caring manner to acquaintances, friends, and family members... Rhetors using enactment must 'create new models for interaction...ways of being that promote respect and reconciliation" (Foss et al., 1999, p. 86). While not disregarding my own position as a hijab-clad Muslim, in this essay I engaged in conversations with three Malaysian women, who at the time of this writing, were residing in Malaysia, the United Kingdom, and Australia. All three women are from academic backgrounds. These women not only practice the act of hijab, but are also conscious of their faith and their religious acts. It is worthy to note that in a country where Muslims are the majority and Islam is the official religion, hijab is common practice in Malaysia. Although the law does not require it, most Muslim women are socially expected to cover their hair in public. This, in turn result in some individuals who perform the act out of societal pressure, and not out of their own consciousness and critical thought processes. Still, on some levels Malaysian women remain generally privileged because they are members of a developing society. On the other hand however, one cannot deny the fact that religious rhetors in the country are mostly made up of male figures that may not always recognize the female standpoint. Due to this reasoning, rhetors made up of *conscious* practicing Muslim women is crucial to ensure that Islam's equitable position on women's rights is not drowned by pessimistic rhetoric that see women as beings of secondary standing.

3.2 *Rhetorical/Narrative Analysis*

In his 1984 essay on narration as a human communication paradigm, Fisher (1984) advances the notion of humans a "homo narrans" or story tellers. He sees narratives as "symbolic actions -- words and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (p. 241). Though not all narratives may be considered equal (e.g. in coherence and "truth"), for Fisher, messages are believed to be more accessible, rhetorically sound and compelling if delivered via narratives. Referring to narratives, (Foss, 2004) contends that the format in which narratives are presented varies and may include songs, stories, films, interviews, and even visual artifacts (p. 334). Narratives concern not only the argumentative or persuasive, but also the aesthetics (Fisher, 1984). In this paper, specific focus is placed on the women's speech because hidden between the lines is a beautiful message of faith, agency, and emancipation. This is particularly important in a climate where Islam is often associated with the idea of a punitive Divine, rather than One that is gracious, loving, and all merciful.

In light of the personal nature of the topic, conversations on a one-to-one basis was seen as more ideal to capture the essence or reasoning behind the participants choice to adhere to the religious requirement.ⁱⁱⁱ Out of the three participants in this study, two were born into a Muslim family - Ida and Meena. One was a convert from Christianity -- Lia^{iv}. The first two individuals have had experience living abroad, and at the time of this study, were pursuing their doctoral studies in the United Kingdom and Australia respectively. The third individual, Lia is a Malaysian and a teacher by profession. All individuals are university graduates, in their 30's. All individuals also had their own stance with regard to their state of agency. The notion of *agency* will be addressed in the later section of this essay.

What makes the three individuals in this study interesting is that their practice of hijab is *consciously enacted*. This is especially obvious for the two ladies residing in societies where Muslims are the minority. Instead of conveniently forgoing the hijab to ensure easier assimilation, the women chose to stay steadfast in their beliefs and practices. As for the new convert to Islam that is residing in Malaysia (a Muslim majority country), instead of doing without hijab to please her non-Muslim family, she chose to stay firm with her beliefs and

identity as a new convert to the religion. In the following section, I analyze narratives from the women by organizing their stories into relevant themes.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Narratives on Agency

Different women wear the hijab for various reasons. However, among the most common reasons are self-identification, desire to protect the self from unwanted (male) attention, and to remain in a state of modesty and piety. Many observers have made statements with regard to the “oppressive” nature of the hijab. In doing so, they fail to recognize that a great number of women (including myself), who have *chosen* to wear the hijab in spite of the negative connotations that some members of the public may have with regard to women who choose to cover. This notion of *choice* is significantly related to an individual’s *agency*. Specifically, agency is defined as “the choices and opportunities actors make for themselves” (McKeen, 2001, p. 39). An example of agency (ability to act for oneself) can be derived from Mahmood’s (2005) “Politics of Piety”, she discusses the religious movement in Egypt and points out how the women in this movement hold the belief that piety and modesty account for moral goodness and in order to attain this state of virtuousness, one should aim to adhere to certain requirements, which includes covering the hair. This movement is voluntary in nature and is even frowned upon by some men who feel that such a progression makes women “outdated” in outlook, making them unfit to mix with the more social or secular crowd. By highlighting this, Mahmood was able to illustrate that contrary to general beliefs, a great number of Muslim women choose to be more pious by performing religious acts which includes donning the hijab, due to their free agency. It is not something that is forced onto them by male family members or their spouse.

In relation to the above concept, when asked about their decision to wear the hijab, respondents provided stories that may not be in line with what most people may have with regard to a Muslim woman’s reason to dress differently. Below are excerpts of feedback obtained from participants of the study.

I consider myself very ‘fast’ in my appearance changes. I started covering my hair two weeks after converting. Even my ustazah (religious teacher) had a big shock! Nobody forced me. I wanted to do it myself. Most of my non-Muslim friends were shocked; they didn’t know how to react. My Muslim friends were quite happy to see me. I had two different types of reactions from both sides. My mother was really angry! She said, why are you wearing this hijab when other Muslim women are not? And I said, “I don’t care if they don’t want to wear... I want to wear the hijab because I am a Muslim!” I am doing it for my religion! I think one of the reasons why my mother was angry with me is not because I became a Muslim, but because I choose to wear the hijab. And when I go out with her, everybody will know that her daughter has become a Muslim. Identity for us, for Muslim women, is wearing the hijab. This is sort of a symbol for us. Yeah... Not everybody is comfortable with you wearing the hijab.

- Lia (new convert to Islam, teacher)

Nobody forced me. I wanted to do it myself... My mother was really angry! ... Identity for us, for Muslim women, is wearing the hijab. This is sort of a symbol for us. Despite facing the wrath of her mother, Lia was adamant to don the hijab as a symbol of her Muslim identity and commitment to her new-found faith. These words and act resonates with the notion of

agency, which focuses on an individual's personal choice. The fact that Lia also mentioned how the hijab operates as a *symbol* aligns with the focus on rhetoric in this paper, specifically if seen from a Burkean perspective. For rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke, rhetoric is used to persuade both intentionally and unintentionally based on word choices or symbols. For Burke, symbols as well as language may be used to unite individuals with each another. Burke contends that humans are symbol using, symbol making and symbol misusing creations (Burke, 1966; Herrick, 2005). In the case of Lia, wearing the hijab *symbolized* her commitment to Islam and acts a visible declaration to the world.

Indeed, wearing the hijab is a statement about one's identity. For new Muslims, it may be seen as the most visible transformation. According to Zebiri (2008), two things often result when a female convert begins wearing the hijab. The first is an unfavorable response from the family (as relayed by Lia), as well as friends and colleagues. The second thing that occurs is the person's increase in strength and faith. For many Muslim women, donning the hijab reflects their pride in being a Muslim and helps them hold on to their Islamic identity and practices. It is unfortunate that many of those who do not understand, see it as 'not respectable', a symbol of 'going native', and even barbaric (Zebiri, 2008). These stereotypes of course, are not in concert with how many women in hijab feel.

My mom, at first, really didn't like the idea of me wearing hijab because she thought it would make me look old or narrow-minded or something like that... She was pretty upset about it... Actually, what I want is for people, or less informed Muslims and non-Muslims to view a woman wearing hijab as her exercising her choice and her wanting to be more modest, because like, its like, just because you have something, it doesn't necessarily mean you should flaunt it. But rather, if you have something really really precious, you treasure it. By treasuring something, you keep it safe, you respect it. I wish less informed Muslims and non-Muslims saw it that way...I 'rehearse' every now and then just in case somebody asks me about my hijab, but so far, nobody has! But, if someone were to ask, I would probably tell them that, it's how you define modesty. I think in some ancient Chinese culture, a woman's underarms is considered something that should not be seen. And in some cultures, a woman's arms are considered sensuous. So hijab is the way Islam views modesty. That is the level of modesty that we believe we should adhere to.

- Meena (PhD Student, Australia)

Focusing on Meena's choice of words, we can see how her experience aligns with that of Lia who went against her mother's wishes to enact the Islamic dress code. Meena also showed her consciousness or *enactment* when she relayed how she used to "rehearse" an answer in case someone approached her to ask about the hijab. This can be seen as resonating with hook's idea of enactment, which refers to instances where individuals "practice speaking in a loving and caring manner to acquaintances, friends, and family members..." (Foss et al., 1999, p. 86). Further according to Foss, this model of interaction helps promote respect and reconciliation.

Agency in this context, as highlighted by the women in this study, refers to the ability for a person to act for oneself, based on her own justification. It is not something that can be easily understood by the outside world. Rather, it is personal choice. All three individuals in this essay narrated how they came to don the hijab, a decision that was made on their own and without force. Aside from the issue of agency, the notion of "liberation" and "oppression" are

also noteworthy concepts in this topic. Which leads us to the next theme in this essay – *emancipation or oppression?*

4.2 Emancipation or oppression

Failing to accept or appreciate the diversity in today's world has resulted in negative stereotypes and the unfavorable portrayal of Muslim women. In fact, images of the "oppressed" such as the Afghan women, covered from head to toe, has regrettably been used by the Bush administration as one of the factors to justify the invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2006). The fact of the matter is, many people find it hard to believe that covering oneself from top to toe can be a sign of liberation. Some ask, *isn't it degrading? Isn't it giving into the notion of male superiority?* If this is the case, why then, did the women of Afghanistan not throw away their *burqas* after being "liberated" by the West? Why is it that many of the women who do choose to cover come from well-educated backgrounds? Surely, they cannot all be oppressed beings. When speaking of "liberation", this is what Lia (the new convert to Islam) had to say,

I wanted to wear the hijab a long time ago. I went to an all girls' school. And back then, there was only one girl wearing the hijab, we treated her well. She was very good, very kind... I think she was sort of a role model for me during my school days. And even before I converted to Islam, I wanted to wear the hijab. In fact, I had bought one headscarf, just to have a feel for it... and it was quite comfortable...and it makes a lot of difference. After, and before. Because, you see, I'm quite well endowed... and nowadays, you have all these fashion that shows off your figure. You don't have much choice in what to wear. So before I started covering up, I had men saying things like 'wow, you look nice...' and all these words that make you squirm! But after I wore the hijab, I feel very comfortable. I can go anywhere. I don't get all these ogling looks from men. Wearing the hijab allows me to be myself without having to worry about being judged from the way I look physically. Freedom to do my work, without having to think about things like, whether my skirt is too short... or things like that. I don't have men whistling at me. When I walk down the streets, they leave me alone. I feel safe. Wearing the hijab is a reminder for me, as a Muslim woman that I am under the watchful eyes of God.

Emancipation, according to Molyneux (1985) mostly refers to the idea of freedom from the demands of status quo roles or patriarchal domination. This belief resonates with the words of Lia when she said, *(A)fter I wore the hijab, I feel very comfortable. I can go anywhere. I don't get all these ogling looks from men. Wearing the hijab allows me to be myself without having to worry about being judged from the way I look physically. Freedom to do my work, without having to think about things like, whether my skirt is too short... or things like that.* Based on Lia's reflection, we may assume that for her, and perhaps many other Muslim women, practicing the hijab contributes to their sense of emancipation, an antithesis to the notion of oppression. This is particularly significant in an Asian culture such as Malaysia where the interpretation of a women's modesty is still very much tied to how much, or how little she is covered. Although this perspective can be considered very patriarchal, for women such as Lia, the practice of hijab may perhaps be the most fitting strategy to navigate society without worry of being sexualized. For Ida and Meena (the two PhD students in the U.K and Australia), donning the hijab also had its rewards. The issue of rewards as well as challenges, I address in the following section.

4.3 Rewards and Challenges

According to Zebiri (2008), “The discourse linking the hijab with female empowerment is often intertwined with criticism of Western or British society” (p. 208). Zebiri continues to relay a comment made by a convert to Islam who stated that,

Before I was a Muslim, I used to look at ladies in hijab, and I was struck by their strong, powerful, pure appearance and I wanted to cover as well...to cover yourself, especially in this culture, asserts more strength and power than to surrender to the plastic, superficial values that tell ladies to offer their beauty to the whole world (Zebiri, 2008, p. 208).

When asked whether she is treated differently because of the way she is dressed, and whether she ever feels frustrated with how some people tend to judge, Ida explains,

Well, sometimes it's good to be treated differently. The fact that some of my non-Muslim friends... they actually respect how I dress. Like, sometimes, they watch what they say when they are in front of me. They don't really swear in front of me. They watch whatever words they use. But sometimes, well, it's understood that once you wear the hijab, there are limitations. I did my undergraduate studies in the States, I had some really out-going friends, and they liked to go clubbing every weekend. I couldn't join them because of the hijab and because of what I believed in, but they respected me for that. But we got to do something else! Ninety-five or ninety eight percent of the time, it was good experience. But when someone says or have negative opinions about you based on how you dress, definitely you'll feel offended. Definitely. But to say that I would prolong that frustration is not true because I usually have the perception that those who give negative judgments are those who do not really know or don't really understand why we wear the hijab... In the U.K. it is a bit different. There's good and there's bad. Here, there are many Muslims around. There are many Pakistanis. There are different styles of hijab around. It's normal. So, people don't give you that stare. I blend in just fine because of the big Pakistani-Islamic community. So, I think that helps. In a way, there's not much of a challenge in terms of adapting. But there are those incidents, for example, there was one time, while queuing up at the cashier in one of the stores near my house, a guy behind me was saying to the cashier, not to me, he said 'isn't this store for British only?' The cashier just looked at him and smiled. The cashier is Pakistani by the way! And then he continued saying 'If its only for the British, why do we have these kinds of Muslims around?' I think he was drunk. I dared not look at him. I just left the store.

The idea of “rewards” and “challenges” may differ in meaning to many individuals. In the case of Ida, it was obviously related to how she was treated in relation to her identity. Her claims signify that the hijab can be both an advantage as well as a disadvantage. An advantage because, some of her friends would *watch what they say* when they were in her presence. At the same time, her dress code also placed some restrictions with regard to her social life (i.e. unable to go clubbing), as well as made her an easy target for racist individuals (such as the man at the store). Evident from the way she relayed her narrative, it was quite obvious that the rewards outweighed the “challenges”, and that she had no difficulty improvising and remaining fluid in her social interaction (*I couldn't join them because of the*

hijab and because of what I believed in, but they respected me for that. But we got to do something else! Ninety-five or ninety eight percent of the time, it was good experience).

As for Meena, she shares her story of rewards and challenges in the following narrative,

When I was first planning to study in Australia, I had some concerns about how I would be treated, so I went out and bought a lot of hats! On the first day, in Australia, I actually wore a hat and a sweater with a hood, but then, I saw a lot of other women wearing the hijab so I thought...Hey, they're doing it, and they seem fine! I personally believe in a university setting, it would not be a problem...but if you go out to a different place, it might be a problem. When I read about women who are harassed because of their hijab, I really just sympathize with them. At the same time, I can't really condemn those who harass them because I think they don't understand Islam and whatever understanding they have of the religion is what they get from the media, which is pretty much um... biased. I think the global media in general portrays Muslim women either as suppressed or potential terrorists. So in a way, I understand why some might not like women in hijab. But you know, you can't lump together all women who wear the hijab. There are many women, all over the world, who wear the hijab for many different reasons.

Meena's story in a way resonates with that of Ida when she shared her positive experience while studying overseas. Despite having some prior doubts, she was able to overcome her anxiety when she observed how the hijab in Australia is actually more common than she expected. Her observations helped develop a sense of security and solidarity with strangers in a foreign land (*On the first day, in Australia, I actually wore a hat and a sweater with a hood, but then, I saw a lot of other women wearing the hijab so I thought...Hey, they're doing it, and they seem fine!*). While recognizing the rewards, Meena was also not oblivious to how hijab is seen not just from a personal perspective, but also from a more macro scale (*I think the global media in general portrays Muslim women either as suppressed or potential terrorists...*). In recognizing this fact, she illustrates how the act of wearing the hijab, although a personal choice, also implicates how Muslim women are viewed on a more general scale.

5.0 CONCLUSION

If one were to give into the all-negative portrayals, the hateful rhetoric, and the hostility that exist, this world would be in a very sad state indeed. Fortunately, amid all that is happening, there exist optimism and kind individuals who use their good judgment when faced with individuals who are different in appearance or religious beliefs. Support by those of other faiths do occur such as in the case of Amaiya Zafar in Minnesota (Das, 2017) and world-class fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad (Noel, 2016).

It is important to note that, one of the most important criteria of Standpoint Theory is that the research that utilizes this theoretical framework must work *for* the participants (Swigonski, 1993). For instance, how can the study contribute to the empowerment of those involved? Or, how can the study be of help to those who are marginalized? After the tragic events of 9/11, coverage of Islam and its followers has heightened. However, due to some negative and false representation, Muslims have found themselves to be easy targets for unfavorable branding. In relation to this, Islam has been labeled "backwards" and the women

are represented as “submissive” or “victims” (Karim, 2007). Some look upon the hijab as a mere tradition or part of a culture (at best) and a tool for terrorists (at worst), when in reality, it is not. There may be different styles of covering up, but the fact remains that it is an act of faith. Not culture, nor tradition, and certainly not a tool of violence. It is hoped that the standpoints narrated in this essay will help in countering the negative claims towards the religion of Islam and its followers.

In the earlier section of this paper, I attempted to establish a link between *rhetoric*, *da'wah* and *hijabis*. I also mentioned that while writing this essay, I do not disregard my own position as a hijab-clad Muslim. Further, it is significant to note that, rhetorical criticism originates from a humanistic lens, and therefore the discoveries outlined in this paper is not meant to be a generalization for all Muslim women, in all contexts. This paper is my humble attempt to add more voice to the dialogue on hijab. For Malaysian-Muslims who choose to don the hijab, the challenge is not so much related to assimilation, since life in a Muslim-majority country does not pose much challenge for a Muslim woman who chooses to cover. Although participants may touch upon themes related to the issue of agency, emancipation, and rewards/challenges, the fact remains that the practice of wearing the hijab is for the Divine. Muslim women wear the hijab (or not) for various reasons. At the end of the day, one's *iman* (faith) cannot and *should not* be measured by the length (or absence) of a hijab. If labels of oppression or coercion are to be ruled out, hijabi-rhetors must ensure their *enactment* of donning the hijab is done consciously, and their voices heard.

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ⁱ An example of an *exigence* would be environmental decay, which calls for urgent persuasive speech, addressed to an audience to reduce or eliminate the problem.

ⁱⁱ bell hooks is a pen name for Gloria Jean Watkins. She is an American feminist and social activist.

ⁱⁱⁱ Individual interviews were conducted using the Internet communication software Skype due to the different geographical locations of the respondents. Additionally, emails were exchanged to clarify points and themes.

^{iv} All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants.

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