

# THE ROUTLEDGE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK TO VEILS AND VEILING PRACTICES

Veils and veiling are controversial topics in social and political life, generating debates across the world. The veil is enmeshed within a complex web of relations encompassing politics, religion and gender, and conflicts over the nature of power, legitimacy, belief, freedom, agency and emancipation. In recent years, the veil has become both a potent and unsettling symbol and a rallying point for discourse and rhetoric concerning women, Islam and the nature of politics.

Early studies in gender, doctrine and politics of veiling appeared in the 1970s following the Islamic revival and 're-veiling' trends that were dramatically expressed by 1979's Iranian Islamic revolution. In the 1990s, research focused on the development of both an 'Islamic culture industry' and greater urban middle-class consumption of 'Islamic' garments and dress styles across the Islamic world. In the last decade academics have studied Islamic fashion and marketing, the political role of the headscarf, the veiling of other religious groups such as Jews and Christians, and secular forms of modest dress. Using work from contributors across a range of disciplinary backgrounds and locations, this book brings together these research strands to form the most comprehensive book ever conceived on this topic.

As such, this handbook will be of interest to scholars and students of fashion, gender studies, religious studies, politics and sociology.

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THE ROUTLEDGE  
INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK  
TO VEILS AND VEILING  
PRACTICES

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## SMART-ENING UP THE HIJAB

### The materiality of contemporary British Muslim veiling in the physical and the digital

Shehnaz Suterwalla

#### Introduction

In contemporary style, the hijab is a long scarf worn by Muslim women that is tied around the head and shoulders. It can be made from a range of materials, from luxurious silk to cotton; it can be any colour, either plain or printed. Most often it is draped around the head so that an end tucks under the chin to stay in place, or is held in place by a pin. It is rare that the hijab is worn as a turban, although this can be the case. More often it is folded over the head in layers to cover the hair or the skin of the neck or chest, in line with Islamic edicts relating to modesty. Muslim women interpret ideas of modesty differently according to their religious affinity and cultural backgrounds and all have different ways of veiling. In Britain, many young Muslim women create their own hijab styles by adopting and adapting scarves and material from British high street shops. Motifs, fabrics and colours from mainstream fashions are rendered 'Muslim' through the way in which they are shaped and draped on the head. As such, the aesthetic and cultural politics of the hijab simultaneously defy and enforce continuous engagement with the mainstream: the hijab, while fashioning otherness, at the same time constantly borrows from global fashion industries. It thus creates a double discourse: one that seems to resist the mainstream but at the same time forms part of it, and in turn, of modernity.

The contemporary Muslim veil is in fact so full of diverse interpretation, myriad expressions and individual style, as well as religio-cultural history, that as a topic it engenders limitless analysis. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the hijab's materiality and affect. This means that I will explore how the material handling of a piece of cloth or scarf, how its feel and its texture, allows Muslim women to create a Muslim identity through embodiment based on their feelings, desires and subjectivity. I will discuss how the manipulation of the cloth, its folding and draping, transforms the wearer's identity into a Muslim 'look', and allows for expressions of subjectivity: philosophically as well as physically. I will unravel some of the ways in which the crafting of the hijab exposes a wearer's skill and dexterity to create different affects that in turn reflect more closely their own, personal, social, cultural and political experiences and motivations. The chapter also looks at technological innovation and tech-inspired design change, and the way that these factors are creating even more new opportunities for Muslim women to subvert stereotypes and fashion systems through 'smart' hijab-wearing.

### **Let us talk about scarves . . .**

A main aim of this chapter is to pull apart some of the generalizations and misconceptions about the hijab, many of which have caused alarm since the attacks on New York's twin towers in 2001, and the subsequent 'war on terror' that followed.<sup>1</sup> Since that date, the hijab in Western cosmopolitan and metropolitan centres has become a highly visible, contentious and public issue that has sparked a range of debates about women's bodies and sexual politics, race, notions of national identity, and affiliation with terrorism, tradition and modernity. Moreover, in recent times, the hijab's role in Muslim feminist emancipation – where the emphasis has been on how Muslim women feel empowered by the hijab to express their identity – has morphed into a poetics of terror with the rise of the so-called Islamic State group, and the number of women who have left the UK to join ISIS wearing hijab. Recent female recruits were three girls from Bethnal Green: Kadiza Sultana, Amira Abase and Shamima Begum. In February 2015, the girls ran away from home and were reportedly smuggled into Syria via Turkey. CCTV footage of the runaways at Gatwick showed two of the three wearing a hijab. One had created layers with a black cloth, and had a leopard-patterned scarf around her neck and draped down her torso; the other had scooped her hair into a scarf, tied at the back, with some of the scarf and its trim hanging over the shoulders of her bright yellow top. Of note is the fact that rest of the girls' attire looked as if it was from the high street: jeans, T-shirts, jackets and trainers.<sup>2</sup> In many ways subcultural, and in others so mainstream, the narratives of the contemporary hijab remain challengingly complex.

Of course the wearing of the contemporary, cosmopolitan hijab as a highly styled, urban Muslim 'look' is as much about contemporary bodily performance as it is about object. The hijab must be considered not as inanimate cloth but as an embodied appendage brought to life by its wearer. In its limp, impotent form it could be just another rag; this does not evoke its symbolic meaning which has proved, throughout history, to be charged with social and cultural significance (El-Guindi 1999; Scott 2009; Mernissi 1987). Controversially, the hijab is as much about the erotic body as the modest, concealed one, with its play on notions of revealing and concealing.

Meanwhile, the semiotics of the hijab, particularly in contemporary Anglo-American popular culture, shapes discourses about both Muslims and non-Muslims, with the hijab as the signifier that pits one against the other in mutually generative definitions of modern, progressive, tolerant versus oppressed, terrorist. Desire, affect, 'Britishness', 'Westernness' come to be constituted through interpretations of the hijab and its highly gendered female wearer. While the metaphoric and symbolic charge of the hijab is limitless, it cannot be fully interpreted without analysing its materiality, its 'thingyness' (Brown 2004),<sup>3</sup> its texture and tightness. The surface of the hijab is as important as its semiotic vibe, for it sits on the skin in intimate contact with the wearer. 'Materiality is not a question of materials but rather concerns the substance of material relations' (Bruno 2014, 2). The hijab must be viewed not just as an object but also as a site of mediation and projection: mediation because it involves haptic manipulation, that is, the handling of the material by the wearer creating reciprocal contact between the wearer, the object, and their environment; projection because through the layering of the cloth on the head, the scarf represents the particular identity of its wearer. The process of veiling enfolds, unfolds, represents the inner world of the hijabi as a subjectively designed space.

### **Handle with care**

We handle the hijab. The haptic becomes the process of making a direct intervention to the process of looking. In this instance we make the veil by draping the scarf to conceal parts of the body from view by bringing into view the hijab as highly conspicuous. The hijab as



dress resists techniques of mainstream corporeal inscription and normalization because it represents the direct interest of the wearer: it is made directly through her skill and design. Reina Lewis has explored Muslim hijab-wearing as both a subcultural style and popular mainstream fashion (Lewis 2015). To add to this, it is important to note that an alternative embodied hierarchy of the senses unfolds in the individual construction of the hijab where through the haptic a personal immersion into a private dimension is created specifically for public view and consumption. This creates a simultaneous hiding alongside exhibitionism, where the reciprocity of touch—cloth to skin and vice versa—are no longer just about looking and to-be-looked-at-ness but also about sensation. Richard Shusterman (2000) defines two types of body consciousness. One is an awareness of the external form of the body, which projects it into visual representation as image. The other is a somatic awareness, in Shusterman's terms 'somaesthetics', which concerns how the body feels in terms of lived experience and 'its kinaesthetic sense of itself' (2000, 149). In the haptic making of the hijab, what follows can include the pleasure of touch.

### **Pull tight**

The folding and draping of the headscarf requires dexterity. With hijab, it is not enough to loosely rest a scarf on the head. At a physical level hijab involves the acts of pinning, knotting, tucking tightly. Tightness in the case of the hijab ensures concealment. Creating tightness involves stretching the material of the hijab to ensure it folds closely to the head. The act proves transformative, physically and existentially, the sense of touch negates any separation between subject and object since they are in direct proximity to each other, blurring the border between the self and the other. Touch represents 'an orientation to sensuality as such that includes all the senses' (Young 1994, 204), and the wearer transforms into a Muslim subject.

The process of transformation through folds is a theme that is central in Gilles Deleuze's *The Fold* (1993). The text explores, through an analysis of philosophy and art, the movement of thoughts and a philosophical approach to folding, with close reference to the work of German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. The book is about culture only by implication, yet in it Deleuze explains that a fold is not a line that dissolves into independent points but more like a continuous labyrinth: the fold can never be accepted as a singular event, but rather as a population of many folds. Even its antonym, 'unfolding', is not to be understood as the opposite of the fold, but as a movement up to a containing fold. It is itself a derivative of the fold. 'Folding-unfolding no longer simply means tension-release, contraction-dilation, but enveloping-developing, involution-evolution' (1993, 9).

Deleuze interprets folding as a series of potential expressions of pure movements, defined as differentiations. Folding presents another concept of space and time: folding across lines creates impermanent configurations instead of defined boundaries of separation. In this way, Deleuze's analysis suggests that folds create a blurring of inside and outside, solid and void, absence and division. The fold is thus a critique of accounts of ontology or subjectivity that presume a simple interiority and exteriority, such as appearance and essence, or surface and depth. Deleuze's philosophical interrogation offers a model in which to understand the British hijab in terms of its never-ending potential for transformation: the wearer's identity is not bound by the object but in constant movement through its folds.

The idea of movement is particularly significant when considering Deleuze's philosophy directly in relation to cloth or textiles. Pennina Barnett uses Deleuze's presentation of the fold to reconceptualize what she calls 'the poetics of cloth' as '“soft logics”, modes of thought that twist and turn and stretch and fold' (1999, 26). The scarf as head-covering, twisted and folded and stretched, matches Barnett's description exactly. Barnett adds later that:

[t]he poetics of cloth are composed of folds, fragments and surfaces of infinite complexity. The fragment bears witness to a broken whole; yet it is also a site of uncertainty from which to start over; it is where the mind extends beyond fragile boundaries, beyond frayed and intermediate edges, expanding in the fluidity of the smooth. The surface is a liminal space, both inside and out, a space of encounter.

*(1999, 31–2)*

The idea of ‘encounter’ again raises questions about new possibilities. It reminds us that the manner in which the surface of the hijab drapes and covers the head and neck, how it meets the body and thereby creates a haptic experience, and its protection of the wearer from immodesty or inappropriate gaze, are all performative articulations: this means that they happen as an action within a particular time and space to present the identity of the wearer at that moment. Encounter also raises the idea of an interface, where a Western scarf, that is, a mass-produced object that forms part of the fashion system and its cycles, meets the Muslim wearer. This is a point of creative consumption, of modernity, where objects from within the fashion system act as a prism for mainstream values and trends, but also of individuality and subjective desire.

And yet drapery also has a long tradition in histories of Western idealised body fashioning. Anne Hollander has discussed its place in Western art, where the nude body and draped cloth ‘became essential elements of idealised vision; they came to seem correct for conveying the most valid truths of life’ (1993, xiii). Gen Doy notes that ‘the lack of drapery in the image of the nude woman . . . reveals that she has not been treated as an “aesthetic object”, draped, idealised and distant’ (2002, 103). The Western concept of dress, from the time of Christianity, has been defined in opposition to a naked body (Mascia-Lees 1992, 93), and covering has been predicated on a disavowal of the organic form to create highly gendered bodies defined through normative dress functions. Paradoxically in the Western context, the more that female fashions have disavowed the organic forms of the body, the more tantalizing the body has proven to be, with women’s clothing historically, and somewhat uncritically, associated with sexual attraction and eroticism (Kidwell and Steele 1989; Wilson 2003).

The British hijab has its own logic, one of draping, layering and pleating: like the Indian sari, for example. Interestingly the hijab’s folds and pleats also correspond with highly futuristic technological fashion developments. The work of Issey Miyake, a Japanese designer, relies on pleating to stimulate an active interaction between the clothes he designs and the body of the wearer and its movements. His shapes are dynamic rather than pinned, tucked, sewn and finished (like many rigidly shaped garments such as suits). He likes to give an impression that his clothes are unfinished, leaving it to the wearer to complete the look through embodied performance. Parallels between the hijab and the way that fabrics are wrapped to form the kimono are also evident.

While Miyake is famous for his pleats<sup>4</sup>, he uses these innovatively with new materials that heighten the tactile experience, such as vinyl. He – and others like Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto – exaggerates a manufactured aesthetic, often combining industrially inspired looks with elements of futurism. While the designers are loyal to their raw materials and traditional fabrics, they promote still an interest in the evolution of fibre technology. For example Miyake has used heat-embossing and synthetic coating textile processes to effect more modern sculptural forms, while Kawakubo, referencing historic fashions, incorporates cold synthetic fibres in her designs.

The idea of folds, and the layers and pleats inherent in the fold, are thus shown to be modern and technologically driven. Moreover, while technology determines how some of the hijab scarves are manufactured, it is through digital life that hijab-wearing as subcultural practice or as modern, mainstream fashion practice has proliferated over the last decade or so.

## Smarten up!

Through the Internet, all and every dimension of hijab-wearing occurs: production, consumption, embodied identity politics and representation, to name but a few, and the websites pertaining to the British hijab amount to more than 500,000 results in a Google search.<sup>5</sup> The timing of the rise of the Internet alongside the rise of British hijabi identity politics has proved fortuitous not only because it has facilitated subcultural and fashion momentum, but also because of how developments in technology and the web have been associated with various freedoms for individuality and self-expression. The current Maker Movement and the rise of DIY culture in digital life are contemporary examples of self-fashioning, but it is also the broader discourse of the merging of humans and technology into transhumans – which refers to the way in which science and technology pushes us beyond our human limits through augmentation and digital innovation – that offers exciting scope to rethink embodied identity, generally. In the new world of skin and digital circuitry, everyone is, to some degree, a data body. But it was in 1960, as a product of early cybernetic theory, that the term ‘cyborg’ was coined, to refer to a being with both organic and biomechatronic parts. It was precisely this kind of idea that heralded the new frontier where humans were going to have their bodily and cognitive functions enhanced by technology. Twenty years later, theorist Donna Haraway (2006) sequestered the term into feminist theory, marking a turning point for thinking about gender. In her very famous essay, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, she used the idea of the cyborg to reject that gender is confined or based solely to the body. Instead she wanted us to rethink ourselves as the fusion of self and machine as a way transcending the physical body, and in turn its social and political limitations. Haraway presented a gender theory and politics for the information age.

While she has been critiqued, Haraway’s ideas have also been heavily developed by successors, particularly in the 1990s, when British cultural theorist Sadie Plant (1997) argued that the ‘digital revolution’ marked the decline of masculine power structures. Plant’s ‘cyberfeminist’ vision saw the web as fractured and diffuse structures: ones that she argued were aligned with women’s fluid identities. In her book *Zeros and Ones* (1997), she identifies women’s natural relationship with modern technology, one that she argues would lead to a sexual revolution. Within her utopian polemic, she also connects the development of code – that is the binary of zeros and ones – with weaving. Plant suggests that weaving and textile production, specifically the development of string, are a foundation for society’s further invention, innovation and entrepreneurial advances in the information age. She makes much of the connection between the computer and the loom, arguing that the structure of the computer, which is controlled by the two digits zero and one, is closely related to the construction of the loom.

The critical fact about the cyber-discourse of the 1990s was that it was, for the most part, premised on disembodiment through technology: it mapped the Internet as a disembodied cyberspace and this is where, for its proponents, utopianism lay: through liberation from the constraints of physical, gendered reality. Undisputedly, one of the key signifiers about the hijab is that it fixes Muslim women into a gendered position, that of ‘female’, reinforcing a gender hierarchy rooted in traditional and historic texts and mores.

But as digital subjects, hijabi women face a new frontier: one where wearable technology and smart fabrics might be embodied as hijab, potentially throwing into crisis the meaning behind the historic definitions of ‘woman’, ‘female’, let alone ‘hijab’ or ‘hijabi’. Our posthuman and artificially augmented futures offer a fascinating turning point regarding ontological definitions and uncap myriad potentialities to express our digital subjectivities beyond any that, to date, we have recognized.

## Conclusion

Considering that many hijabs are made from globally produced scarves, it is noteworthy that in January 2015, Microsoft researchers prototyped SWARM, an emotion-sensing scarf that can be commanded to heat up and vibrate via a smartphone app, part of an exploration of how the accessory could eventually work with emerging biometric- and emotion-sensing devices. The current prototype is a flexible laser-cut garment made of hexagons of industrial felt overlaid with conductive copper taffeta. Some of the modules can heat up, while others can vibrate.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, there is Veil, a Kickstarter project with the tag line, 'The Future of Modesty' and a homepage tile that reads: 'Hijab meets Technology'. The company has developed a crowdsourced hijab that is climate-adaptive with water repelling technologies. The hijab is called 'Cool Dry' and the founder, Ahmad Ghanem, says his motivation for the smart scarf is that he wants:

to continue to innovate, revolutionise, and change the way people see the hijab. These women are the strongest and steadfast, and they deserve everything. The hate and verbal abuse many of them receive is wrong and unfair, and I hope my brand can inspire them to go out and become what they want to be.

While still in its infancy, smart textiles and wearable technology have strong growth predicted over the coming years and success for mainstream adoption. In a report in 2014 about market trends, Beecham Research predicted that the wearable technology market is expected to be worth almost \$3bn by 2018,<sup>7</sup> and it is also likely that more women will be the founders of the start-ups producing these sorts of objects.

The idea of the hijab as vibrant matter<sup>8</sup> creates a new arena to think about potentiality and affect beyond historical reduction of gender, race and religio-ethnic identities that has traditionally held notions of the body as stable matter and ontologically defined. Smart-hijabs raise a host of new questions about definitions, and ideas about materiality and sensuality of the British Muslim woman. Stretching further, in a world of posthumans and artificial intelligence, should we also ask: might robots wear hijab in the future, and to what affect?

## Notes

1. There are no accurate statistics about the number of women wearing Muslim head coverings in the UK. The rise in newspaper, television and radio footage about the topic in the last decade, or more, is one measure of how veiling has become a significant public issue, as is the rise in hate crimes against Muslim women wearing the veil. Hate crimes against Muslims in the United Kingdom have jumped nearly 275 per cent since the 13 November Paris attacks, according to a Reuter's report on 23 November 2015. A couple of years prior, in August 2012, Anne Marie Waters, a council member of the National Secular Society, made the claim that 'The number of women wearing the burka and niqab has exploded in Britain in recent decades'. Available at [www.secularism.org.uk/blog/2012/08/women-can-choose-to-wear-the-burka--but-can-they-choose-not-to](http://www.secularism.org.uk/blog/2012/08/women-can-choose-to-wear-the-burka--but-can-they-choose-not-to) (accessed 16 April 2016).
2. For a still of the footage see [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31650985](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31650985) (accessed 16 April 2016).
3. While there is much writing about the 'thingyness' of things, Brown's (2004) text offers a contemporary theoretical overview of the materiality of things.
4. Issey Miyake's London store is called Pleats Please Issey Miyake. Available at <http://pleatspleaseshop.com/storeinfo.html> (accessed 16 April 2016).
5. About 564,000 results on 16 April 2016.
6. Available at [www.technologyreview.com/s/534261/microsoft-researchers-get-wrapped-up-in-smart-scarf/](http://www.technologyreview.com/s/534261/microsoft-researchers-get-wrapped-up-in-smart-scarf/) (accessed 16 April 2016).
7. Available at <http://www.beechamresearch.com/download.aspx?id=29> (accessed 16 April 2016).
8. For a discussion of new theories of materialism and vibrant matter see Bennet (2009).

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