

Women, Gender, and Religion

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Hijab, Hip-Hop, and Haram

Identities of Shi'a Muslim College Women

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Introduction

[1] Muslim women are often portrayed as weeping victims or sexy, sensual belly dancers. For decades they have been politicized, erotized, and exoticized by Western media, where photographs construct an image that is fantasized and false. The photograph “is perceived as pure documentation, a recorder of reality” (Jarmakani: 91); yet in truth, photographic images are constructed for the uneducated and untraveled eye. In Hollywood movies that depict Middle Eastern women languishing in harems, waiting to meet the needs of their “master,” or as fanatically religious weeping women in black, pounding their chests in grief, these images present a one-dimensional and imaginary representation of Muslim women as “passive emblems of ‘collectivistic’ traditional society, and hence as the antithesis of Western individualism” (Ghazi-Walid: 300). These women are depicted as having no power, no authority, no autonomy or freedom, and as needing to be “liberated” by Western heroes. Rarely does one see in Western Media depictions of young Muslim women attending college, sitting in a park with their children, or curled up on the couch reading a novel. In short, Muslim women are rarely portrayed as “normal”; rather, they are consistently otherized and Orientalized.

[2] Most Muslim women would contest these constructions by outsiders. In my research, the young Shi'a Muslim women from Southern California find these stereotypes laughable. They define themselves as feminists who attend college, choose spouses and careers of their own accord, participate in sports, and listen to popular music. This study examines the identity construction of Shi'a Muslim women attending college in Los Angeles County and the ways they challenge stereotypes as first-born American Shi'a Muslims whose parents were immigrants. Although their experiences may be similar, the women have individual and personal stories to tell. These women are not a monolithic group, nor do their stories represent the experiences of all Muslim women or all Shi'a women.

[3] Most of the women interviewed were born and raised in the United States yet travel regularly to their parent's homelands, making them hybrids and transnational. They have struggled with questions regarding their Americanness, their patriotism, and their ability to construct piety in a secular world. They are asked, "Who are you?" and, "What are you?" (see Sarroub: 126-29). Although some of the women in other studies state that they do not know who they are, the women in this research group expressed a strong sense of self, at least in the interview process.

[4] What happens to an American Muslim woman? How does she craft an identity when she is religious, wears blue jeans, high heels, and yet still covers her hair? Who is she, then, and what culture does she belong to if she listens to hip-hop and also religious chants? What is considered *haram* or forbidden by the religion and the culture? Shi'a women, like most Muslim women, struggle with identity construction in the United States. American born Shi'a women must negotiate an "American" identity. They do this through the construction of a third space where women learn to negotiate their hybridity or choose, sometimes from their pain of not fitting in to "white" America, to define themselves in terms of their parents' ethnicity and culture. Feminist Shahnaz Khan notes, "this third space emerges from the dynamic notion of culture and also gives rise to it. It is a process of intellectual and political intervention to resolve the ambivalence that Muslim women face" (489). Additionally, the women in the present study bridge multiple cultures, taking and leaving what they want, rejecting Orientalized images projected onto them by Western media as well as overly religious ones projected by their community. They are able to maintain agency by blending identities using markers like *hijab* (head scarf) with the cultural components of their clearly American life. For some women, identity is imagined through being Muslim, yet embracing religious values that transcend ethnic labels.

Religion

[5] For the Shi'a women in my study, religion is one of the key components in their identity construction. Their religious dress, rituals, and social gatherings are markers of their identity, as are the "American" things in which they participate. All of these create a sense of self and of cultural affiliation for these women whose affiliations are very broad, and so, include diverse situations from mosque attendance to film-study in college. For many, religion is a chosen identity, as sociologist Lori Peek suggests, in which

participants consciously decided to embrace their Muslim identity, often after much self-reflection, with the support of their peers, and sometimes at the exclusion of other core identities such as ethnicity and nationality (236).

The women in the study have their own venues for creating, implementing, and analyzing their life experiences that result from their personal choices. They, therefore, stand as agents of their own identity. They author their own “truths,” through rituals led by women for women, and are, as Harding writes, “agents of knowledge” (3).

[6] These women want to be known as Muslims by other Muslims and by the general American community. They have strong opinions and beliefs about religion, politics, and American life. In some ways their lives are similar and they share the same religious beliefs, but their interpretations of these beliefs vary. An example of this is their contradictory ideas and diverse opinions regarding music and what music is acceptable. They have also chosen careers such as practicing law and medicine that historically would have been inappropriate for pious Muslim women.

[7] Women born in America to immigrant parents experience fluid cultural values, moving from traditional roles assigned by their parents to American values and behaviors. These women, as hybrids, must negotiate between two worlds. They typically refer to themselves as Americans, stressing the difference between themselves and their mothers. A number of young women interviewed state that their mother’s generation did not have the freedom of self-expression that they have. American-born women argue that they embrace Islam because they have researched it, not because they blindly follow their parents. These women embrace the histories of their mothers, yet forge a new future for themselves, one that is both traditional and modern.

[Their] development of a strong religious identity involves heightened reflection and self awareness, individual choices and the acknowledgement of others. Religious boundaries and meaning are constructed both from within and without, in response to internal conflicts and choices and external pressures and rewards that drive identity formation (Peek: 236).

As a result of growing up in America they view the world and their religion from a different lens than their mothers and grandmothers. This does not mean that they are less religious than their elders, but that they interpret their religion somewhat differently. They believe that they can be modern and pious, traditional and feminist at the same time. These women use their religion to argue their rights.

Feminism

[8] One of the first questions asked of these women concerned their understanding of feminism. They unanimously agreed that they are feminists, but the kind of feminist was negotiable. When asked if they were feminists, they typically responded, “Of course I am a feminist. The Prophet Muhammad was the first feminist. He was the first to establish equal rights for women!” When their mothers were asked the same question they insisted, “Of course I am not a feminist. I am a Muslim!” The majority of the women interviewed did not affirm the Western concept of feminism; yet they all believed in equality of the sexes as a God-given right. Many of the women had a negative concept of Western feminism, internalized from media representations of feminists and feminism.

[9] Susan Faludi details the negative representations of the feminist movement by the media, politicians, and male and female leaders of the religious right. Neo-Cons and the New Right

label feminists as unrelational, angry, and even confused. From their perspective, feminism has destroyed the American family and Christian values. Some religious women, especially those for whom marriage and motherhood are crucial to their self-worth, agree. Therefore, it is understandable that one might develop a negative perspective on feminism.

[10] The following definition from feminist theorist Patricia Maguire is operative in this study:

Feminism is a worldwide movement for the redefinition and redistribution of power. Feminism is: a) a belief that women universally face some form of oppression or exploitation; b) a commitment to uncover and understand what causes and sustains oppression, in all its forms, and c) a commitment to work individually and collectively in everyday life to end all forms of oppression. Given this definition, the ultimate goal of feminist research is the emancipation of women and the creation of a just world for everyone (79).

The experience of Shi'a women interviewed are not homogeneous, but they consistently identify with "difference feminism," though they did not use this term. Difference feminism is the theory that men and women are equal but have different biological and behavioral attributes. The women's responses to questions about feminism suggest that they also subscribe to "cultural feminism," which defines women's roles not only as different from men's but special. They believe that men and women are essentially different based on fundamental personality differences and that there is a specific "woman's way" of experiencing and acting.

[11] From the perspective of many Muslim women, there must be an alternative to Western notions of women and women's rights. They see Western feminism as one type of feminism, and Islamic feminism as another that addresses the specific needs of Muslim women. As scholar Haideh Moghissi writes:

Certainly there are women who demand equal rights and who have yet adopted Islam as their personal faith, as a cultural identity and as a response to spiritual needs in a world increasingly engulfed in spiritual impoverishment. Which is to say, such a person might call herself a "Muslim" feminist, aspiring to feminist goals. In such a case, she has left behind the Islamic legal framework on matters of women's rights and status, even though she may not know it or may not wish to acknowledge it (140).

The women interviewed had their own definitions of feminism and argued that one can be a feminist, modern, and pious. One woman interviewed, Soha who holds a Masters degree in Islamic studies and attended UCLA, is adamant that she is a feminist, but,

not in the way that Americans have picked up the term and applied it to women who don't shave their armpits. That's not what feminism is about at all, or its not about women being able to do men's jobs. It's about women being given the respect and the dignity that they deserve.¹

¹ The women's interviews have been edited slightly for style and grammar, but the substance of their comments has been preserved.

Soha has her own understanding of what feminism is. She believes that women can be and do whatever they want, and that they must strive for respect for themselves and from the culture. As a woman who works, attends college, and is waiting to have children, her maturity is evident in the life decisions that she has made, including marriage, even though by most standards she is quite young.

[12] These cultural and generational differences among the women regarding feminism were sometimes comical and at other times a bit tense. Zaynab is a 23-year-old law student at UCLA, the third of six children born in the United States, whose parents, one a dentist and the other a doctor, are from Iraq. Like most women her age, she plans to marry and have children but not until after she finishes school. When asked, “Do you consider yourself a feminist? She replied,

Absolutely. . . Not in the typical sense of the American word feminism, . . . because I think it’s ridiculous. I definitely think men and women are different, but . . . if you really understand and know Muslim women, it’s truly liberating and it’s true feminism. If you look at the American definition of feminism, then no, I don’t.

When asked what she meant by “the American definition of feminism,” she clarified,

Women and men should be doing the exact same things. I think women and men are equal, but there are different roles, . . . and I don’t think it is putting a woman down if she is going to be raising kids or if she is going to be at home being a mother. I think that is great, and I think that to complain about that stuff and to be saying, “Oh, she shouldn’t have to raise kids or to do these womanly things,” I don’t think that is feminism at all. Feminism is really standing up. Islamic feminism is that women are recognized for their minds and for their intellect, and for what they have to say rather than for their physical assets.

Feminism, for Zaynab, is about equality between the sexes, but also about personal choice. If a woman chooses to be a stay-at-home mother, she should be honored for doing so. In Zaynab’s view, women have many choices in life, and a woman can and should be respected for her various qualities.

[13] Her younger sister Laila attends UCLA, has played on hockey and soccer teams, and was a skateboarder. She loves music, but is selective about what she listens to, wears the most fashionable clothing, and always wears *hijab*, the headscarf. Very outspoken, she has no trouble speaking her mind about feminism and Islam. When asked, “Do you consider yourself a feminist?” she replied:

Definitely. I think Islam is a feminist religion. First of all, the Prophet married a woman who supported him. Second, *hijab* is a feminist concept. It says, “Ok, don’t look at me; look at who I am.” That is a feminist statement in itself. The religion is a feminist religion for sure. In American culture versus Islamic culture, you just don’t know what to do, because American culture says you’ve got to always look pretty. Woman has to represent beauty in general, not a zit, not a mark, not a flawless body. That is what American

culture teaches, while Islam says the opposite in regard to make up. Women, of course, have to be presentable and even beautiful, but you're not supposed to attract so much attention to yourself.

Laila speaks for a number of the women interviewed in that she dislikes the constant pressure on American women to be beautiful and sexy. She believes that women can have those qualities, but they should also be valued for their intellect and their ability to nurture and care for others. Neither Laila nor her sister Zaynab think that they have to be one or the other, a businesswoman or a stay-at-home mother. They see themselves as able to make different choices at different times of their lives.

[14] These American-born women say that they have to think for themselves, whether about Islamic beliefs, American culture, or feminism. When I told Sedeer, who has a Bachelors degree in Middle Eastern and African Studies, that I am impressed at how articulate American-born women are when asked about feminism, she replied:

I think that has a lot to do with [your] background and where [you] were raised. Back home or back in the Middle East or South East Asia, a woman's opinion was never really appreciated or counted. I don't feel like their word had worth or value. Nobody probably even bothered to ask them, they probably weren't asked certain questions or how they felt. They just kind of went with the flow and did what everybody did. They didn't really think for themselves, "Why is it that I believe this, or why do I practice?"

[15] Although these young women have questioned aspects of their roles, they typically confer with their mothers when they speak about women's roles as wives and mothers. There is a shared resistance to the Western construct of the "liberated woman" who is valued only for her thinness, beauty, and fashionable clothing. None of the women interviewed said that women should not be educated or allowed to work, as happens in some Muslim countries. These women are not pressured to marry early, as their mothers and grandmothers did. They can choose whatever they desire as long as the family is put first. This concept is central to their self-understanding and religious identity because family is the microcosm of the community and the community itself is Islam.

Dating / Arranged Marriage

[16] The young women also construct an identity for themselves through piety, while managing to be "modern" at the same time. Their views on feminism also impact their beliefs about marriage. None of the women I interviewed had done much dating, as it is not allowed in Islam, especially in religiously conservative communities. Some had performed *nikkah*, an Islamic wedding in which a couple pledges to each other but without necessarily consummating the marriage. They stated that they were married Islamically, but would wait until they finished school to have a cultural wedding that is usually quite elaborate. Most of the women interviewed were not yet married because they had decided to finish college first, had career goals, but also insisted that being a mother outweighed a career. They all seemed to believe that they could have a career and be good mothers.

[17] In the course of the interviews, the women were also asked, “How do you feel about arranged marriage?” they offered a variety of answers. Zaynab said,

If it’s in the sense that the girl has no say, then I absolutely don’t agree with that. But [if] the family finds someone who is also of a good family and they meet and get to know each other, and they decide whether or not they want to be with each other, I think it’s good because . . . instead of getting some random person, you get someone with a good background and you know their family background and you know how they were raised. As long as you get to meet them and see if you’re compatible and whether you want to do it or not, then I’m all for it.

Jasmine, a very outspoken 18-year-old, had a very different opinion. Having watched her mother struggle with a less than happy marriage to a man who was not Muslim, she commented:

I feel that marriage should not be arranged. But if the person wants their marriage to be arranged and if they want their parents to choose their husband or their wife for them, then that is their choice. And I believe that no choice should be mandatory and that you should be able to choose who you want to be with. I feel that if you, as an individual, want to choose who to marry then you should have that choice.

These young women felt comfortable with arranged marriages as long as they had a final choice in the arrangement. Although they agreed that they would never marry someone that they did not want, they said that they trusted their parent’s judgment.

[18] These women, living in Muslim communities in America, have very different choices than poor women in places like rural Pakistan or Afghanistan. Without exception, the women insisted that they would not allow a second wife. One woman said,

As a girl who grew up in America, I couldn’t, I absolutely could not do it. I wouldn’t know how to. But there are people who are happy, and they do it, and it’s fine. But that’s just not the way I grew up; that was never my understanding of marriage. So, no, I would never do it.

A few of the women had parents who were divorced. Although they did not want to see themselves divorced like their parents, they were adamant that they would never stay in an abusive marriage. Because many women, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, have an idealistic understanding of marriage, it would be interesting to interview these women again in ten years. Life in America will afford them many benefits but also numerous challenges to their identify as they negotiate life in the secular world. How do these women balance tradition and modernity? In order to gain insight on this, still more questions about life in America were posed to these women.

Music and the Struggle with Popular Culture

[19] One of these questions pertained to music and dance, which while typically very important to young people, are controversial subjects in Islam. Depending on the culture, they are acceptable to some, forbidden to others. In the United States there are numerous

popular Muslim rappers, e.g., Mos Def, Native Deen, and 3ILM, who communicate a message that does not degrade women. This type of music elicits a variety of responses. To the question, “Do you consider listening to music and dancing *haram* (forbidden)?” one young woman responded:

I do. Most of the scholars say that it is *haram* to listen to general music today and dance to it. And I do honestly agree, because . . . when I hear the lyrics of the songs that are on the radio today, they are poison. It’s ridiculous, all the songs are so explicit and they are all just about dirty things; they are really explicit.

[20] Some feel that music is *haram*, yet others, who are more liberal, argue that most music is not harmful. All the interviewees agreed that music that suggests inappropriate sexual conduct or lyrics that are degrading to women are *haram*. Jasmine, who has attended public school her entire life, was the first Muslim to become a chamber singer at her school (everyone else was Mormon), and does not wear *hijab*, has a very different interpretation than most of the other women. When asked, “Is there any kind of music that you would consider *haram*?,” she responded:

It all depends on what the music is saying. I believe that music is definitely not *haram*. Because they say that on the day of judgment the angel Gabriel, who is my role model, will sound his horn. Lady Fatima sang a lot; all the women sang a lot. Singing and music is not *haram*. When we pray, we use musical tunes all the time. And I believe that music is a form of reaching to the soul of praying. So it is definitely not *haram*. But if the song that you are listening to has bad words . . . or is inflicting harm on people, then that kind of music is considered *haram* because it is reflecting a bad image.

Another woman who also grew up attending public schools responded:

Music . . . can be therapy sometimes. Just music without any words, the sounds of the nature tapes and the ocean tapes – I like those. I think that’s more of a therapy . . . I don’t think of them as being *haram*.

When asked, “Have you missed out on not being able to do sports or dance, do you think music is *haram* and dancing is *haram*?,” another woman answered:

Before I started wearing *hijab* that was something I considered because I knew that in order to do this that there was a lot that I would have to give up. And I do believe that music is *haram*. I personally see the effect on myself . . . when I listen to music . . . on a daily basis. It makes it very hard for me to read the Qur’an because I would rather be listening to music, and pop culture is so strong in the way it influences people. . . I listen to classical music and I feel like that is art . . . Pop music isn’t art, that is mass produced.

When asked whether she sees pop music as a voice against oppression, as making a kind of political statement, this same woman responds: “That music isn’t *haram*. Political music is not *haram*.” Music that makes a political statement, especially Muslim rappers that speak against the war in Iraq or challenge the Palestinian situation in Gaza, was seen as acceptable.

[21] Among the women interviewed, there were differing ideas of whether *hijab* was mandatory. They had to wear the scarf as part of their school uniform, but outside of school they were pleased to make their own choices. Some of them pulled off their scarves saying that they did not feel comfortable wearing them in public. Others left them on. Some parents allowed them to go without a scarf, and others did not; likewise, some of their mothers wore scarves and others did not.

Role Models and Religious Rituals

[22] In the course of the interviews, the women were asked to identify their religious role models. Like Catholic women, Shi'a Muslim women revere the Virgin Mary, but also the Prophet's wife Khadijia, his daughter Fatima, and granddaughter Zaynab. Fatima and Zaynab are particularly loved and emulated by Shi'a women. Fatima al-Zahra was married to the Prophet's first cousin Ali. She is known for enduring suffering, her piety and faith, and her intercessory role: all who love and weep for her are granted entrance into Paradise. Revered for her compassion, patience, and kindness, Fatima is considered the embodiment of love. Shi'a also believe, "God expanded the Light of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, and from it He created the heavens and earth, and Fatima became more excellent than both the heavens and the earth" (Majlisi, as told by Moosa: 58). Countless stories recount her goodness and charity as the mother of the imamate. Living in poverty and suffering on earth, she was rewarded in heaven for her charity. As a result, "He [God] showed them a Being, adorned with a myriad of glittering lights of various colors, who sat on a throne, a crown on her head, rings in her ears, a sword drawn by her side" (Massignon: 64-65). Fatima is the carrier of *nur* Muhammad, the light that gives meaning to suffering, and is the promise of redemption when honored by Shi'a women.

[23] Her daughter Zaynab, on the other hand, is remembered for her bravery and as the young woman who watched her entire family martyred. As one of the only survivors, she stood at the court of her oppressors and gave a famous monologue, speaking against oppression and reminding the oppressors of God's justice. As angered sister, outraged mother, and daughter of Fatima and Ali, Zaynab assumed a majestic defiance of the limitations assigned to her by her culture and religion, determined to "betray [their] political, social, and religious agenda," and to "transcend gender expectations and regulations" (Thurkill: 2). Loved by young Shi'a women, Zaynab is an important role model in their spiritual and terrestrial development. Her ability to speak powerfully and eloquently on behalf of Islam and the *abl al-bayt* have established her as a source of wisdom for all women. She is called *zīnat*, the Jewel of Paradise, the light of God, because "she is a representative of Zahra's [Fatima] side for women's welfare" (Shirazi: 110). One respondent, Sedeer, remarks:

[Fatima and Zaynab] were mentioned by the Prophet many times to be great women, especially Fatima, that she was the woman of all women. I definitely take her as a role model because my goal is to be a really good, Muslim woman, and she was the ultimate Muslim woman . . . She was also the mother of the Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn who were great leaders in Islam. I definitely consider her, as well as Zaynab, especially Zaynab, because of her struggle in Muharram and because of her fight against oppression and the way she faced the oppressors fearlessly . . . as role models, definitely.

[24] Coming from a family that is not very religious, Sedeer has sought to create a spiritual identity for herself. Although she looks up to women in the community, much of her guidance comes from stories about Fatima and Zaynab. Because Fatima and Zaynab embody piety, righteousness, bravery, and courage, Sedeer, as a Muslim woman, can do the same. She sees Fatima and Zaynab as women who stand up for themselves and others and speak the truth. Their stories are a constant reminder that the human spirit will fight against and triumph over oppression. Although she suffered tremendously during her life, Zaynab is considered a heroine by Shi'a Muslim women, not a victim.

[25] Not surprisingly, Shi'a women enact rituals that honor members of the Prophet Muhammad's family, including Fatima and Zaynab. These rituals, which consist of specially constructed sacred space, specific clothing (black), prayers, and food offering, tell the story of Karbala, so important to the Shi'a, and narrate the meaning of suffering. Karbala was the place where many members of the Prophet's holy family were martyred, among them was the most revered Imam Husayn and his infant son. His sister Zaynab was the first woman to lament the death of her family, forming a tradition of rituals still reenacted by Shi'a Muslims worldwide. Through participation in the rituals, the women give voice to their sacred aspirations, reproduce and valorize tradition, and integrate the group through physical movement, chants, and prayers. The ritual experience is deeply personal as well as communal, serving to keep the individual actively bonded to the community. Together they experience the sacred and the presence of Fatima and Zaynab, in the sharing of tears of sorrow and hope.

[26] The theme of the ritual is redemptive, and Fatima in particular is called on as an intercessor. For one woman, Zaynab, the rituals are a time to return to her center and to make an inward journey away from her hectic life as a student. She says that Muharram and Ramadan are, for her, the most spiritual times of the year, times when she feels connected to her faith through sadness, but more importantly, when she feels a sense of determination to make the world a better place, in her case by studying to become an attorney and pursuing justice. Zaynab remarked:

There's meaning in the special Islamic events that we participate in, like Muharram as well as Ramadan. Mostly it's the fact that I go to the mosque every night and I'm reading every night and praying more than usual. It brings me back to my center. . . During times such as Muharram and Ramadan, I go back to the mosque every night and I remember what's important. . . And then, of course, in Muharram just remembering the struggle of Imam Husayn and Zaynab . . . the tragedies that happened, it really reminds me that life is short and that I should not get side-tracked, . . . I should stick to what's important, be serious about what it is I want to do, and not get caught up in frivolous things.

Her sister Laila also finds the rituals meaningful and spiritually renewing, as this time of grieving washes away her sorrow, and she feels spiritually elevated. She says that her deliberate choice to embrace Islam has helped her to define herself because Islam teaches values about dress, eating, and pious action.

[27] Participating in the religious rituals that are devoted to Fatima and Zaynab serves multiple functions in the lives of these Shi'a women. Most importantly, such ritual participation ties them to the Shi'a community even though the rest of their lives might be somewhat secularized. Ritual participation secures for them a spiritual identity in a profane world.

[28] That the women interviewed participate fully in Islamic religious life and American secular life presents challenges to their spiritual identity. Some experience the challenges as a personal *jihad* (struggle). When asked, "What is your personal *jihad*?" Laila commented:

I wear *hijab*, that's probably my biggest *jihad*. I go out every day and people stare at me and ask me questions, and that's difficult. That's a great *jihad*. Also, in school, graduate students are always going out and drinking and going to parties and clubs together, you'd think they would be too busy . . . , but every Thursday they go to a bar together . . . I'm the only one who never goes. . . Refraining from going to these things when I want to, when I want to be with my friends and hang out, that's *jihad* for me. The way that Islam is set up, dictates a way of life.

For women like Laila it is a struggle to strike the delicate balance that allows them to remain pious in a secular world. Like other young American women, they love music, fashion, movies, and plays; they also have dreams of falling in love, getting married, having a family and a career.

[29] And so, these Shi'a women create a space for Islam within the modern world, and their lifestyles suggest that the notions of Islam and modernity are not contradictory but complementary. They practice what Lara Deeb calls "authenticated" Islam, an Islam that has a modern interpretation based on knowledge and understanding, which stands in marked contrast to a traditional Islam that is blindly followed by older generations. This "enchanted modern" form of piety emphasizes the importance of both material and spiritual progress, and a "new kind of religiosity, one that involves conscious and conscientious commitment" (5). In this context, pious women create their identity through the visibility of their faith in activism. For these women, progress and modernity are not about materialism but about the social welfare that results when women, as active agents, seek to end oppression and injustice through centers that offer education and support.

[30] To be a modern Muslim woman entails a multifaceted *jihad*. In short,

The multiple elements that make up a pious woman's gender *jihad* together posited a model for an ideal pious modern woman, one who was educated, outspoken, strong, and visible while also being pious and committed to her faith, family, and community (Deeb: 217).

These Shi'a women pressured by American culture and their parent's cultures still manage to carve a space for themselves, balancing tradition and modernity as well as religion and popular culture.

Conclusion

[31] Although the stories of the Muslim women interviewed for this study have similar characteristics, the women themselves remain individuals with diverse experiences, perspectives, and beliefs. As hybrids and transnationals, these women, keenly aware of the differences between their religion and their secular cultural context, construct their identities and beliefs in relation to their parents' cultures as well as the American culture in which they were raised. In choosing which values – Muslim or American – to uphold, for example, with regard to arranged marriages, music, or popular culture, they challenge the stereotypes perpetuated by Western media and by their own heritage.

[32] These women have crafted their own critical understanding of feminism, opting for a feminism that is based in the Islamic tradition according to which the Prophet Muhammad first established equality and rights for women. They are able to balance feminism and piety, arguing that liberation is freedom of choice, not what one wears, and insisting that binaries are inadequate for defining who they are and what they believe.

[33] Indeed, this study indicates that the women interviewed do not experience themselves as oppressed victims of a patriarchal and male-dominated religion. Rather, they have a strong sense of self that is firmly rooted in religious piety and personal agency. The ritual commemoration of Muslim women, Fatima for her piety, and Zaynab for her ability to speak out against oppression, afford these women opportunity to explore who they are and what really matters to them, and to make choices accordingly. Arguing that the Qur'an demands that women have the right to choose, they intend to create multi-faceted identities for themselves, as mothers, career women, sisters and wives. They choose *hijab* as a religious identity marker, choose an education and career as modern women, and also believe that being a wife and mother is a God-given right. Whether it is their choice of a spouse or the reenactment of their religious rituals, these young Shi'a women are grounded in a desire to create love and meaning in their lives. They are "California Girls" who attend college, plan careers, and have hopes and aspirations like other American women their age. They see themselves as feminists while anchoring themselves in the sacred traditions and rituals of their Islamic faith. Sometimes they are conflicted about popular culture – what to embrace and what to reject, but they feel free to negotiate what is acceptable to them as individuals and as Muslims.

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