

## Listening to the voices of hijab

Tabassum F. Ruby

*Department of Women's Studies, York University, Toronto, Canada*

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### Synopsis

This article illustrates the ways in which immigrant Muslim women in Canada perceive the *hijab* and associate it with diverse meanings. The article reveals a gap between dominant understandings of the *hijab* as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, and the self-expressed sense of women participating in the study that the wearing of the *hijab* is a positive experience in their lives. Through focus groups, the participants stated that the *hijab* confirms their Muslim identities, provides them a chance to take control of their lives, and offers them the status of "respectable person." The meaning of the *hijab*, nonetheless in this study, is not limited to attire and most participants described modesty as being an important dimension of the *hijab*. The concept and deeper meanings of the *hijab* as expressed by the participants of the study, however, are not woven into larger Canadian society, and this article argues that the *hijab* in the form of Muslim woman's clothing emerges as a device to negotiate spaces within the Muslim community, as well as in the dominant western culture.

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The question is not simply what do clothes mean or not mean. Rather, how do we use them to negotiate border spaces we need to conceptualize as tenuous, fragile, barbed, or elastic, rather than as fixed and dichotomous? (Freitas et al., 1997: 334).

With the increasing number of *muhajibh*<sup>1</sup> around the globe, the issue of the *hijab* has become a topic of debate among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Researchers such as Nasser (1999) have pointed out that the "new *hijab* phenomenon" initially began two decades ago in countries such as Egypt, and the practice has since been embraced by Muslim women around the globe. In Canada, the *hijab* is often seen as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression and a restriction to their mobility, particularly in the media.<sup>2</sup> Many Muslim women, however, claim that the *hijab* empowers them in numerous ways: making their identities<sup>3</sup> distinct; taking control of their bodies; and giving them a sense of belonging to a wider Muslim world. Thus, the discus-

sion on the *hijab* is contentious, revealing the complexity of the issue.

The intricacy of the issue of *hijab*, nonetheless, is not limited to whether the *hijab* oppresses a Muslim woman or liberates her. Most often the Muslim community and the dominant culture recognize the *hijab* as clothing that is used to cover the female body, i.e., a headscarf and/or long coat. This research, however, indicates that immigrant Muslim women<sup>4</sup> perceive the *hijab* in a variety of ways and associate it with diverse meanings that range from covering of the head to modest behaviour. As a result, the participants often negotiate their places in the larger community as well as in the Muslim community, because they feel pressure whether wearing or not wearing the *hijab*.

### Methodology and sampling

There is a small population of immigrant Muslim women in Saskatoon (the geographical location of my

research), and most of them know each other. I have personal contact with many of these Muslim women, and through the use of the “snowball technique,” I was able to identify participants. The “snowball” or “chain” method occurs when “sampling identifies cases of interest from people who know other people with relevant cases” (Bradshaw & Straford, 2000: 44). In recruiting the sample, the Islamic Association of Saskatchewan played a particularly important role. Along with Friday prayers, weekly gatherings in the mosque facilitated meetings with diverse groups of women and provided opportunities to talk with them about my research project.<sup>5</sup>

The focus group, a qualitative research tool that has been widely utilized in the social sciences, could be defined as an interactional interview involving at least 3, but ideally no more than 10, participants.<sup>6</sup> Utilizing this technique, researchers who act as moderators strive to learn through discussion about psychological and sociocultural characteristics and process among various groups (Berg, 1998, citing Basch, 1987 and Lengua et al., 1992). Using focus groups, I interviewed 14 women who came from 12 different countries. I conducted three interview sessions and divided my participants into two groups of five based on whether or not they wore a headscarf. I conducted one interview session with participants who did not wear a headscarf and one with those who did. Each interview session was 1.5 h long. My third group consisted of a mix of participants, some of whom wore the headscarf and some who did not. The session with the mixed group, which had four participants, lasted 1 h and 50 min. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audiotaped.

The focus group was a particularly useful method for conducting this research. This technique brought together many cultural groups among immigrant Muslim women and enabled exploration of the range amongst them of cultural differences and similarities in reference to the *hijab*. Berg (1998) states that the focus group is an effective method of observing group dynamics. Rich data were collected by recording conversations that were not necessarily directed at the researcher, but took place between participants who often talked among themselves. Thus, group energy and interaction nurtured considerable stimulation, and provided an opportunity to explore diverse meanings of the *hijab*.

In addition to taking cultural diversity into account, language was also a big consideration in selecting the participants. Even though immigrant Muslim women speak various languages, I conducted the focus groups

in English so that the group (including myself) had a common language. Conducting the interviews in English, however, also meant limiting the research to participants who spoke and understood the language. It may also have affected the data: ideas about the practice of the *hijab* expressed by the women through metaphors in their mother tongue could have different meanings when articulated in English.

In order to protect the anonymity of my participants, personal details such as place of birth, age and occupation cannot be fully described here, but general characteristics are as follows. The participants' countries of origin include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Burma, Egypt, Guyana, India, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan and Turkey. The women's ages range from just under 20 to 60. The participants' occupations vary from physician to accountant, writer to insurance officer, and students. Their immigrant experiences range from arrival in Canada within the last few years to immigration more than two decades ago. Some informants have lived in other cities such as Toronto and Edmonton; others have resided in Saskatoon since they emigrated. Six participants did not wear the *hijab*, and eight were *muhajibh*. As the overall number of participants is quite small, the results of this study may best serve as a “case study.”

### Etymology of the *hijab*

The term *hijab* has various meanings in the dictionary<sup>7</sup> and in the Qur'an. According to Lane (1984), the meanings of the word *hijab* are: a thing that prevents, hinders, debars, or precludes; a thing that veils, conceals, hides, covers, or protects, because it prevents seeing, or beholding. The *hijab* also means a partition, a bar, a barrier, or an obstacle. In the Qur'an, the word *hijab* appears seven times, in five instances as *hijab* (noun) and twice as *hijaban* (noun). Neither *hijab* nor *hijaban* is used in the Qur'an in reference to what Muslims (and non-Muslims) today call the *hijab*, that is, a Muslim women's dress code. In most cases, the Qur'an uses the word *hijab* in a metaphysical sense, meaning illusion or referring to the illusory aspect of creation (Ibrahim, 1999). For instance, the Qur'an states “. . .Until (the sun) was hidden in the *hijab* (of Night)” (38:32).<sup>8</sup> In this context, the word *hijab* is used symbolically: the sun is concealed due to the darkness.

The *hijab*, in the Qur'an, is a concept that has double meanings: not only something that protects, but also something that can hinder. For example, the Qur'an states, “They say: Our hearts are under veils,

(concealed) from that to which thou dost invite us, and in our ears is a deafness, and between us and thee is a *hijab*” (41:5). In this verse, the *hijab*, which is not a physical object, is an obstacle or a hindrance, keeping non-believers from understanding the message of God. In another verse, the Qur’an states, “Between them shall be a veil, and on the heights will be men who would know every one by his marks: they will call out to the Companions of the Garden, “peace on you”: they will not have entered, but they will have an assurance (thereof)” (7:46). In this verse, the *hijab* is used to indicate separation between different groups of people who would be waiting to enter heaven. These Qur’anic examples show that the *hijab* has positive as well as negative connotations, depending on the situation in which the term is used; however, as mentioned earlier, it is not used in the Qur’an to denote or refer to a Muslim women’s dress code.

Verse 33:53 is known as the *a’yah* (verse) of the *hijab*, in which God says, “And when ye ask [the Prophet’s wives] for anything ye want, ask them from before a *hijab*: that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs.” Many scholars see this as a rule not only for the Prophet’s wives, but also for ordinary women, the former being role models for the latter. Some scholars, however, disagree with this approach. The Qur’an clearly states that the Prophet’s wives are not ordinary women, and that God has commanded them to abide by certain rules which do not apply to other Muslim women, such as not marrying after the death of the Prophet, and getting double reward for good deeds and double punishment for bad deeds. Since this verse clearly addresses only the Prophet’s wives, I argue that this restriction of *hijab* is just for them, and not for other Muslim women.

### Does the veil equal the hijab?

One complexity regarding the subject of *hijab* is that the term *veil* is often used synonymously, or interchangeably, with the word *hijab*. However, El Guindi (1999) points out that in Arabic, which is the language of the Qur’an—the spoken and written language of 250 million people and the religious language of more than 1 billion people around the globe—the word *hijab* has no single equivalent such as “veiling.” Therefore, the distinction between the words *veil* and *hijab* is important, as the latter has Islamic association that differentiates it from the former term.

In addition, researchers such as Fernea and Fernea (1979) and Roald (2001) have indicated that regional and global terms differ in classifying the diverse

articles of women’s clothing, and the word *hijab* varies from culture to culture. El Guindi (1999) states that *The Encyclopedia of Islam* identifies over 100 terms as pieces of clothing, many of which, such as *burqu’*, *’abayah*, *jilbab*, *jellabah*, *niqab*, and *izar*, are used for the covering of a female body. Thus, while a Saudi woman may wear a *niqab* and call it *hijab*, a Canadian Muslim woman could use a headscarf and also identify it as a *hijab*. The concept of the *hijab*, hence, emerges in multiple ways. The veil, which is often interpreted in Western<sup>9</sup> traditions as a covering of the head, does not illuminate the complexity of the practice in the Muslim context. For this reason, I have used the word *hijab*, but for the sake of better flow, I have not changed the word *veil* when the writers cited, or the study’s participants, used this word.

### The hijab in the Muslim context

Before illustrating the participants’ views about the *hijab*, I would like to outline some of the basic concepts of the *hijab* in the Muslim context, because many participants referred to them. The Qur’anic verses that are traditionally cited to describe women’s dress code are as follows:

1. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty. . . . And that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. (24: 31)
2. O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): this is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God is oft forgiving, most merciful. (33: 59)

In the first verse, the Qur’an uses the word *kho-moore henna* (from *khimar*), which means veiled, covered, or cancelled. Asad (1980, 1900–1992) states that *khimar* was worn more or less as an ornament in pre-Islamic times and was let down loosely over the wearer’s back. In accordance with the fashion prevalent at the time, the upper part of a woman’s tunic had a wide opening in the front, and her breasts were left bare. Thus, the *khimar* as an ornament was very familiar to the contemporaries of the prophet, and Asad writes that

the Qur'an uses the word *khimar* to make it clear that a woman's breasts are not included in the concept of "what (must ordinarily) appear" of her body and should not therefore be displayed.<sup>10</sup> In the second verse, the Qur'an uses the word *jalabib* (from *jilbab*), which means an outer garment, a long gown covering the whole body, or a cloak covering the neck and bosom. *Khimar* and *jilbab*, then, are the basic words which often lead scholars to conclude that the Qur'an requires that Muslim women should wear specific types of clothing, which nowadays is called the *hijab*.

Other scholars, however, have interpreted the words *khimar* and *jilbab* in numerous ways. Ibn Kathir (1981, 1300–1372), for example, argues that *khimar* and *jilbab* signify that women should cover their whole bodies, except one eye. al-Tabari (1994, 1839–1923), on the contrary, cites several scholars who see the first verse as implying that women's faces and hands can be exposed. Commenting on the second verse, nonetheless, he cites a number of scholars who interpret the verse as requiring the covering of the whole female body except for one eye. Most often, scholars' commentaries on the Qur'an link similar contexts and interpret them in light of each other. al-Tabari, however, highlights the fact that not only do many classical commentators understand the first verse differently from the second, but also have diverse opinions as to the extent to which Muslim women need to cover up.

The scholars' explanation that women should cover their bodies is not only based on the interpretation of the cited verses, but also on *hadith*<sup>11</sup> literature. However, many *hadiths* that are often cited as justification for women's covering have been challenged, with researchers arguing that these *hadiths* are not authentic<sup>12</sup> (*sahih*). Ibe-al-Jawzi (d. 1201), as cited in Roald (2001), argues that women should stay at home and, if they need to go out, should wear the *hijab* because they can cause *fitnah* (temptation).<sup>13</sup> Ibe-al-Jawzi bases his argument on a *hadith* that reads: the Prophet says that "the best mosque for woman is her home." Contrary to Ibe-al-Jawzi, however, Al-Ghazzali (1989, 1054–1111) argues that there are many *hadiths* that provide evidence that women used to pray at the mosque during the Prophet's time and that those *hadiths* are stronger than the one cited (Roald, 2001).

Khaled (2001) argues that the debate on the *hijab* among classical and contemporary scholars is fundamentally rooted in the previously mentioned idea of *fitnah*<sup>14</sup> (temptation). He states that the Qur'an uses the word *fitnah* for non-sexual temptations, such as "money and severe trials and tribulations" (Khaled, 2001: 233). Nonetheless, scholars often associate the

notion of *fitnah* with women's sexuality, which is signalled, in part, by an uncovered appearance in public. Khaled writes that women are prohibited from attending mosques or driving cars, and that "every item and colour of clothing is analyzed under the doctrine of *fitnah*" (Khaled, 2001: 235). He argues, however, that these restrictions are misplaced, and that *fitnah* reflects men's fantasies of uncontrollable lust which they have associated with women's sexuality:

It does not seem to occur to the jurists who make these determinations that this presumed *fitnah* that accompanies women in whatever they do or wherever they go is not an inherent quality of womanhood, but is a projection of male promiscuities. . . Instead of turning the gaze away<sup>15</sup> from the physical attributes of women, they obsessively turn the gaze of attention to women as a mere physicality. In essence, these jurists objectify women into items for male consumption, and in that, is the height of immodesty. (Khaled, 2001: 235–6)

Khaled (2001) further argues that the injunction that women need to cover their bodies to avoid bringing on *fitnah* is not in harmony with Islam's message; the Qur'an does not use the word to imply women's temptation, and does not view women's bodies as *fitnah*. Moreover, Islam requires lowering of the gaze and guarding modesty for both men and women; thus, a covered female body will not lead to a modest society (the essence of the *hijab*) until men behave in a similar manner.

### What is the hijab? The discussion among the participants

That is a question that I ask myself. (Almas)<sup>16</sup>

The extent to which Muslim women should cover their bodies is not only a controversial issue among scholars, but also emerged as a contentious matter among the participants in this study, where the meanings of the *hijab* are interpreted in a variety of ways. The *hijab* in the form of physical garments signifies headscarves (as worn by some of the women interviewed), but also modest clothing that does not include the covering of the head. Equally important, the *hijab* in this research also refers to modest behaviour.

Some participants indicated that although the Qur'an requires head covering, "the instructions are not clear, and people have diverse views about the *hijab*." Scholars such as Asad (1980, 1900–1992) have pointed out that there are sound reasons for not stating precise rules regarding the covering of women's bodies. He argues

that human circumstances vary over time, and that the verses are moral guidelines that could be observed against the ever-changing background of time and social environment. Similarly, Dilshad', one of the participants, recognized the purpose of the vague regulations of Islam, and stated that the religion accommodates people's cultural differences. She remarked:

Islam defines certain [rules] very strictly, because you have to follow them throughout your life. Even till the end of the world. . . these rules will remain the same. But some things are [a] little flexible, because you have to adjust with time, culture, and country.

Dilshad' is aware that human beings cannot free themselves from the bondage of time and space, and need to adjust their lives frequently. People's dress codes differ not only from culture to culture, but even within a culture, and patterns and styles indeed change over time. Drawing on the concept of "flexibility" and "adjustment," Dilshad' argues that Islamic rules about women's clothing can be modified according to their needs.

The idea of the *hijab* with reference to headscarves or covering of the body, however, is only one element of the *hijab*. Most participants reported that physical articles such as clothing would not serve the purpose of the *hijab* unless women *believe* in the practice. Islam requires lowering the gaze, avoiding seeing what is forbidden, and not inviting the male gaze. For these reasons, many participants mentioned that whether a woman wears a headscarf or not, modest behaviour is a fundamental aspect of the *hijab*. Raheelah, for example, remarked that the *hijab* is not limited to head covering: conducting life unpretentiously is also significant in fulfilling the requirements of the *hijab*. "To me," she stated, "the *hijab* is not just covering of your head. . . it is your life, your portrayal of yourself as a person. As long as you dress decently, and you do not draw attention to yourself, that to me is the *hijab*." Raheelah does not wear a headscarf, but her concept of the *hijab* dictates modesty of dress, such as not wearing miniskirts or tight dresses that could be seen as bringing attention to oneself. She also believes that moral behaviour is part of the *hijab*. This indicates that she sees the *hijab* not as a material garment, but as an ethical belief. Raheelah then, while not wearing the headscarf, feels that she is maintaining the boundaries of the *hijab*.

### Why or why not wear the hijab?

It keeps the society pure in many, many ways. (Dilshad')

Following the discussion of the concept of the *hijab*, some participants mentioned the rationale of the Qur'an requiring the *hijab*. For example, Farza'nah' argues that the *hijab*<sup>17</sup> sets a boundary between men and women that helps them avoid premarital relationships, which are not permissible in Islam. She commented that a woman's beauty needs to be concealed, because beauty brings a "lot of other things. . . freedom, the kind that we see here." Farza'nah' identifies the *hijab* as a means of minimizing easy interaction between men and women, which in turn promotes chastity. However, according to Farza'nah's views, chastity is not restricted to women's behaviour, but it is extended to society, where women's modesty grants chaste society.

Contrary to Farza'nah's opinion, Dilshad' did not think that women's bodies should be covered simply because they are eye-catching. She believes that the *hijab* is a tool that diminishes sexual appeal and as a result promotes a virtuous public domain. She stated that women need to wear the *hijab* because "it keeps the society pure in many, many ways." Despite the seeming differences about the attractiveness of women's bodies, both Farza'nah' and Dilshad' linked the *hijab* with women's sexuality. Underlying their views is a concept of women's bodies as either tempting (their beauty will seduce men) or polluting (their immodest behaviour can corrupt society). The status of women's bodies, in turn, is seen as a sign of the moral status of the nation, because women are perceived as the cultural carriers of their society (Yuval-Davis, 1994). Thus, a chaste, moral, or pure society is dependent upon the condition of women's bodies according to Farza'nah' and Dilshad'.

Farza'nah's and Dilshad's reasoning also indicates that because they see women's bodies as *fitna*, their views contradict the Qur'an as discussed earlier. In verse 33:59, already mentioned, the Qur'an states that women should cover themselves so as not to be "molested." The context of the verse indicates that at the time this verse was revealed, men treated slave women very disrespectfully, and there were incidents in Medina<sup>18</sup> when the men assaulted Muslim women. The offenders' excuse was that they did not know that these were Muslim women. In order to protect Muslim women, it was stated that they should dress modestly so that they could be recognized. Implied in the Qur'an is the idea that men are the aggressors and women the victims, whereas according to these participants, women are the actors and men the victims (Roald, 2001). Thus, as Roald (2001) points out, many Muslims have turned the Qur'anic view around to suggest that women are responsible for a corrupted and unchaste society.

While some women wear the *hijab* because they feel responsible for a moral society, others wear it because it offers them respect, dignity, and protection. Almas, for example, is just under 20 and away from her country of origin, as well as her family, for the first time. She reported that because she is living by herself, the *hijab* has become a security measure, that men are respectful towards *muhajibh* and do not treat them like sexual objects. She remarked that “to me now it’s like protection. . . I wear the *hijab* and people do not treat you the way they treat other girls here. They are more respectful.” Although she had difficulty explaining why men respect *muhajibh*, for Almas the *hijab*, as it desexualizes her body, is a device for earning respect and ensuring her safety from potential male viewers. Many studies, such as Read and Bartkowski (2000) have found that many women wear the *hijab* because they think men will respect them. These researchers did not discuss why men respect *muhajibh*, and it was difficult for me to speculate about the reason(s). Nonetheless, Almas’s remarks indicate that she feels that the *hijab* gives her the status of a respectable person, which shows that the *hijab* has a significant impact on its wearer regarding her social relationships and her perception of her “self.”

Moghadam (1994: 21) states that women “find value, purpose, and identity in religious practice”, and in this study, the practice of the *hijab* emerges as a significant religious symbol. Many of the wearers of the headscarves felt that wearing the *hijab* indicated commitment to the religion and to self-discipline, because it covers the hair sign of women’s beauty and sexuality. Sima, for example, remarked that when women want to look beautiful, they show off their hair, but women who cover their hair “do not do it just for the sake of Allah [God]. . . It is a sacrifice that you do not [expose hair]. . . You just submit yourself.” Sima considers wearing the *hijab* a part of her religious obligation, which is expressed by denying her (sexual) desires and pleasures as symbolized by her hair.

Since people often recognize the *hijab*<sup>19</sup> as a religious sign that offers its wearers respect and dignity, many Muslims look negatively upon women who do not wear it, and non-wearers often feel community pressure to conform. Despite the dominant view that the *hijab* is a symbol of religious commitment, non-wearers of headscarves<sup>20</sup> argue that a woman not wearing a headscarf still could be a dedicated *muslimah*.<sup>21</sup> Bilqis’, for instance, remarked:

Within the Muslim community, if you are not wearing the *hijab*, then you know you are not Muslim or you are not Muslim enough, when . . . it’s a totally

personal choice, you know. My relationship as a Muslim and my spiritual development is between me and God, and that’s it.

Arthur (1999: 1) states that “while a person’s level of religiosity cannot be objectively perceived, symbols such as clothing are used as evidence that s/he is on the ‘right and true path’”. Similarly, Bilqis’ points out that her devotion to the religion is judged by her dress codes, and since she does not wear the *hijab*, the Muslim community in Saskatoon does not recognize her as a committed *muslimah*. Although for Bilqis’ her relationship with her God is a personal matter that is not connected with the visible marker of a headscarf, the community’s attitude is that the *hijab* signifies a pervasive identity symbol of a devoted *muslimah*.

The participants who did not wear headscarves perceived the *hijab* as a cultural dress code rather than as a religious symbol. These women indicated that wearing the *hijab* is a new cultural phenomenon locally and globally, and that it does not have a religious connotation. Ati’yah, for example, remarked, “I think it’s more like a culture that is the way they are raised there [“back home”]. . . I do not think it is taken as a religion when they started.” According to Ati’yah, women are taught traditionally to cover their bodies with the *hijab*, and they do not wear it because of religious requirement.

The non-wearers of the headscarves, in addition to perceiving the *hijab* as a cultural marker, also reported the irregularity of many of the *muhajibh*’s clothing. These participants mentioned that many women who wear the *hijab* often dress in tight and transparent garments at home and/or in women’s gatherings, whereas they could not “imagine” putting on a tight, revealing outfit. These women thought that because of some “immodest” clothing practices, *muhajibh* usually needed to cover their bodies with the *hijab* when they went out. Moreover, non-wearers reported that they adopted a consistent wardrobe whether they were at home or outside.

Although non-wearers of the headscarves ascribed different reasons for wearing the *hijab* from those who did wear it, both group categories felt that the *hijab* was a way of demonstrating the difference between Muslim and Western values. Mali’hah, for instance, commented that morality is declining in Canadian society, and wearing the *hijab* shows people that its wearers do not subscribe to immoral values; also, she added, *muhajibh* are afraid, because they do not have control over these undesired values. Mali’hah reported that:

The sense of morals has gone way over the other end. . . permissiveness has gone to its utter extreme.

Even if you go to the library now, which was a safe place for kids to go to, they have access to the most, um, horrific pornographic literature. . . . It is really scary. There is complete lack of morals and I think it's a swing in the opposite direction. . . . People are afraid and so they are sort of running to cover themselves, literally speaking and metaphorically.

Most people will concur with Mali'hah that access to pornographic<sup>22</sup> material has become easy for young people. The fact that Mali'hah singled out the library as a site of access for pornography is particularly symbolic since, as a writer, she holds the library in some esteem—denoted by the term “even”—as if one could expect to find pornography at “other” places but never at the library, because she sees it as “a safe place for children.” The availability of pornographic material at the library—an important cultural source for seeking knowledge—represents the defilement of something previously regarded by Mali'hah as “pure.” Even though she does not wear the *hijab*, she sees a link between the *hijab* and pornographic literature, the former standing as a reaction to the latter, with *muha-jibh* using the *hijab* to oppose immoral values. In addition, as I demonstrated in the preceding section, some of the participants perceived the *hijab* as a protector of their cultures, as they think that women are responsible for chaste societies. Likewise, Mali'hah believes that covering women's bodies, and hence Muslim society, shields Muslims from immorality.

### The hijab as an identity symbol

In the global context, if I see a woman in the *hijab* I know she is a Muslim and it creates sense of community in that respect, which is a nice feeling, I think. (Bilqis')

The reasons for wearing it can be diverse, but the *hijab* has become a very powerful, pervasive symbol of Muslim women's identity, particularly in the West. Ibrahim (1999) states that it is a growing feeling on the part of Muslim women that they no longer wish to identify with the West, and that reaffirmation of their identities as Muslims requires the kind of visible sign that the adoption of traditional clothing implies. For these women, the issue is not that they *have* to dress traditionally, but that they *choose* to embrace the *hijab* as a marker of their Muslim identities.

Similarly, many participants who wear the *hijab*<sup>23</sup> claimed that it was a mark of their Muslim identities, ensuring that people immediately recognize them as

Muslim women. Sima, for example, who wears a headscarf, commented that her distinct clothing symbolizes Muslim identities, and that the *hijab* makes her visible in a non-Muslim society. Being visible as a Muslim, however, also means encountering the negative stereotypes that are linked with Muslims, and Sima is aware of that. She remarked:

Nothing else tells them that I am a Muslim, just my *hijab*. And. . . if they have the idea, oh, Muslims are terrorists, they might look at me like [that], and if they have the idea that, oh, Muslims are good people, they might look at me [with] respect” But still it gives me. . . identity.

Nasser (1999: 409) writes that adoption of the *hijab* “conveys a public message/statement, both about the wearer and about the relationship between the wearer and potential viewers”. Accordingly, Sima's response shows that she recognizes her *hijab* as a public statement. However, whether she would be identified as a “terrorist” or a “good” person in Canada is a secondary consideration for her. The significant element to her is that she will be known as a Muslim in a non-Muslim country. Sima thus uses her *hijab* as a tool for declaring her Muslim identities.

The concept of the *hijab* is not limited to personal identity; it has also become the symbol of the Muslim *ummah*, or community. An immigrant Muslim woman's attempt to identify herself as a Muslim by wearing a headscarf is an acknowledgement of general support for the attitudes, values, and beliefs of Islam and her culture that links her to the broader community of believers (Daly, 1999; Read & Bartkowski, 2000). Some participants in this study also saw the *hijab* as representative of the Muslim community, and argued that the *hijab* helped them to stay away from un-Islamic practices. Farza'nah' stated that the practice of the *hijab* defined boundaries for her, and that she would not do anything that could portray the religion negatively:

The *hijab* limits me from doing certain things. When I have the *hijab* on. . . as a Muslim woman, I consider myself basically representative of the whole Muslim community. So, I do not go to bars with my *hijab* on. I do not go to strips clubs with my *hijab* on because I know [that] by wearing the *hijab*, I am not representing only myself. . . it's the whole Muslim community, basically.

Farza'nah' believes that the *hijab* symbolizes both individual and collective Muslim identities. For her, the *hijab*, as a visible sign of Muslim identities, is a public statement for potential viewers. It is also a reminder for

the wearer to conduct her life in accordance with the Muslim belief system by not going to bars and/or strips clubs—places where sexuality is on display—as doing so contradicts the Qur'an's demand for modesty.

The *hijab* not only links the wearers with a larger community, but it is also a symbol of rites of passage. In Iran, reported Pervin', when a young woman begins to wear the *hijab*, the family celebrates it. It is a "memorable" event and "part of the life of a girl as a graduation party." According to Sima,<sup>24</sup> it signifies that a young woman is now a responsible person, and family and friends rejoice in her honour. In this cultural context, the *hijab* appears as a sign of adulthood and offers the wearer prestige and appreciation from friends and family members.

The participants in this study who have maintained the practice of wearing headscarves in Canada indicated that they are stricter in the use of their *hijab* in Canada than are those "back home." Shaffir (1978) states that usually people become more loyal to their traditions and customs if their identities are threatened by the larger society:

A feature common to groups that perceive the outside world as a threat is the belief that they must resist the assimilative influence of the larger society. . . . [This helps the] group members to feel more committed and increases their awareness of their separate identity. (Shaffir, 1978: 41)

Confirming Shaffir's observations, a number of informants in this study reported that they have embraced the *hijab* in Canada more enthusiastically than have people in their country of origin. Pervin', for instance, stated, "I find that our *hijab* here is better than people are wearing in Iran. . . and I think the reason is [that] . . . somehow we need more to do this here than there." The *hijab* helps Pervin' keep her distinct identities in a non-Muslim country, and it appears as a sign of resistance to the assimilative influence of the larger society.

In comparing the practice of wearing the *hijab* in Canada to its usage "back home," the wearers of headscarves are crafting their Muslim identities not only in relation to the dominant values of their residing country, but also to the values of their country of origin. Many informants held a static view of their places of birth, and on their occasional visits they were surprised that the societies had changed. They argued that there is now a tendency "back home" for women to dress in tight clothes and not to wear "proper" *hijab*. The contrast of two different places allows these informants to notice differences in the *hijab*, and "improper" *hijab* emerges as a symbol of the loss of Islamic values. Thus,

the *hijab* for these participants stands as a guardian of Muslim standards, and they thought that "back home" people were careless in not maintaining it.

### The hijab, body, and gaze

The study of dress as situated practice requires moving between, on the one hand, the discursive and representational aspects of dress, and the way the body/dress is caught up in relations of power, and on the other, the embodied experience of dress and the use of dress as a means by which individuals orientate themselves to the social world. (Entwistle, 2000: 39)

Many prominent scholars, such as El Saadawi (1980) and Mernissi (1987; 1991) have situated the practice of *veiling* as an act of controlling women both physically and psychologically. These writers argue that *veiling* represents, and is a result of, oppressive social hierarchies and male domination (Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Roald, 2001); therefore, it should be condemned. Mernissi (1991), for instance, states that "all debates on democracy get tied up in the woman question and that piece of cloth [the *hijab*] that opponents of human rights today claim to be the very essence of Muslim identity" (188). Mernissi views the *hijab* as a hindrance to accessing human rights and, consequently, inherently oppressive. Equally important, she denies the lived experiences of many of those women who recognize the *hijab* as a positive experience that empowers them and grants them Muslim identities.

For the wearers of the headscarves in this study, the *hijab* is a tool that confers power and, contrary to the above writers' opinions, helps many of them to take control of their bodies. Many of the participants seem to be utilizing the *hijab* to set boundaries between themselves and the outside world. Di'ba, for example, commented that she likes keeping her curtains closed when she has the lights on, because otherwise people walking down the street can see her. One of Di'ba's friends, however, finds her precautions odd, and argues that Islam is not that strict, that she can relax without the *hijab* while she is in her home. For Di'ba, putting a barrier between herself and potential viewers is not due to Islamic restrictions; rather, she wants to create a space where she feels free from the male gaze. Di'ba reported her friend's reaction:

What's the big deal? Like, you are in your house. . . . Allah is not going to punish you for what you are doing in your own house, you know. And I am, like, but it is not about being punished. . . . I do not know



how Allah is going to view this, but I do not want people, like [some] guy, [looking in]. . . that's the thing.

Secor (2002) writes that veiling as a form of dress is a spatial practice embedded in relations of power and resistance. Accordingly, extending the idea of the *hijab* from headscarf to the creation of “safe” space, Di’ba uses her curtains to assert power and resistance, her freedom from the undesired gaze.

The notion that the *hijab* liberates women from the male gaze and helps them to be in charge of their own bodies is a very prominent claim by those Muslim women who wear it. They argue that the *hijab* is not a mark of oppression; rather, it is a sign of liberation that protects them from a sexist society. The *hijab* allows Muslim women physical mobility because they feel free from the male gaze. Consequently, they move in the public sphere more comfortably (Hoodfar, 1993; Khan, 1995; Odeh, 1993). Noreen’s story of being released from the gaze by wearing the *hijab* is particularly significant, because she suffered heavily from the “inspecting gaze.” Noreen was 18 years old when she got married and came to Canada. When her husband did not let her wear the *hijab*, she reports, “it got [her] into real trouble.” She and her husband ran a store where she often worked there by herself. After being harassed in her workplace by some non-Muslim men, her husband consented to allowing her to wear the *hijab*. Noreen’s distress due to the harassment can be heard in the following passage:

The first thing that made my husband let me wear it was because I have four guys [following] behind me and I was married. Imagine what that [would do]. . . especially if your husband. . . [is] think[ing]. . . how [will] she. . . react to all those people who are asking for her. It was terrible for four months, the first four months, because I had to work. . . It was very hard, but now I like the work and I am way freer than before. . . So, yeah, it’s the protection, the main thing.

From the conversation in other parts of my interview with Noreen about her experience of harassment, and as the emotional tone of her narrative indicates, she was not only the victim of harassment, but her response to the harassers was also inspected by her husband. The behaviour of Noreen’s spouse indicates that he blamed the victim, as if Noreen were responsible for the harassment. The *hijab*, however, elevated her position from the “observed” to the “observer,” as she felt free from the male gaze. This granted Noreen the protection that otherwise might not have been possible for her.

Contrary to the opinions of those women who perceive the *hijab* as protection, the non-wearers of the headscarves argued that the *hijab* is not an appropriate dress in Canada. These participants stated that while the basic purpose of the *hijab* is not to draw attention to oneself, in Canada, where it is not customary dress, people often scrutinize women who wear the *hijab*. Citing the example of her daughters who wear the *hijab*, Ati’yah reported that whenever she goes out with her daughters, she notices that people stare at them, which “is the opposite of what the *hijab* is supposed to be.” Ati’yah’s observation indicates that the *hijab* is a marker of difference in Canada, as people find it “strange.” Equally important, since it draws attention to the wearer, Ati’yah sees it as contrary to the teachings of the Qur’an.

While some women in this study retain their distinct Muslim identities by wearing the *hijab*, Ati’yah, in order to be more anonymous in mainstream society, did not wear the *hijab*. Both wearers and non-wearers are crafting their identities and negotiating a place as Muslim women immigrants in a Western society. As noted earlier, the sample of this study is very small and the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of Muslim women in Saskatoon. Nonetheless, the results indicate that the reasons for wearing or not wearing the *hijab* are varied and complex, and cannot be reduced simply to religious or cultural reasons.

### Western perception of the hijab

Veiling—to *Western eyes*, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies—became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies. (Ahmed, 1992: 152)

The formation of identities is not only restricted to the ways in which we relate and present ourselves to others; it also depends on how others perceive us. One avenue for understanding the ways in which a society views different people or cultures is to study media representations, because the media often play a powerful role in suggesting and shaping national and personal identities. Studies such as Bullock and Jafri (2000), Jafri (1998), and Kutty (1997) show that mainstream North American media have consistently portrayed an image of “the Muslim woman” as an oppressed and passive *hijab* wearer. Bullock and Jafri (2000) argue that Muslim women are presented by the media as

“others,” members of a religion that does not promote “Canadian” values but, rather, anti-Canadian values such as indiscriminate violence and gender oppression.

In the media, wearing the *hijab* is seen as a powerful signifier of Muslim women’s oppression, and the majority of articles in print about the *hijab* suggests that this practice is a sign of Muslim women’s subjugation, and therefore to be condemned. The print media’s negative stereotypes of the *hijab* are demonstrated in the following headlines: “Wearing a uniform of oppression” (*The Globe and Mail* 1993), “Women’s legacy of pain” (*Toronto Star* 1997) June 26: (5–6), “The new law: Wear the veil and stay alive” (*The Globe and Mail* 1994) April 11:B3, “Lifting the veil of ignorance” (*Toronto Star* 1996) July 30: E1, E3 (Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Jafri, 1998). These headlines illustrate that the popular media not only see the *hijab* as a mark of Muslim women’s subjugation, but that the media perpetuate this image. The media do not, however, draw attention to the banning of the practice. Bullock and Jafri (2000) argue that when Tunisian and Turkish governments banned the *hijab* and many women refused to go to work or attend the universities, the media did not report these events. Thus, the media contribute only to the negative stereotypes of Muslim women.

While there is a general intolerance about the *hijab* in the media, there are some specific incidents in Canada which further support the idea that mainstream society does not perceive the *hijab* as acceptable clothing. In Montreal, in 1994, students were sent home by school officials for wearing the *hijab*, and the young women were told that unless they “removed their *hijab* they could not attend school” (Shakeri, 2000: 130). Similarly, in May, 1995, in Quebec, “the largest teacher’s union in the province, the Centrale de l’enseignement du Quebec (CEQ) voted to ban the *hijab* in school” (Shakeri, 2000: 130).

Discrimination against *muhajibh* students was not limited to Montreal and Quebec schools. Participants in the case study who attended schools in Saskatoon also reported experiences of racism in the classrooms. Di’ba’, for instance, commented that when she began to wear the *hijab* in high school, one of her teachers started to ignore her as if she was not part of the class, which deeply disturbed Di’ba’. “It was art class,” she recalled, “we were sitting all around the classroom and he just, like, totally skipped me. He would be handing out something or whatever. . . and I guess at that time it was bad. . . I took it hard.” The teacher’s approach shows the negative attitude toward the *hijab* by some Canadians. More importantly, it highlights the impact of such discrimination on Di’ba’s self-esteem.

In mainstream society, the negative stereotypes of Muslim women have become more visible since the attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, and the *hijab* has become a sign of a “terrorist” woman. There are a number of incidents in Canada where *muhajibh* were harassed after September 11,<sup>25</sup> and some participants mentioned that they also had encountered racist harassment. Pervin’, for instance, who has also experienced racism in Canada, reported that someone has since called her a “terrorist,” and she inferred that it was because she wore the *hijab*. “Some guy said ‘Terrorist,’ because I wear the *hijab*,” she remarked. “. . . Some people stare at me. They think that if you have the *hijab*, you are a ‘terrorist’. . . really, some of them think so.” Pervin’s experience reveals the powerful and negative stereotypes that have linked the *hijab*—the sign of Muslim identity—with terrorism, resulting in verbal, racial, and ethnic assaults like the one cited above. These racist incidents demonstrate that Muslim women (and men) are often seen as “other” in Canadian society and, despite claims that it is a multicultural country, many Muslims face difficulties living in Canada.

Price and Shildrick (1999) point out that the negative portrayal of the *hijab* in the West stretches back to the 19th and earlier-20th century. “Removing the veil, both real and metaphorical, was the prime concern of the missionaries” and “the prevailing discourse was that women *needed to be rescued*” (Price & Shildrick, 1999: 392). The most recent example of the West as “rescuer” of Muslim women is the “liberation” of Afghan women from the *burqa*. While I do not support the Taliban’s compulsory enforcement of the wearing of *burqas*, I recognize that as attire, the *burqa*, as well as some kind of *hijab*, such as a *chadar*, is a centuries-old tradition in Afghanistan; the Taliban did not invent the practice. Moreover, Afghan women are still wearing *burqas* even though the Taliban regime is no longer in power, which illustrates the fact that the custom has not died.

The “liberation” of Afghan women from the *burqa*, nonetheless, is portrayed in mainstream North American society as if the covering of women is inherently oppressive, and the participants in this study mentioned that people often have the view that Muslim women are forced to wear the *hijab*. I interviewed two Afghan women who wore the *hijab*, and one of them said that people often told her that she could remove her scarf in Canada as her family would not know that she was not wearing it. The participant argues that “it’s not for [my parents], but [people] thought I am scared of my parents and. . . I am doing this just for them. I said,

‘No, it’s different.’” During the interview, the same woman expressed very strong feelings about wearing the *hijab*, and spoke very enthusiastically about it; however, she reported that she often encountered negative views of the *hijab*, based on the assumption that she was forced to wear it.

The participants not only mentioned the negative stereotype of the *hijab*, but they also recognized that many Western-style clothes could be construed as oppressive. Bilqis’, for example, remarked that many North American women wear short dresses and expose their bodies, but this is not perceived as an act of oppression in Canada, whereas covering the body is interpreted as a sign of subjugation. She commented:

Western women, when they see a Muslim woman in the *hijab*, they think, ah, oppression. But you know, ten-inch heels and a miniskirt is not seen as oppressive. To me it is more oppressive than a putting a scarf on your head.

Wolf (1991) has demonstrated that the “beauty myth” has often resulted in the objectification of women, and the expenditure of large amounts of money to achieve the ideal body. Wolf (1991: 13) writes that there is no justification for the beauty myth: “What it is doing to women today is a result of nothing more exalted than the need of today’s power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against women”. Similarly, Bilqis’ argues that the Western style of wearing scanty outfits is a form of women’s oppression.

The representation of the *hijab* is intimately related to issues of voice in the West, which has been expressed through the colonial relationship between the “Occident” and the “Orient” explored by Said (1978). He argues that the link between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, and of varying degrees of complex hegemony, where the Occident spoke for and represented the Orient. As a result, there are many myths about Muslim women created by the “Occident.” One of the fairy tales is that Muslim women are passive victims of their societies and their religion, and the example of *hijab* is often cited as a sign of their submissiveness. In the present study, however, some of the participants did not see the *hijab* as a mark of subordination. Moreover, they consciously chose to wear the *hijab*, undercutting the myth of the submissive Muslim woman. For example, Di’ba’ reported that she always wanted to wear the *hijab*, but she thought that it would hinder her participation in sports activities, and so she did not wear it. She

decided, however, to put it on when she realized that it would not hamper such activities:

It was a weekend and I saw one girl who was a year younger than me at the mosque the night before and, uh, she was wearing the *hijab* and playing basketball, and I mean that’s the whole thing, you know. So, I [thought], well, it is not preventing her from doing all those things. She is still having fun, she is still enjoying herself, so why not? So that night, actually, it was snowing and I made dua [supplication]. . . The next morning, Alhumdulliah [praise be to God], I woke up and I was like, I am ready. I am just going to do it and, Alhumdulliah, I put on [the *hijab*] since then.

This decision was a significant act in Di’ba’s life. Several years later, she still vividly remembers the details of the event: “it was a weekend. . . it was snowing.” Thus, the *hijab* stands for her asserting her own agency and demonstrates that she is not a passive victim of a Muslim society whose life is ruled by male relatives.

## Conclusion

This article discussed the concept of the *hijab* and its meanings to immigrant Muslim women. Wearing the *hijab* in the last two decades has become a popular phenomenon, locally and globally; however, to what extent Muslim women need to cover is a debatable question among scholars as well as among the participants. The idea of the *hijab* ranges from wearing headscarves to demonstrating modest behaviour, depending on one’s understanding of religious precepts. The participants described the *hijab* in a variety of ways; some linked it with the moral Muslim society and others thought that it was a sign of opposing immoral values. For those informants who wear the *hijab*, it is a religious obligation. The non-wearers of the headscarves view it as a cultural symbol. The *hijab* as a mark of identity is a persistent theme and the *muhajibh* use the *hijab* to assert agency, which in turn confers status and dignity to its wearers. At the same time, however, the *hijab* disempowers non-wearers, because the Muslim community does not perceive them as “good” *muslimah*.

While the *hijab* holds multiple meanings for Muslim women, mainstream North American society’s perception of the *hijab* is usually negative, and the practice is often presented in the Canadian media without proper cultural and historical reference. Unlike the participants’ views, the depiction of the *hijab* in Canada suggests that there is only one form of the *hijab*, that

is, as a symbol of the oppression of Muslim women. Canadian attitudes towards the *hijab* suggest that Westerners “know the Orient better than the Orient can know itself” (Khan, 1995: 149).

In some situations the *hijab* may indeed be imposed on Muslim women, but in this study many of the participants chose to wear it. Living in Canada, where the connotation of the *hijab* is often negative, has a strong impact on those immigrant Muslim women who wear it, as they consequently face negative stereotypes of Muslim women such as being labelled “terrorists.” In spite of these racist acts, the *muhajibh* wear the *hijab* as a sign of their Muslim identities and in opposition to “immodest” Western values. Those who do not identify with the visible marker recognize that the *hijab* is not an acceptable dress code in Canada. In fact, their refusal to wear the *hijab* could be read as a symbol of assimilation, but in not drawing attention to themselves and by wearing modest clothes (without the headscarf) these women, nonetheless, maintain the practice of the *hijab*. Thus, the non-wearers of the headscarves may not confront the racism that wearing the *hijab* can prompt; however, they usually encounter criticism within the Muslim community. The *hijab*, therefore, in the form of Muslim woman’s clothing, emerges as a device to negotiate spaces within the Muslim community, as well as in the dominant western culture.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A woman who wears a *hijab*, such as a headscarf, is called *muhajibh*.

<sup>2</sup> Media is defined here as any form of written text, i.e., books, magazines, journal articles, reports or articles in newspapers, and audio or visual productions, i.e., radio, television shows, and documentary films.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the word “identities” in plural form is more appropriate here because a person’s identity is multi-faceted. For instance, a Muslim woman living in Saskatoon is not only viewed as a woman, but also as a woman of colour, an immigrant, and a member of an ethnic, as well as a religious, group.

<sup>4</sup> The term refers here to any Muslim woman born outside Canada, but currently is residing in Canada with any kind of official documents, such as a Canadian passport or student visa.

<sup>5</sup> Please note that men’s and women’s gatherings are held separately in the mosque.

<sup>6</sup> Though different researchers have different opinions about the size of groups, for instance Morgan (1988) states that “use ‘moderate sized’ groups, which is somewhere between 6 and 10” (43). However,

he also indicates that the currently favored range in marketing is 6 to 8, and several years ago it was 8–10.

<sup>7</sup> Lane’s (1984) *Arabic–English lexicon*, is a classical dictionary, which originally appeared in 1863. The meanings of all the Arabic words discussed here are taken from this source.

<sup>8</sup> The meanings of all the Qur’anic verses are taken from Ali (trans) (1946).

<sup>9</sup> By using the term “Western and/or the West,” I do not intend to homogenize the Western world. “The West is as diverse as any other part of the World” (Mojab, 1998: 25); consequently, Western people are heterogeneous. However, the purpose here is to indicate the assumed superiority of the West. Western discourses often profoundly mould the majority of people’s lives, because they have managed to impress an ideology of white supremacy over the last few centuries (Jhappan, 1996). Western views that often underscore their superiority in reference to the *hijab* are discussed later in this article.

<sup>10</sup> Many classical and contemporary commentators, for instance, al-Tabari (1994, 1839–1923), Ibn Kathir (1981, 1300–1372), and Ali (1946), agree that at the Prophet’s time, Arabian women used to wear clothing that left the breasts uncovered; the Qur’an required covering of the bosom.

<sup>11</sup> A collection of the Prophet’s sayings and actions is called *hadiths*.

<sup>12</sup> There is a science of knowledge that studies the authenticity of *hadiths*.

<sup>13</sup> I will discuss this issue below. The idea of *fitnah* is also found in the Judeo-Christian veiling tradition, where it was thought that an uncovered female head aroused sexual desire in men (Bronner, 1993; D’Angelo, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Please note that he discusses the *hadith* literature in reference to the *fitnah*, and argues that they are not authentic *hadiths*.

<sup>15</sup> A reference to the Qur’anic verse 24:30, where it states that men should lower their gaze and guard their modesty.

<sup>16</sup> Please note that all participants have been given pseudonyms.

<sup>17</sup> The *hijab* here signifies a headscarf.

<sup>18</sup> Geographical location where the Prophet was residing.

<sup>19</sup> Here the *hijab* is identified by the form of headscarf and/or long coat.

<sup>20</sup> I used the word headscarf here to make a distinction between those whose concept of the *hijab* includes the physical article, such as a headscarf, and those who view the *hijab* as modest clothing (without the head covering) and modest behaviour.

<sup>21</sup> *Muslimah* is the feminine for a Muslim woman.

<sup>22</sup> Mali’hah defines pornographic material as explicit sexual images.

<sup>23</sup> The *hijab* here particularly refers to the material article; nonetheless, modest behaviour is not excluded.

<sup>24</sup> As stated earlier, please note that as I conducted focus groups, the participants talked among themselves and commented on each others’ views.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance, *The Globe and mail*, October 15, 2001, and Jain (2001) [www.rediff.com/us/2001/oct/12ny31.htm](http://www.rediff.com/us/2001/oct/12ny31.htm).

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