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Not Without My Hijab: Experiences of Veiled Muslim Women in India

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Abstract

Hijab or the Muslim veil has emerged as one of the most contentious articles of clothing in recent times. Scholarly literature has often limited itself to discussing the hijab in binaries of oppression and liberation. The present qualitative phenomenological undertaking sought to move beyond this reductive dichotomy and analyzed the veil through a systemic framework. Accounts of twelve hijabi Muslim women, between the ages of 18 and 25, from Mumbai, India, were explored to identify issues of relevance for hijabi women and highlight unique ways in which they exercise agency. Hijab was found to be inextricable from the varied sub-systems of the respondent's ecology. Positive response to the veil at home, neighborhood, and on social media promoted the hijab, while negative responses at work and in educational settings impeded it. Participants devised personal "rules" for hijab, adapting it to different settings, after evaluating the diverse demands of the roles they occupied. Hijab was understood as modest clothing that covered their body, not limited to a burqa. Spiritual adherence to the principles of hijab were considered as imperative as its physical adherence. Though the degree of physical veiling fluctuated, commitment to the veil strengthened over time. The primary reason for veiling was religion, but secondary reasons such as empowerment, advocacy, and protection were cited in favor of the practice. The veil was embedded with many meanings, including modesty, a means of connection with the Muslim community, and a symbol of resistance. It was purposefully worn to promote a positive image of Islam and exhibit the self-efficacy of the Muslim community. The study has implications for counselling, policy making, and further psychological research.

Keywords Hijab · Veil · Identity · Patriarchy · Islam · Systems theory · South Asia

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The hair on a woman's head has been a subject of fascination in cultures around the world, transmitting messages about a woman's social status, class, character, and identity (Zahedi, 2007). Despite its contemporary association with religion, the veil is not an Islamic invention. In ancient Assyria, covering one's hair with a veil was considered to be a mark of the rich and was used to protect the women of wealthy households from the commoner's gaze; peasants, enslaved women, and sex workers were barred from using a veil and were punished if they refused to comply (El Guindi, 1999). In India and neighboring South Asian countries, the *purdah*[1] system was the basis of seclusion of men and women in both Hindu and Muslim cultures (Papanek, 1973). Several prominent faiths still endorse the veil for women; Orthodox Jewish and Christian women, especially nuns, continue to veil to this day in degrees quite similar to Muslim women.

Nevertheless, it is the Muslim veil or the hijab which has emerged as one of the most contentious, widely discussed and criticized articles of clothing in recent times (Ahmad, 2006). It has been tied to questions of security, nationalism, assimilation, stigma, and feminism. Literature has puzzlingly described it as both a tool of oppression and liberation of Muslim women, and ascribed it with meanings of both radicalization and freedom. The following review of literature emphasizes the binary nature of discussions on hijab, making a case for an alternative framework for conceptualizing the Muslim veil. The present study proposes a systemic and developmental conceptualization of the hijab which takes into consideration the complex social, religious, personal, and political influences on the practice.

What Is Hijab?

The word hijab is derived from the Arabic *hajaba*, which means to cover (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013), and was first used to refer to a curtain that separated the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh[2]) and his wife from some wedding guests in Medina (Mernissi, 1987). Muslim scholars reference Quran (24:30–31) when discussing the importance of hijab. It is noteworthy that the mandate for hijab was first directed at men rather than women. These verses instruct believing men and women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty. Women were additionally instructed to not "display their beauty and adornments except what ordinarily appear" and to "draw a veil over their bosoms." This is broadly interpreted as a requirement for Muslim women to cover their hair, neck, and chest. This hijab sets itself apart from veiling systems of the pre-Islamic era, as it was neither meant to signify the social or marital status of its wearer, but only their faith.

The diversity in the practice of veiling parallels the diversity of the Muslim community (refer Fig. 1); this is especially so due to the ambiguous guidelines laid down in the Quran regarding its use. The "correct" way of wearing hijab is debated with the help of Hadith[3] and related Sunnah[4] prescriptions. The most widely practiced form of covering is the headscarf, or *hijab*, which refers to both the custom of veiling and the cloth that conceals women's hair. In the Middle East, a loosely tied hijab with longer ends is referred to as the

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[1] Literally meaning curtain. A system of secluding men and women in South Asian societies.

[2] Pbuh, an acronym for "Peace be upon him," a translation of the salutation added to the name of the Prophet.

[3] Narrations and actions of the Prophet (Pbuh).

[4] Refers to the traditional customs, habits and practices of the Prophet (Pbuh); not limited to verbal prescriptions of Hadith.

Fig. 1 Widely practiced forms of the Muslim veil: the hijab, shayla, khimar, abaya, niqab, burqa, and chador

Shayla. A *Khimar* is a longer headscarf that falls below the wearers elbows. Chador refers to a full-length sleeveless cloak worn over the head and held shut in front by the hands, concealing everything except the hands and feet. In India and other parts of South Asia, a stitched form of this hijab called the *Burqa* is used as a concealing cloak, with some women (especially in Bangladesh) choosing to wear knee-length burqas. The *abaya* is a long-flowing dress used to cover one's body. The *niqab* is the cloth that covers the woman's face. Merely wearing a headscarf, which may or may not conceal the hair at the front, with clothing that reveals body shape or forearm skin is variously considered as a liberal hijab, or a "bad hijab" (Pazhoohi & Burriss, 2016). Over the years, the veil has undergone many transformations in both aesthetic and meanings attached to the practice. The new "pink hijab generation" (Wright, 2011) has moved away from the monochrome covering and has adopted new colors, materials and patterns, even experimenting with tassels, sparkles, and feathers in their hijab.

Hijab, Feminism, and the State

The veil as a political symbol has been used by both its proponents and detractors. The debate surrounding hijab intensified, mostly deleteriously, after 9/11 (Everett et al., 2015). Even before the terrorist attacks on twin towers, hijab was discussed as a symbol of coercion and patriarchy in scholarly literature (Aziz, 2012). Post 9/11, the discussion shifted from the "oppressed" Muslim woman, to a possibly "co-conspiring" Muslim woman, who had suddenly become a symbol of suspicion as a sympathiser of

terrorists (Aziz, 2012). The French ban on burqa and niqab in 2011 was followed by Bulgaria, Austria, Quebec, Denmark, and Sri Lanka imposing similar prohibitions on the Muslim veil, citing reasons of safety and female emancipation. Such bans were considered necessary for integrating Muslim women in the mainstream, for maintaining societal values of dignity and equality and for secularism. As hijab is viewed as a symbol of subjugation, many Western feminists consider removing the veil as an act of breaking free from religious oppression (Hasan, 2018). The "choice" to wear hijab is often deemed "false consciousness" on the part of Muslim women as complying with religious mandates is viewed to be contradictory to the paradigm of choice (Cumper & Lewis, 2008).

Support for hijab bans is often strengthened by citing examples of Iran and Saudi Arabia, countries which have curbed agency of Muslim women by instating compulsory veiling in a bid to "uphold morality" (Zahedi, 2007). For proponents of hijab, it is women in the West who are the victims of patriarchy and objectification which lead to eating disorders, crime, and an extreme dissatisfaction with their appearance. On the other hand, a woman in a veil is judged only based on her character rather than appearance (Tarlo, 2005). Although many women in Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and other nations have willingly adopted the hijab, it is difficult to determine exactly how many did so because of family and social pressure.

Beyond Oppression and Liberation: Positive Functions of Hijab

A plethora of recent studies have noted that Muslim women do not see the veil as an oppressive instrument but rather give it personal and political meanings, illustrating why the veil cannot be viewed with the singular lens of politics or religion. While religion and cultivating modesty was a significant motivator for those who practice hijab (Winchester, 2008), Williams and Vashi (2007) found that beyond religious motivations, the veil was used by Muslim immigrants in the USA to emphasize their religious identity and to gain status in Muslim society. Identifying as a member of the faith offered the wearers of hijab material, psychological and social benefits including economic opportunities, community networks, peer support, and educational resources (Peek, 2005).

Muslim feminists state that hijab is used by Muslim women to "claim the gaze and to become the ones who observe the world" (Afshar, 2000, p. 343). Several benefits are attributed to the hijab by its supporters, including protection from male sexual gaze (Tolayamat & Moradi, 2011) as well as an anti-colonial statement that rejects western consumerist standards set for women. Hijab was used as a revolutionary "icon" in Algeria in the 1950s and in Iran in the 1970s. Most recently, the rise of anti-Muslim discrimination in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks have led to many young Muslim women in the West adopting hijab as a means of resistance, even though their mothers never practiced the veil (Haddad, 2007). Despite the stigma associated with the veil, Muslim women were found to strategically use the hijab to start discussions about the Muslim faith, highlighting positive aspects of Islam as a way of coping with adversity resulting from increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric (Marouka, 2008). The practice of veiling reduced the negative impact of discrimination by providing a means of self-definition to its wearers (Byng, 1998).

Hijab in India

In India and neighboring South Asian countries, the purdah system has existed among Hindu and Muslim communities for centuries. Historically, the purdah system has prohibited the interaction of men and women outside certain "categories." For Muslim women, purdah had to be maintained in the presence of men they were not related to, or not considered to be their mahram[5] (Papanek, 1973). As purdah restricted access to public spaces, sex-roles were reinforced more stringently, limiting the circle of interaction for Muslim women (Menon, 1981). The purdah system continued under the British rule, but its severity was reduced with the influence of western education in India. In this context, a burqa or an abaya was believed to provide "portable seclusion" and was used by Muslim women to continue following religious commandments as they stepped outside their homes (Papanek, 1973). In post-colonial India, Shariah[6] prescription was found to be a primary motivation behind veiling (Khan, 1995), accompanied by an understanding that veiling was important to be a "good" Muslim (Sriram & Vaid, 2011).

Systematic investigations of hijab in the Indian sub-continent are either scant or dated. India provides a unique context for the study of hijab as the Muslim population is native to the country, and the state has neither prescribed nor enforced the religious veil. The relevance of the study of hijab in India has increased with the worsening of social and material conditions of the Muslim community, and with the rise of partisan Hindu right-wing politics (Human Rights Watch Report, 2020) which mirrors the rise of anti-Muslim prejudice around the world. While stigma relating to being Muslim and a hijabi has received some attention in Western literature, it is unclear how Muslim women in India have responded to it. A closer look at the practice of hijab in India will allow us to draw implications for the place of hijab in a secular democracies around the world.

Overview of the Study

The Muslim woman's body has been spoken of as a "battleground upon which patriarchy and feminism are at an ideological war" (Medina, 2014, p. 876). The meanings attached to hijab swing between intense disapproval and approval—a garment of oppression to control women, or a tool of liberation from patriarchy's objectification of women, while the voices of Muslim women on the topic continue to be sidelined (Zempi, 2016). By critically reconsidering these dichotomies, issues of importance to Muslim women's psychological, emotional, and physical well-being can be given attention. This can aid in overcoming the dearth of scientific literature on how hijabi women traverse their personal and public lives.

Further, existing studies on veiling have overwhelmingly focused on religious identity of Muslim women disregarding equally important overlapping identities of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, language, and context which influence the practice in several ways. The growing stigma and discrimination of being Muslim must also be given careful consideration in any studies which seek to provide insights into the practice of hijab.

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[5] Male blood relatives and affine that a Muslim woman cannot marry such as father, grandfather, male siblings, sons and so on.

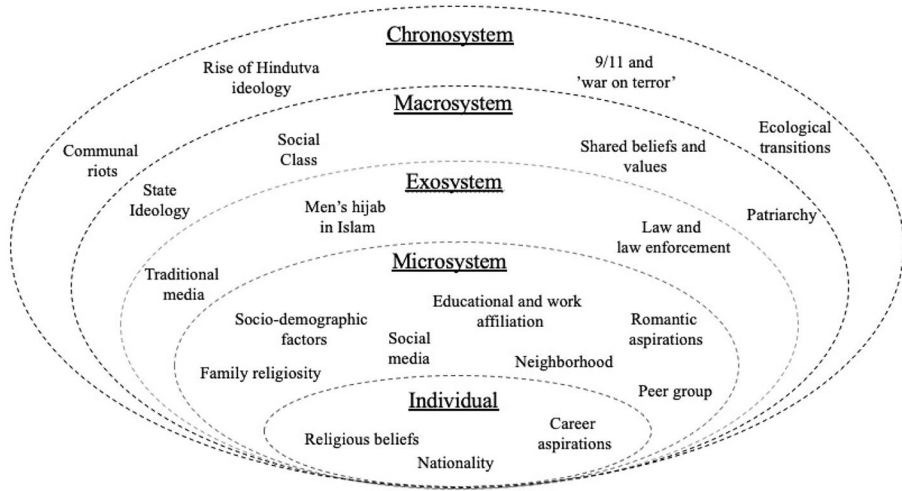[6] Shariah refers to Islamic religious law.

Fig. 2 Ecological concept map of the present study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Gulamhussein and Eaton (2015) consider the relationship between hijab and experiences of discrimination to be a public health concern.

The present undertaking proposes a shift in our understanding of the veil, by including the role of multiple factors underlying the systems occupied by Muslim women. To overcome gaps listed, a developmental framework is employed to map the influences on the practice of hijab. Being a comprehensive framework, Bronfenbrenner's model of Ecological Systems (1979) was chosen to conceptualize the present study. This framework was originally applied towards understanding child development, but has notably been used to answer questions of relevance to sexual identity (Hollander & Haber, 1992), education (Leonard, 2011), public health (Eriksson et al., 2018), and more.

While the model emphasizes the role of an individual's context in their development, the individual is not viewed to be a passive recipient of these processes. The authors of the present study were able to use this framework to highlight the unique ways in which Muslim women exercise their agency by exploring the continuous negotiations made by them to balance their spiritual, religious, occupational, familial, gender, and academic roles in different settings. Using this framework allowed the authors to theorize the relationship with hijab as a dynamic entity that evolved over time in response to new knowledge and events occurring in the respondents' ecology.

In the participant's most immediate environment or *microsystem* (Refer Fig. 2), factors such as age, gender, self-concept, knowledge of religion, personal religious beliefs, and beliefs about hijab were explored. The pattern of activities and roles of the respondents in relation to family, work, and schooling were important proximal processes which exerted an influence on the practice of hijab.

At the *Mesosystemic* level, inter-setting knowledge was studied as a product of interaction between the varied microsystems of the individual. This knowledge referred to both positive and negative expectations that others had from the participants: as

Muslim women, expectations from within the religious community were explored, and as a minority in India, stereotypes associated with them from outside the religious community were examined. Distal *exosystemic* processes, such as legislations, law enforcement, and traditional media were also investigated as potential influences on the practice of veiling. Under *macrosystem,* cultural elements as well as belief systems such as the ideology of the state, and patriarchal influences both within and outside the Muslim community were examined vis-à-vis the hijab. The *chronosystem* charted how the hijab was affected by patterns of environmental events, life transitions, and socio-historical circumstances.

The core questions explored in the study were the participants' motivations to veil, challenges encountered in the practice, and the hijab's influence on the social, personal, and interpersonal spheres of the respondent's life. These questions were explored in relation to the degrees of veiling, personal religious beliefs, prejudice encountered, romantic and career aspirations, and the identity needs of the respondents. The relationship with the hijab was viewed as bi-directional; the hijab influenced and was influenced by the systems in which the respondents resided. The accommodations made by veiled Muslim women to balance the spheres of their life were drawn from their responses.

Methodology

Sample: Inclusion Criteria and Selection

The participants of this study were unmarried, Sunni Muslim women from Mumbai, India. Only women who continuously practiced the hijab, the burqa, or niqab were included in the study. Married women were excluded from the sample as the researchers sought to investigate participants' ideas on dating and romantic relationships. The Sunni sect, which makes up about 85% of the total Muslim population in India, was selected as the sect of interest both for the relevance of findings to the larger Indian population as well as convenience in sampling. The age range to be studied was between 18 and 25, also defined as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2004); as emerging adults, the participants were likely to have revisited their parents' or their own decision to start veiling. Being able to understand and converse in English was a criterion as well, but the participants were not restricted to that language. As the first author was fluent in English and two additional local languages (Hindi and Maharashtrian Konkani), the questions were posed in English, but the participants occasionally switched to their mother tongues, which was translated and transcribed accordingly.

The Indian setting provided unique insights in two ways. Firstly, the Indian state does not prescribe or enforce the veil, so the influences on hijab were studied in a context without state-intervention. Secondly, the focus of the study was a native or non-immigrant population in a secular context. Both demographics have not received much attention in literature. The sample originated in different Indian states, and in the case of two participants, had also spent a considerable amount of time in the Middle East, but most of them had been residing in Mumbai for many years when the study was conducted. The criteria was to have resided in the country for at least more than 3 years, as that would have provided them with enough time to familiarize themselves to the Indian context.

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was chosen for the study, given the nature of its framework and research questions being explored. The participants' own lived experiences, frames of reference, and language was used to construct the various meanings attached to hijab. Narratives of the participants were elicited using semi-structured interviews, to query aspects in eight domains: religiosity, conservativeness of wearing hijab, motivation and reasons for veiling, education, work, social life (online and offline), dating and marriage, and nationality. The final interview guide had 86 questions. Beyond the interviews, some participants shared Instagram and Facebook posts, WhatsApp forwards about hijab, or their own writings on the topic which were coded for meaning alongside the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This enriched the investigative process by drawing focus to what was important for the participants, rather than limiting the study to the knowledge of the researchers and academic literature (Creswell, 2003).

Process of Data Collection

Respondents were enrolled in the study through purposive and snowball sampling. Particularly helpful in finding participants were WhatsApp groups of people who attended Arabic classes and were motivated to discuss topics of religious significance. The researcher sent enrollment messages to several WhatsApp groups, which snowballed as more and more people shared it on other groups. A pilot interview was conducted with a 23-year-old woman to test the interview guide and the feasibility of the study. The first author's identity as a hijabi woman proved to be an influence in both rapport building and recruiting participants, in line with Amer and Bagasra's recommendations for conducting psychological research with the Muslim population (2013). An earlier overlooked domain of 'Work and Hijab' was added to the interview guide after the pilot was conducted.

   The participants were allowed to choose the setting of the interview to make the process unobtrusively naturalistic. The interviews were conducted in mall food courts, café chains, or the first author's home, subject to participants' logistical and emotional comfort. One participant was interviewed over phone because of family restrictions about traveling alone. Those who indicated an interest to participate were sent a socio-demographic form to confirm that they met inclusion criteria, and to familiarize with the participant's background before the interview was conducted. In all, 17 people indicated their interest to be a part of this study and the interviews were conducted with 12 participants. Those who withdrew cited reasons such as not wanting to do a face-to-face interview, university obligations, or not meeting the criterion of regular practice of hijab. The duration of interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours.

Description of the Sample

Two of the twelve participants of the study were originally from Saudi Arabia but had been continuously living in India for more than 4 years, meeting the inclusion criteria for this study. Most participants' families had been living in Mumbai for generations. Six participants were students, two were recent graduates in search of employment and four were working

professionals. They were pursuing a diverse range of careers such as Pharmacy, Designing, Medicine, Psychotherapy, Teaching, and Civil Services. In terms of their economic positioning, they belonged to the middle and upper middle class backgrounds. All participants' mothers wore an abaya or a chador, and many covered their face with a niqab. Four participants wore the abaya or the burqa, two wore burqa with the niqab, four others wore the headscarf, and two switched between abaya and hijab based on the activity they were engaged in.

Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

A researcher's personal background affects how they approach a topic, the findings they consider appropriate, and the topic they choose to study (Malterud, 2001). Issues explored in this study, too, emerged from both review of literature and the first author's personal experiences as a hijabi Muslim woman. The awareness of this identity and possible biases led to systematic attention paid to every step of the study by the authors to ensure that the standard of research is maintained. The first authors' identity facilitated the study in terms of recruitment of participants, and the frequent use of common Muslim parlance was not an obstacle in the interviewing and analysis process.

Ethical considerations were not compromised at any stage of the study. Strict confidentiality and anonymity was maintained. The respondents were briefed about their rights, and signed an informed consent form before the interviews began. Their questions regarding the study were clarified both before and after the interview, in person, or over call and text. The transcript and recording were shared with participants whenever requested, and the results of the study were shared with the participants.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study have been organized using the ecological model, beginning from the microsystem outward to larger systems.

Settings of Influence, "Rules" of Hijab, and Trajectory of the Personal Hijab

The initiation into the practice of hijab was a result of the participants' immediate microsystems, and had many meanings attached to it, including piety, family reputation, and respectability. The participant's relationship with hijab evolved with time towards heightened commitment, even if the degree of physical veiling fluctuated. The 'home' and 'neighborhood' settings and related proximal processes facilitated and promoted the practice of hijab. Significant life transitions such as moving from a Muslim to a non-Muslim neighborhood, or the death of a parent were related to a stricter adherence of hijab.

Home and Neighborhood The participants were introduced to religion and the practice of hijab through their immediate family, the closest and most influential presence in their microsystem. Religion was central to their homes and religious upbringing was ensured through lectures, Islamic schools, and mosques: most participants prayed five times a day and fasted throughout Ramadan. According to Zahra, 21, everything in her home

was planned around the daily prayer schedule. All participants ensured that they followed sunnah in their day-to-day tasks. Mothers were typically more involved in the religious upbringing of the participants than fathers. Tasneema, 22, said, "I wouldn't have been serious, not only about hijab but Islam as a whole if my mom wasn't."

Many of the participants noted that even if they had not initially understood why they veiled, they were certain that it was a command of Allah and that alone demanded adherence. Religious understanding of the hijab played a crucial role in its acceptance.To embody the roles of being a "good Muslim" and a "good daughter," hijab had to be worn,

> I saw a video of Mufti Menk[7] that inspired me, he told us that whatever reasons, keep that aside. That you will be protected, that is all you know, some reasons that we tell ourselves to satisfy us. But one thing is that when Allah asked Ibrahim (A.S.[8]) to sacrifice his son, he did not question it. He just took him out and he was about to sacrifice him. So that is the thing about believers, if you believe in Allah, you just have to obey him. (Zoya, 22)

As a consistent practice, the participants began observing hijab through a headscarf, loosely or properly tied, at 11 or 12 years of age and with time, had developed a close relationship with the veil. Roshan, 18, said that the hijab had become her constant companion, it protected her as a friend would, and in return, she defended her hijab. Shabnam and Sumaiya were fascinated by the hijabs of older female family members, and began to wear it to emulate them. For other participants like Rehmat and Zahra, wearing a burqa was an implicit expectation,

> My mother used to wear a burqa and I knew eventually I would wear a burqa … it's a norm in my family to cover heads. So I was nurtured that way, right from the start, because my uniform also had it so I was used to that thing while going out – I think that is the reason that I continued. (Zahra, 21)

Some participants began wearing the hijab due to parental insistence, and for them, veiling was linked to protection, following religious custom, and keeping with the community norms. Protection was emphasized when the participant had to engage in a setting where they had to interact with "na- mahram[9]." Shireen, 21, who was made to wear the hijab because of boys attending her remedial class said "I was not on board at first, but then I just grew into it and it became very comfortable." Although the headscarf was non-negotiable in family discussions on hijab, most participants who were asked to up-veil, or increase the degree of their veil to an abaya were given space to refuse.

The Muslim community replicated the influence of the family at a larger social level. Many participants lived in areas surrounded by other Muslims where the expectation was for women to veil and follow the hijab. The expectations varied with neighborhoods; a conservative locality like Safa's hometown expected strict adherence to the niqab, whereas Shireen's "modern" extended family expected her to wear hijab with western clothing, such as jeans. According to Medina (2014) those who failed to comply with the community norms of hijab were considered to be less religious and pious than others. The current study found that gauging piety by clothing extended beyond the individual, to questioning

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[7] Renowned Islamic scholar.

[8] A.S. is short for Alayhi s-salam, and it translates to peace be upon him.

[9] Not *mahram*, or men that the respondents were not related to by blood.

the values and piety of the respondents' families. Participants had to be mindful of their family's "honour and reputation." When Rehmat, 25, was asked about what would happen if she did not wear burqa, she said,

> Basically, (they would say) 'Did you look at her daughter? She's not wearing a burqa anymore? Why did she start?' Yeah, and in my case, 'Her mother said nothing about it.' So, why should my mother face the taunt? It is not like my mum forced and it happened (Rehmat, 25)

Being in a hijab, especially the conventional burqa, provided participants with a "legitimacy" and respect in the eyes of the neighborhood and allowed for a sense of belonging and acceptance in the Muslim community. The high level of reciprocity and positive affect observed in this dyad was a motivator for veiling. Wearing the hijab came with expectations of what "good" Muslim women did, such as avoiding speaking to na-mahram, and getting married early. The more conservative the hijab, the more stringent the expectations from the hijabi women, and higher the level of faith it represented (Zempi, 2016). Most participants were deterred from up-veiling to a niqab for this reason. Only two participants wore the niqab or the face covering, and four other participants said that they had tried the niqab before choosing not to wear it. All participants were of the view that the niqab was not a mandatory part of faith, and the face could remain visible to the public eye.

Material Adherence to the Hijab In the initial stages of the practice, for the first few years of veiling, the focus was on the appearance and aesthetic of hijab. Watching YouTube tutorials, buying hijabs and abayas, and matching accessories with the hijab was given priority, and there was a sense of 'excitement' about donning it. Enthusiasm about hijab styles and aesthetic has also been noted in other studies (Wright, 2011). "Rules" for hijab were drawn from the Quran and Hadith. The first rule was that hijab had to be worn everywhere outside their homes, but what defined a "home" was decided based on personal comfort in their surroundings. For Shabnam, it meant her entire apartment complex, but for many others it was limited to the inside of their homes. Hijab was not necessary within their homes, especially if they were only in the company of women, but the participants continued dressing modestly.

Outside their homes, hijab was understood as loose, modest clothing that covered most of the body, and a traditional burqa was not considered mandatory. Wearing a burqa was a convenient way of making sure that the requirements of hijab were met, but the long cloak was considered to be "old-fashioned" and most participants preferred to pair the headscarf with kurtas[10] and leggings. In terms of degrees of veiling, the body parts that had to always be covered included the head, neck, chest, and hips, while the face, feet, and forearms could be left exposed. Different styles and colors of hijab were used to make different "statements" and illustrated a considerable degree of freedom when it came to practicing the veil. Some participants like Zoya switched between abaya and hijab based on the activity they were engaged in; she wore an abaya to the mall or classes, but wore a headscarf to work, because a burqa did not allow free movement in her occupation as a physiotherapist. If Sumaiya found some of her dresses to be body-hugging, she would make sure that her hijab was longer. In this manner, constant adjustments were made in

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[10] Long, loose collarless shirt.

their daily outfits while following the "rules" of hijab. To maintain modesty, "heavy" makeup that enhanced attractiveness or drew the attention of onlookers was avoided. The participants either wore no makeup at all, or wore light makeup that included kohl, concealer and a nude-shade lipstick. There was a continuity in the adherence of these rules in online settings.

Contrary to hijab-induced self-consciousness noted in some studies (Rastmanesh et al., 2009), the participants of this study found the hijab to be empowering, and stated that it helped them feel more confident in public as it "concealed their flaws". Rehmat described this feeling as being in a super suit, "Do you know how superheroes wear their super suits? (laughs) This is my super suit." Despite being a gendered practice in essence, the participants found that wearing a hijab permitted them to subvert other gendered prescriptions such as waxing, or putting on makeup, and instead focus on what was "important," such as their careers. This is in line with multiple studies where hijabi women reported lower experiences of sexual objectification, and found it easier to disregard Western beauty standards (Tolaymat & Moradi, 2011).

Another important rule related to hijab was consistency of the practice; intermittent veiling or veiling at irregular intervals was not favorably perceived. The participants believed that intermittent veiling, or removal of hijab at irregular intervals or in public places, occurred either due to lack of faith or absence of choice in matters of veiling. While some participants were sympathetic to the plight of such women, many considered intermittent veiling to be "cowardly" and "hypocritical" as it portrayed Islam and Muslims in a negative light. They wanted such women to confront their family members, instead of taking off the hijab in public. Safa, 23, stated,

> A lot of non-Muslim people have told me that socially the message that goes out is that every single woman who wears the hijab is oppressed and every single woman who wears a hijab doesn't want to wear it, and that is wrong, right? Because I am a living and breathing example of otherwise. That is why I don't want other non-Muslim people to think that way, form that opinion.

Work and Education Work and education impeded the practice of traditional hijab. As the participants began to closely interact with these new settings, they encountered conflicting role demands which led to an introspection regarding their veil. This was in line with Sriram and Vaid's (2011) study which found that respondents who were raised and educated in a predominantly Muslim locality, never saw a reason to question their Muslim identity. Shabnam, 18, recounted what it was like when she first began wearing the hijab,

> It was fine with me inside, because I really liked wearing it, but when I used to go out, and when my schoolmates used to see me in (a mall) or anything, so it was kind of awkward because they are like, 'Why do you wear it? What is the need? Why do you guys cover?' So at that age I didn't know the answers.

Hijab had previously garnered a positive reaction in their immediate context, but interactions in settings with more non-Muslims made them aware of their Muslim identity, how it was different from others and was often negatively perceived. Several participants reported instances of discrimination where their schools refused to accommodate the hijab. Challenges arose in form of exclusion, bullying, and confronting ethnic stereotypes about

Muslims, with many respondents choosing to down-veil, or reduce the degree of veiling in these settings.

Similar challenges were encountered by the respondents in work settings, as employers were hesitant to hire hijabi women. Hijab negatively influencing employment opportunities has been noted in studies conducted in the USA, Germany, Netherlands, and the UK and is considered a consequence of "gendered" Islamophobia (Parker-Jenkins, 1999). While discussing discrimination during the job recruitment process, Rehmat said that she often did well in telephonic interviews, but being asked a barrage of questions about her veil during in-person interviews was mentally exhausting, "It has become a very conscious effort for me to go looking for jobs, because I am just like, how will they perceive me during interviews?" It was especially difficult for Rehmat, who encountered challenges regarding her choice to work at home. Her parents believed that a woman's primary role was to raise a family, "My father is okay (with it now), my mom still thinks that it's a mistake… (but) we (me and my sister) did it anyway," she added.

The participants were nonetheless committed to not compromising their hijab for career or education, "No, no, no, it's like compromising on your religion and you can't do that," added Zoya. They tried to find ways around discriminatory practices so they could achieve their career goals without compromising on their faith. Rehmat applied only to large multi-national organizations as she believed they had more inclusive policies and were wary of lawsuits. Similarly, Shireen and Zahra thought merit-based government entrance exams would be their best option while job hunting. Difficult situations had strengthened their commitment to the veil, "I realized when I started going to college, how much of a part it is of me; and what a difference it makes in my life. That is when I started getting committed to it," stated Safa.

Spiritual Adherence Exposure to newer settings gradually led to an evolution of the participants' idea of hijab. While they were earlier preoccupied with physical adherence of hijab, its styles and colors, they gradually moved beyond material adherence towards a more spiritual understanding of hijab. Zahra believed that more than clothing, there was a "hijab of everything," including one's behavior, character, and conduct. The adherence of the Islamic rules of hijab predicts adherence to other Islamic guidelines (Hassan et al., 2015), and the participants of the present study emphasized modesty, obedience to God, and engaging in pro-social behavior as equally important determinants of veiling. One of the "responsibilities" of hijab was to be more altruistic and they strove to become better Muslims.

As a regulating force (Droogsma, 2007 as cited in Abubakre, 2018), the hijab motivated the participants to avoid indecent speech, parties, pubs, and intermixing with other genders. Shabnam, Shireen, and Tasneema occasionally felt that they were missing out due to this, but they preferred FOMO[11] to doing something that went against their religion. This was similar to the 'ethical' veil described by Hamzeh (2011) which protected Muslim women from what was considered haram or forbidden within religion. The participants of this study viewed hijab's requirement as something that gave them spiritual depth and purpose, and they continued to practice these "rules" even in the absence of authority figures.

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[11] Fear of missing out.

Paradoxically, a stricter spiritual commitment to hijab involved modifying the traditional veil in a way that helped them feel more at ease with it. In most cases, the reexamination led to reducing the degree of veiling from an abaya or burqa to just wearing a hijab or headscarf. There was guilt and questioning of their own faith as they gave down-veiling serious thought, and those who spoke of reducing the degree of veiling repeatedly clarified that they would continue following all the rules of the hijab. Papanek (1973) found that the purdah system had such extreme effects on the wearer's psyche that even discarding the burqa was not enough to change the attitude and limited the public role of previously veiled women. However, for the participants of this study, down-veiling was done with the express intention of increasing their public role and visibility, and most discussions of down-veiling happened in the context of employment.

Helping them assert their identity as Muslims was identified as another important function of hijab. Like Muslim women in the West (Marouka, 2008), the participants of this study used their unique position as visibly Muslim women to propagate a positive image of Islam. They believed they had a responsibility to present Muslims in a good light, to participate in all activities, to achieve both academically and non-academically, and to break stereotypes about Hijabi women,

> I like to go in places, I like to take part in competitions and stuff. So that people see the representation, people know that it is okay for someone to wear a hijab and do all that you are doing. Yes, I try to do that […] I don't have any personal gains in that, I just do it because I want people to see the hijab. (Zahra, 21)

Social Media Despite not being a physical place, social media was explored as a microsystem setting in the study as it allowed for a two-way interaction between the respondents and hijabi women across the world. It emerged as a crucial space for negotiation, experimentation, and learning for the respondents. The participants noted the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Islam and hijab in traditional media in form of stigmatized caricatures (Zempi, 2016), and had increasingly begun to prefer social networks as avenues of authentic representation instead. The anti-Muslim sentiment at work and in school was offset to a certain degree by a supportive online community of hijabi women. Hijabi Instagram "influencers" portrayed the ideal standards of Muslim beauty, innovated trends in "hijab fashion" (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018), while simultaneously emphasizing the veil's religious significance. In this manner, social media facilitated the practice of veiling,

> I started following those hijabi people, on Facebook, that was when I became socially active. 'til 12th I was someone else… So then I realized that these are the things that Islam wants us to do, I knew it all (before) but I didn't take it upon me […] Facebook had a lot of pages – Islam for kids, women and Islam and now on Instagram as well; they had these messages and quotes and stuff, so that reflected on me (Tasneema, 22)

An observational dyad was noted between the respondents of the study and influential "hijabi icons" who were breaking stereotypes and gaining accolades in diverse fields while wearing hijab. Accomplished hijabi women were role models and a source of motivation for the participants,

I see some really strong American Muslim Women rising up. Ibtihaj Muhammad is the first hijabi Olympian for America. Halima Aden is a hijabi American model. Amani-Al-Khatatbeh is the founder and Editor in Chief of Muslim Girl, she constantly tries to fight Islamophobia through the power of media. Linda Sarsour is an American Muslim activist who fights for the rights of all kinds of immigrants and refugees. These women are the beacon of leadership and I really salute them for their work. They are going against the odds of their time, may Allah help them. (Safa, 23)

Inter-Setting Knowledge, Patriarchy, and Legislation

At the meso-, exo-, and the macrosystemic levels, the influences of intersecting identities, stereotypes and patriarchy were investigated with respect to the veil. These influences manifest in complex ways at different levels of the ecology, but have been combined in this section to offer a more coherent narrative of the respondents' experiences. The findings map (Refer Fig. 3) provides a distinction of these components systemically for reference.

Negotiating Gender and Religious Identity Many of the role expectations that emerged from their gender and religious identity vis-à-vis the hijab were accepted by the participants. Feminine traits of being soft-spoken and obedient were considered to be desirable qualities. In areas of career, dating, and socializing, however, the participants took the liberty to question some of these imposed gender roles. While making these accommodations, the participants were mindful of tackling only culturally gendered norms, while insisting on maintaining religious requirements. For instance, while the participants disregarded familial expectations by breaking curfew, the hijab was never disregarded in this manner. Manal and others spoke of white lies they told to find ways around limiting curfews imposed by family and their neighborhood on women,

I tell after I go home (laughs) because now I have gone and come back, now nothing can happen, that's why… until and unless you are going somewhere very far, then that's wrong… but then Navi Mumbai (within the city), it's fine. (Manal, 20)

Everything considered to be "*haram*" or forbidden within the religion was strictly avoided, such as premarital sexual relations, but in grey areas, a compromise or balance was sought. Papanek (1973) noted how the purdah system in both Muslim and Hindu cultures were first and foremost a means of limiting the interaction between men and women, and it was also true for the practice of hijab. However, Zahra and many other respondents felt it was unrealistic to "never" interact with men, "I feel we live in a world where there are two sexes, and you have to interact with them, you can't stay aloof from 50 per cent of humanity," she stated.

Refraining from interacting with men was closely related with early marriage. Marriage by the age of 24 or 25 was the expected course for Muslim women in India, and Rehmat, who was 25, joked that her age was actually 35 in "Muslim years" when it came to marriage. All participants except Shabnam preferred marriage by choice over an arranged marriage, and they discussed a "*halal*" or permissible method of dating to find their partner. Halal dating entailed a brief platonic relationship, to gauge marital compatibility. Respondents considered courtship and getting to know one's partner before marriage as valid and encouraged within the purview of Islam, so long as requirements of

hijab were not ignored.This is another example of the participants interpreting religious mandates in a manner that was more compatible with their social realities.

Men's Hijab and Patriarchy Patriarchy was identified across settings as an influence on veiling. It was considered to be a cultural rather than a religious norm, and was discussed with reference to hijab and barring Muslim women's entry to mosques. With respect to hijab, Zahra added, "Islam talks about hijab for men before it says anything about hijab for women, and their hijab involves lowering their gaze". But the participants noted that men's hijab was not discussed nearly as often as women's hijab, and there was decidedly more pressure upon women to follow the guidelines of modesty,

> I have seen boys going in t-shirts and jeans also for namaz[12], tying just a hanky (handkerchief). The moment khutba[13] is over, they remove it nonchalantly so it really is, very, unequal because boys don't really follow it [...] even they must have sense of where they are sitting and everything, […] so it is not really equal, and I don't really like it because I feel it should be the same for both. (Sumaiya, 23)

Rules of hijab for men included not staring at women with less than pure intention or harassing them, wearing clothing that covered their body from the navel to knees, with their pants falling above their ankles, having a beard with a trimmed moustache, and just like Muslim women, they were to dress in modest clothes which were not see-through or reveal the shape of their body. Men's behavior was emphasized over clothing when it came to hijab, in that they were required to conduct themselves respectfully in the presence of women. A "reciprocity" in practice of hijab was emphasized by some participants: if women covered themselves as per the norms of hijab, men had a responsibility to not harass them,

> I used to live in Qatar, and my mom used to walk with me. Any car that used to come and she wanted to cross the road, even if the car has a green signal, it used to stop really far away and be like "Go" (to let them pass), so that is the kind of respect and dignity a woman has. And you are supposed to comply with that, because she is doing her bit (with the hijab) you are supposed to do yours as well (by maintaining distance) (Safa, 23)

One-sided discussion on hijab meant that women had to take the onus of their own safety and had restrictions such as curfews and chaperones imposed on them. While they acknowledged the presence of these flaws in the practice of hijab, they continued to hold the religion in highest regard, while attributing the shortcomings to culture. Similar to young British Muslims who accused the older generation of presenting cultural norms as religious requirements (Dwyer, 1999), the participants of this study insisted that it was not Islam that was flawed, but rather the cultural elements seeping into religious practice that needed reconsideration. In this manner, a distinction drawn between Islam as a religion and Islam as practiced by Muslims.

Negotiating Ethnic and Religious Identity External sources such as traditional media— both print and visual, social media, and direct links such as their non-Muslim peers

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[12] Muslim prayer.

[13] Sermon after friday prayers.

communicated anti-Muslim prejudice to the participants. In Mumbai, like in the rest of the country, there was a noticeable hardening in the attitudes towards Muslims across class and locations (Khan, 2007) and was a source of incredible stress for the participants,

> 'Pay attention, open this (hijab) and pay attention', […] and it would start as a joke and it would become offensive later on. So relating to hijab, or Muslims or my appearance there would be comments, joke and then actually a little.. over that. Like now, if I am just sitting and they'd be like 'Arre, you guys are terrorists.' (Sumaiya, 25)

The Indian Muslim identity has been increasingly stigmatized with the rise of Hindu nationalism and nationalist politics in the country. Despite being native to the country, Muslims in India report being termed as "traitors" ,unpatriotic, or the "residual" population that did not leave to join the Muslim nation of Pakistan in 1947 (Bilgrami, 2006). Many participants of this study too reported instances of being called Pakistani, and were often told to "return" to the neighboring country due to its largely Muslim composition. Sumaiya stated, "Yes, I get to hear Pakistani a lot, 'You are Pakistani', or if there's a war, or cricket…'Afridi is your favourite, yes?', so people say that." One participant emotionally narrated an incident wherein she was berated and abused by a stranger for distributing sweets and Indian Flags on the Indian Independence Day,

> You are never patriotic if you are a Muslim in India. It is the mentality, if you are Muslim you have to say Bharat Mata ki jai[14], every time. Only then you are Indian otherwise you go.. like that. It's very horrible! (Huzefa, 21)

Participants thus refused to associate themselves with anything that could be used to fuel anti-Muslim sentiment in India and abstained from publicly talking about politics due to fear of being persecuted. Further, as Muslim women, they found people viewing them with pity and attempting to "save" them from their families. Assumptions held about the respondents included being "oppressed," "illiterate and without career ambitions," "quiet," and "overly religious."

> Even though they (hijabi women) are not, and they are living their lives to the fullest extent, and they're enjoying it, people do feel that. I don't know it's deeply etched in their brain that we are dictated, we are oppressed, we don't have a life of our own, can't go out without male companions and whatever we do, we need permissions for it. (Tasneema, 22)

Power Settings Distal processes such as law-making, the proposed policies of a government, and the ideology of the state have an impact on the lived experiences of hijabi women. Beyond stereotypes, Islamophobic policies of the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) government hindered the development of the Muslim community and influenced their ecosystems unfavorably. When the right wing party was reelected to govern, the participants reported feelings of heightened insecurity, anxiety and apprehension regarding their safety, as perpetrators of hate crimes against Muslims in India often went unpunished. These crimes ranged from verbal discrimination, exclusion, to even being "lynched," and according to the participants, these elements drew their support from the BJP and their anti-Muslim legislations such as the "Beef Ban"[15].The rising

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[14] Nationalist chant that means Hail Mother India or Long Live Mother India.

[15] Cow is considered holy in the Hindu religion. Several Indian Muslims have been lynched in public for allegedly consuming or trading cattle , with support of state apparatus.

wave of anti-Muslim sentiment made it more difficult for the participants to observe the hijab. As visibly Muslim women, they feared for their safety, and felt alienated from the rest of the Indian community. Shireen stated,

> Two days after the election results I had gone to the market, and we went to a Hindu shop and they were just looking at us, and I just immediately felt like.. we were against each other.. Seeing this was such a shock for us because everybody is like so peaceful, almost peaceful. we just couldn't wrap our heads around it. (Shireen, 21)

When asked if they could foresee a ban on burqa the participants were unsure. Rehmat however thought it was a possibility that the hijab will be attacked by the governing party in the future and viewed hijab bans as a restriction,

> Not yet. but I don't think if things like this continue, we might have to ... like France, like they have asked people to remove them because they are making that decision for the entire population. (Rehmat, 25)

Regardless of the probability of ta burqa or hijab ban, no participant agreed to take off their hijab. In fact, many thought that it became more important to use hijab as a symbol of resistance. For Zoya, this was also a reason to put aside sectarian differences and come together as one community, "We really have to come together obviously keep aside our differences… Sunni, Shia whatever and then we'll ask to fight and whatever, candle marches, whatever we can .. in a non-violent way, but we will have to."

Being the "Representative of Islam" Difficult political situations had made the participants' religious identity even more relevant in the public sphere. The result of this could also be seen in the participant's insistence on wearing their hijab, despite the challenges that they faced as Muslim women. The respondents were cognizant of the hyper-visibility of hijab in their settings and wished to use it constructively,

> I feel like whatever I do, people are constantly judging me and correlating whatever I do because I am a Muslim. And wearing hijab is a sign, 'Oh! There's a Muslim.' So whatever I do, if I breathe so they're like 'Oh, a Muslim breathes like this.' (Tasneema, 22)

Instances of discrimination triggered a range of reactions including anger, hurt, sadness, humiliation, fear and resignation, and these feelings strengthened their commitment to become 'Representatives of the real Islam.' The desire to represent Islam positively reflected in every setting that the respondents' participated in, and taking on this role could be understood as a Molar activity, that is, a purposeful activity that carried intent and meaning for the participants (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The political nature of hijab was initially unnerving for some of the participants but they soon realized that this put them in a unique position as "ambassadors" or "spokespersons" of the Muslim faith. As a result, they made sure to always be on their best behavior in public spaces. Participants such as Zahra, Zoya and some others were encouraged by older Muslims to enter diverse careers such as gynaecology and civil services, where you did not usually see women in hijabs and make the community's presence known. Zoya believed it was important to make one's presence felt in the society, "People should know me, people should know me as a hijabi girl doing stuff," she added. Shireen further added,

I think I read this about Sikh people, that they are so helpful and outgoing and so charitable that whenever you spot a turban, you know that you can go to this person and ask for help and you will get help. I want to be that person in a hijab; that you spot a hijabi and you can go up to them and you will get help.

In distancing themselves from the stigma associated with being Muslim, they engaged in 'distancing from the abnormal,' portraying those who did not comply with this definition of a good Muslim as 'abnormal' or an exception to the norm (Ryan, 2011). In a growing climate of hate, many participants believed that it was important to use hijab as a symbol of resistance, "To show that we are here and we don't care, and whatever you say, we will do what we want," stated Rehmat.

While participants said that they would not trade this responsibility or give it away, they talked about how it could get exhausting at times. "You have to- it's a responsibility honestly that I didn't sign up for. I have to be on top of my toes", stated Safa. On the whole, they were mindful of their privilege as educated Muslim women residing in urban areas and used their visibility in a manner they considered worthwhile.

Summary and Conclusion

The present study attempted to bring nuance to discussions on hijab by highlighting the different influences on the practice at each level of an individual's ecology. The systemic framework employed to conceptualize this qualitative research took into consideration the respondents' context, roles, and identities while theorizing the veil. More than just a piece of cloth, the hijab was embedded with many meanings: it was a symbol of faith, modesty, protection, resistance, a means of connection with their family and the larger Muslim community, a regulator of "anti-Islamic" behavior, a promoter of pro-social behaviors, and was a very significant component of the participants' self-definition as Indian Muslims. The veil was perceived positively by its wearers as a practice of agency and empowerment. The relationship that the participants with their hijab was intimate and personal; the veil was described as a "friend" and a "concealer of flaws."

Unlike the Orientalist construction of Muslim women as subjugated women (Afshar, 2008), the findings of the study emphasize the hijabi woman as an agentic force. More than just mute victims or passive spectators, they were active influencers of change at home and in the larger political discourse. The choice and method of veiling was taken with an acute understanding of their ecology, and the various elements and influences within. The participants has revisited their parents' or their own decision on veiling and assigned personal and political dimensions to the practice. Their understanding and practice of hijab acknowledged both patriarchal norms, as well as rising anti-Muslim discrimination. The primary function of the veil remained obedience to God as noted by previous studies on the topic (Rashid, 2017), but a personal understanding of the veil gave the participants a sense of meaning and purpose. Across contexts, the participants prioritized their hijab in decision making processes. Their views on hijab, however, were not rigid and inflexible; they constantly negotiated with their environment to ensure that they could have "the best of both worlds," balancing their faith with the demands of their context.
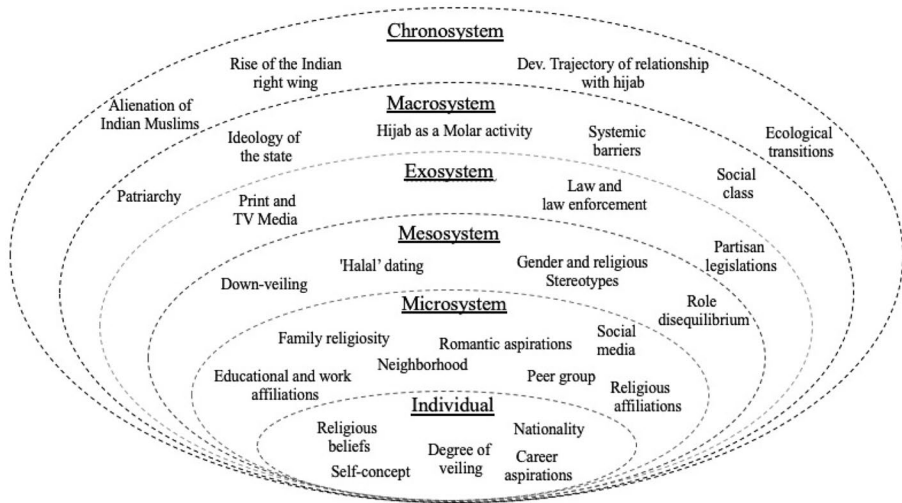
Fig. 3 Ecological findings map of the present study

The meanings and behaviors relating to hijab were interrelated across systems that the individual occupied. While initiation into the practice was due to close members of their ecosystem such as family and neighborhood, the meaning attached to the veil evolved as they interacted with the larger systems in their ecology. Initially, hijab was associated with religion, piety, and respectability for family in the Muslim community. At this stage, their understanding of hijab was largely material, limited to draping and colors of hijab, and the adherence to the commandment of veiling largely focused on its physical aspects. As they moved out of their immediate environment, they encountered role conflicts due to being part of incompatible microsystems. For instance, being part of both religious neighborhoods and secular schooling systems caused a disequilibrium which led to a critical reconsideration of the practice. This prompted an evolution of the participants' understanding of the veil from a "material" to a "spiritual" entity, which took into account participants intention and behavior. As a spiritual entity, hijab did not merely mean covering their body, but behaving in a manner befitting the message of hijab, i.e., being modest and trying to be "better" Muslims. This included being polite and engaging in charitable and pro-social behaviors.

As the meaning attached to hijab evolved, the participants became more flexible in its material adherence. Religion and God were perceived to be without any "flaw," but cultural and gendered prescriptions relating to hijab were questioned and many times, disregarded. Both discrimination and exposure to new settings led to them modernizing their hijab in several ways, most prominently by moving away from the traditional black abaya. Down-veiling was done while carefully maintaining the requirements of modesty in Islam. For some participants, making alterations to their style of veiling was not possible due to social pressure in their Muslim neighborhoods. In such cases, down-veiling was delayed to a later time, for when they moved away from these neighborhoods. Connecting with the larger hijabi community through social media was found to be especially vital in the process of assigning a personal meaning to their hijab. Social medias, such as Instagram and Facebook, helped them connect with teachings of Islam, and they aspired being "model Muslim women" who dressed and acted in particular ways. They sought to emulate

prominent hijabi Muslim personalities who were making strides in their chosen career fields without compromising their faith or hijab.

According to the participants of this study, the challenges they encountered were not due to the hijab itself, but due to Islamophobia and misogyny. If they were not necessarily discriminated against through "actions," implicit prejudice against Muslims was noted. The bigotry manifested as offensive jokes, exclusion, or requests to take off their hijab. Further, as Indian Muslims, their loyalty to the country was constantly questioned, especially after the re-election of the BJP to power. Many participants reported feeling increasingly alienated from the rest of the Indian community. There was an understanding that increasing anti-Muslim sentiment had made their identity as religious Muslim women even more relevant in the public sphere. The participants thus insisted on creatively using their hijab to become "ambassadors" or "spokespersons" of the Muslim faith, and to present Islam and Muslims in a positive light. They continued practicing hijab despite the challenges they encountered, as they believed they were following the commandment of God, and would be rewarded in the afterlife.

This study has implications for therapeutic practice, psychological research and policy making. It sought to highlight the wide ranging influences on the practice of hijab, and note the complexities in decisions relating to veiling through its findings. The findings of this research emphasize how interacting with people outside of their ecosystem, and being part of multi-dimensional debates on hijab promoted the autonomy of Muslim women. In light of these findings, legislations which impose a dress code on women, whether it is banning or enforcing, could be understood as forces which curb the agency of Muslim women. The study further notes issues of importance for the physical and mental health of hijabi women. The stress of being a visibly Muslim person in context of increasing micro- and macroaggressions warrants an investigation about how lives of hijabi women is affected by stigma relating to being Muslim.

Limitations of the Study

The data for this study was collected from an urban, middle-class, English-speaking sample. This socio-economic position may have afforded them more choice and agency related to the veil. The participants were educated young women who had access to religious knowledge and were able to scrutinize and decide when and how to practice their hijab. Another limitation concerns the sect which the study focused on, that is, Sunni Muslims. The practice and beliefs about hijab differ among different sects of Islam, for instance, the Bohra Muslim *rida* is noticeably different from the abaya worn by Sunni Muslim women.

By the nature of the study's qualitative design, it must be noted that biases such as selective memory and attribution may have influenced some responses of the participants, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic. As the participants described themselves as being "representatives" of Islam, they may have been further inclined to portray the Islamic faith and the practice of hijab favorably.

Declarations

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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