

Undermining the “Matrix of Domination”: Religion, Race and Gender and the Intersectionality Politics of Aliaa Sharrief’s “Hijabi” Hip-hop and Modest Fashion

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Abstract

Kimberle Crenshaw, a Black legal scholar, upon introducing the term “intersectionality” (1989) sought to undermine the lack of productivity of “monistic definitions of discrimination” which are based upon “mutually exclusive categories” (Carastathis 3). She used the term intersectionality as an analytical tool to prove how Black women were in a disadvantaged position in the court system in the US as a result of the lack of attention to the intersecting oppressive factors of race, gender and class. In her essay “Mapping the Margins,” Crenshaw designates three major aspects of intersectionality: structural, representational, and political (1245). Moreover, she clarifies that, as a paradigm, intersectionality uncovers how power works pervasively to discriminate against women. In 1986, Patricia Collins also plays a role in developing the discourse of intersectionality (though not directly using the term yet) by foregrounding the need to explore how systems of oppression are interlinked (Learning from the outsider 21). Moreover, Collins goes on in (2000) to refer to this interlinked system of oppression as a “matrix of domination” showing how intersecting oppressions are organized “(both particular and structural, disciplinary, hegemonic)”

(“Intersectionality” 699). Recently she attempted to distinguish between the term “interlocking oppressions” so popular in the eighties and intersectionality in that while “interlocking oppressions” works at the macro-level of policy, intersectionality functions at the micro-level of individuals and communities; however, both together formulate oppression (Symposium 495). Despite all the research work that has been done from the eighties till now “intersectionality” has yet to develop as a critical social theory and is hence still a discourse of social change which brings together the individual and the state, the intellect and practice (“Intersectionality” 723). One of the components of domination which has not received due attention in research on intersectionality is religion (“Intersectionality” 706). My research positions itself as an attempt at studying this gap through tracing the intersectionality of religion, race and gender in the lived artistic religious practices of Black, Muslim American women’s lives. Aliaa Sharrief, hijabi Hip- hopper and Modest Muslim fashionista represents an interesting example of how these components intersect and are resisted.

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Despite all the research work that has been done from the eighties till now “intersectionality” has yet to develop as a critical social theory and is hence still a discourse of social change which brings together the individual and the state, the intellect and practice (“Intersectionality” 723). One of the components of domination which has not received due attention in research on intersectionality is religion (“Intersectionality” 706). My research positions itself as an attempt at studying this gap through tracing the intersectionality of religion, race and gender in the lived artistic religious practices of Black, Muslim American women’s lives. Aliaa Sharrief, hijabi Hip- hopper and Modest Muslim fashionista represents an interesting example of how these components intersect and are resisted.

Redefining Religion in Relation to the “Matrix of Domination”

The veil/*hijab*/headscarf particularly in North America is an item of dress that concurrently stabilizes and destabilizes Muslim women’s identity in a variety of ways, refashioning in the process conceptions of national belonging and Muslim American women’s agency. Aliaa Sharrief a Black Muslim American, California-based Hip-hop artist and human rights activist explores how cultural practices can offer the possibility of new forms of fluid identities that speak to the global fluidity of our times through her lyrics. Black Muslim American Women Hip-hop artists represent an overlapping conglomeration of social

identities which position them ambiguously. The central idea behind the concept of intersectionality, which argues that all forms of discrimination and disadvantage are linked, suggests that if we do not admit the intersectional nature of inequalities in women's lives, we will end up perpetuating the same systems of inequality. In her artistic endeavors Sharrief undermines reductive perceptions of religion through portraying the lived experience of Muslim American women and their affiliations and resisting discriminatory intersectional nodes of race, gender and religion. Her songs and *Hijabi Chronicles*, a social media platform she created in 2014, provide space for *Muslimahs* in Hip-hop to represent themselves. This platform, as a space for women's mobilization, later developed into a charity organization which now provides scholarships to support creative Muslim women. Through an analysis of her art, we can explore how the veil/*hijab*/headscarf becomes a point of representational intersectionality where varied racial, gender and religious identity positions are refashioned; she voices these multiple positions to positively engage with nodes of domination within and outside her community. From the perspective of some first and third world feminists, gender, religion and race all work together to reproduce the objectification of women. However, Black, Muslim, Women artists like Aliaa Sharrief through popular modes of artistic expression like fashion and Hip-hop art undermine the shackles of this intersectionality.

Therefore, an analysis of Sharrief's "hijabi" Hip-hop invites an attempt to explore understandings of modesty, resistance to exotic images and attempts at redefining veiling in relation to fashion. In such a theoretical attempt, mind/body dualisms are designated as social constructions and a conception of bodies as

"historical, social, cultural weavings of biology" is favored (Grosz 12). Choosing the veil/*hijab*/headscarf within such a context can be seen as fashioning a particular historical, social, and cultural context. Moreover, if wearing the headscarf can be interpreted as body inscription, one can interpret it as a mediation of a different understanding of the body and modesty. However, there are some discourses of femininity and dress which disregard the agency of women, who choose to enact veiling and modify it through fashion. Liberal Muslim feminists like Mona Eltahawy feel that veiling makes women carry the unfair burden of covering. Eltahawy critiques popular celebrations of the hijab tweeting: "I oppose all religiously sanctioned 'modesty/purity culture' as unfair burdens on girls & women." (qtd. In Symons). Other Muslim Feminists like Masih Alinejad, an Irani feminist who fights against compulsory veiling in Iran, call upon women around the world to fight for freedom of choice to wear or not wear it. Both views are valid, however, interpretations of covering as merely traditional oppression, are framed within a reductive geographical, social, and historical context. They fail to take into consideration the agency assumed on the part of Hip-hop artists like Sharrief who through their art reinscribe the act of covering, stretching its boundaries to include various identity positions and challenging the conservative Muslim community as well. Analysis, which takes into consideration the intersectionality of the practice of wearing the headscarf in relation to religion, race and gender, circumvents binary views that interpret it only in relation to religious tradition. In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019) Collins explores the role of women in Black Christian churches. This study initially expresses the typical binary approach to religion which sees religious women as either oppressed by religion or empowered by

subverting religious tradition. However, further on she also discusses how Black religious women used male-run churches to lobby for women's issues (150). Arguably then Women's negotiations of identity and agency in relation to religion cannot be interpreted dichotomously. Sharrief's artistic agency springs from this context.

In a recent interview with Pauline De Leon (March 26th 2021) on the Hypebae website, which is a leading online destination in contemporary fashion and streetwear, Sharrief discusses her hopes in encouraging unapologetic creative women. Hypebae's editorial division clarify that their goal is to show-case today's women leaders in fashion and culture. In fact, they themselves define their goal to be the interpretation of "the complex and ever-changing concepts, themes and ideas that surround gender and fashion" (Hypebae). In this interview, Sharrief is positioned as an innovative, powerful voice in fashion and art as she discusses the various nodes of domination inherent in being a Muslim, Black, American, and a Hip-hop female artist. She speaks about her love for music and how her family supported her in this. She also discusses how the ability to change the status quo, in relation to mainstream American culture's representations of Muslim women, was an attractive aspect of music to her. She describes the obstacles she faced in Hip-hop as a field which is primarily male-oriented and primarily objectifying women and how she was able to overcome that through her perseverance. In addition, she describes the misogyny she experiences because of her choice to wear the headscarf. This misogyny is inherent within mainstream tendencies in Hip-hop music which tend to sexualize women's bodies and objectify them, "Being a female [artist] in hip hop generally has obstacles. Misogyny is really a thing, and the way I choose to cover does make some men in this industry feel some type of way"

(hypebae). Yet, despite of this she and a group of other female rappers insisted on raising their voices and in 2014 performed the first "all-Muslim female Hip-hop artist lineup" embodying the motto "we wrapped but we rap". In reference to women's empowerment and the veil/*hijab*/headscarf Sharrief writes, "Muslim women are stereotyped as being forced to wear a headdress instead of being viewed as empowered women exercising their power of choice" (pioneeronline). For this reason, an approach to covering/wrapping which takes into consideration varied intersectional identity positions which are consciously redefined to suggest empowerment imposes itself.

Such an approach to Black Muslim American women's negotiations of their agency opens analysis of the headscarf in relation to a multitude of social and economic experiences, which surmounts attempts at reducing the act of choosing to wear a headscarf to oppression and the limitation of women's rights.¹ Through her lyrics Sharrief forges a collective cultural memory through the reinvention of a highly charged cultural symbol, with the aim of resisting racism and re-positioning Muslim women's identity within American popular culture and art. She invites her audiences -whether Muslim or not- into the lived experience of wearing the headscarf in America. She questions ethnocentric biased stances of either strictly Muslim or American identities, dispersing monolithic fetishized representations of the mythic "Muslim woman" so popular in the media. Through redefining covering/wrapping and the headscarf in relation to the discourse of fashion she reconstructs it in a myriad of shapes, undermining the tendency to freeze it into a stable identity marker opening it up as an article of dress to varied individualistic agencies. Through an active engagement with global fashion practices, we can trace an

awareness of the rac(ing) of the Muslim identity position and resistance to both the exotic and oppressed stereotypes ascribed to Muslim women. As a mercurous figure of cultural production, artists like Sharrief bring together a variety of seemingly contradictory representations.

Resistant Mimicry and Nation: Black Muslim American Women's Hip-hop

The metaphor of nation as an active process of narration as described by Homi Bhabha can help explain the evolving Black Muslim American women's narrative in Sharrief's songs and the introduction of global fashion and Hip-hop trends within the Muslim, and Black American community. Bhabha cites Stuart Hall's notion of articulation as a useful concept in understanding the complex workings of identity politics and further develops it pointing out, "articulation is central to the study of workings of race and culture in social formations because the image of the joint expresses ambivalence," (Edwards 15). This is the attitude towards cultural politics, which Sharrief seems to explore as she weaves her Black Muslim identity in her Hip-hop articulations. She describes how even in the Muslim community, Black Muslim women covering are marginalized, "It's like the face of Islam is a Muslim Arab woman. And, I feel like we have to try, Black women, we have to do more." (blackmuslimgirlfly). Her expression of this marginalization is important because it acts as an articulation of yet another node of domination related to Black Muslim American women within the Muslim American community in general.

Sharrief actively addresses the domination which Black Muslim American women struggle with when they choose to wear the veil/*hijab*/headscarf in relation to national narratives which designate the limits of belonging and passing as an American.²

Prevalent reductionist representations of Muslim women are deconstructed and the precarious relationship between dress, group identit(ies) and affiliations are foregrounded and examined. Expressions of collective identity like the headscarf are explored in relation to intersectional identity positions. The veil/*hijab*/headscarf to Sharrief in the Black Muslim American context becomes a tool of cultural reinvention.³ The *hijab* we see now is not only an ethnic traditional mode of dress, nor a religious garb but rather a platform for identity fashioning.

Sharrief shapes it as a tool of resistance to deconstruct the monolithic, objectified, oppressed, Muslim woman in mainstream American culture. Through Hip-hop she seeks to reinstate the affiliations of a visible minority within the American nation highlighting how they have often been positioned as social outsiders.⁴ Reductionist interpretations of the headscarf that seek to frame it within a paradigm of fetishization or oppression are resisted.⁵ Such an analysis posits the multiple intersections of race, religion and gender, contexts of wearing the headscarf in the US as related to a transformative understanding of identity "as the combined production of external and internal boundaries and mediation by the Subject" (Mc Andrew 160). The historical and political contexts, personal positions along with agency should all work together in shaping a transformative understanding of Muslim women wearing the headscarf in the US. The complications and dispersions related to wearing the headscarf are introduced. Sharrief fragments collective identity positions, opening them up to positionality. We are introduced to how the headscarf, in the US, complicates issues of stable identity because it signals affiliation as well as disaffiliation to one's new nation. These women map out multiple affiliations upon their female bodies; this mapping cannot really be conceived as a reduction of

women's bodies to a metaphorical and metonymic anatomy because it specifies these women as agents active in shaping the social and material specificities of belonging, through their choice of dress. These material specificities are detailed in the lyrics of two songs by Sharrief: "Change the World" (2022) and "Black Heroes" (2014)

In "Change the World" (2014) Sharrief directly voices the activist goals behind her art designating the key intersectionality of race, religion and gender which shape her lived cultural practices in the U.S. Sharrief sings her challenge to the various obstacles which seek to reduce the enriching multiplicity of her identity positions:

I'm a voice, I'm a Queen, I'm a Black star
 I'm a rose out the concrete crack tar
 Ya I did it when nobody said I can
 I believe in God's plan [...]
 Tired of seeing brother dying on the floor
 Still standing for the Rosa Parks who can't
 Got my hoodie on for Treyvon on bart for Oscar Grant
 Still do it so they names don't go vain

In these lines, she expresses pride in being a woman "queen" as well as Black pride "I'm a Black star". Her pride in her religion is referred to when she states, "I believe in God's plan". Moreover, her activism against the systemic racism which the Black community suffers from is voiced with the references to Rosa Parks, Treyvon Martin and Oscar Grant.

In "Black Heroes" (2014) Sharrief celebrates the struggle of living with a Black identity position in the U.S. In these lyrics, Sharrief revives the activist origins of Hip-

hop as she celebrates her racial background and challenges White oppression by singing the praises of Black history while wearing a Palestinian shawl over her head:

As Black people continue to
 Suffer psychologically
 Economically, and socially
 Under the confines of an anti-
 Black society, there has always
 Emerged strong black heroes
 Who resist white supremacy and
 tirelessly work to
 Inculcate within blacks a sense of
 pride and dignity

In the music video audiences are introduced to an empowering delineation of Afrocentric Islamic themes and iconic images of Black history such as Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Sister Souljah and Mansa Musa. She challenges Black self-hatred by expressing Black pride from the perspective of Islamic tradition, "I'm black like the first man who called the Adhan". She designates "White supremacy" as a node of domination and states Black "pride" and "dignity" as resistance.

In the lyrics of her song "My Girls Rock" Sharrief further draws out the details of the matrix of domination which many Black Muslim American women face. However, instead of speaking from a position of defense which seeks to explain covering to a mainstream American public, she speaks from a position of superiority "we covered we draped up/ you never gon' faze us" (azlyrics.biz) and the title of the song itself suggests this "My Girls Rock". Sharrief claims wearing the headscarf as an active personal choice and undermines mainstream interpretations of her body and choosing to cover in terms of violence or oppression when she says:

I ain't no Taliban, just counting bands
my girls rock, tell a friend!

Think we oppressed want to hold our
hands

Black hijab no contraband

[...]

you be tryna bite and -ssimilate

you wish you could copy my files

wish you weren't so in denial

wish you could handle these trails

wish you could run all these miles
covered in tribal

[...]

I got my crown on (azlyrics.biz)

She constructs covering and challenging the sexualization of the female body as a sought-after feminist stance “got my crown on,” “we covered we draped up”. In this, she stresses the goal of modesty inherent within covering. It is also referred to as a stance which many women aspire to and she underlines this through her repetition of “you wish”. In this, she is arguably introducing the language of the historical cultural context of the African American “Black is Beautiful” and “Black Pride” cultural movement of the 1960s. Interestingly enough, these movements needed to spearhead such a movement mainly out of necessity. The Harlem-based cultural group/model agency “Grandassa” Models was established during this period for this reason. They displayed Black art, poetry and beauty with annual beauty shows. These beauty shows were not merely a celebration of physical beauty but were activist in nature since clothing and hair styles were deemed a political act. The “Grandassas” played a central role in the “Black is Beautiful” movement encouraging acceptance of self and empowering Black women in the process (DeLong). Beauty surpassed vanity and

became a tool of expressive communication. Sharrief's refashioning of the veil/*hijab*/headscarf functions similarly as she redefines the veil within the context of world fashion foregrounding a sense of style in relation to it. Sharrief's reinvention of the veil in this manner introduces modest dress into Hip-hop culture in various ways by changing it as a site of physical beauty.

Fixed identity and fixed identity markers are seen as detrimental to cultural communication. Paul Gilroy points to the possible crippling effects of a fixed identity. He suggests that when identity does not involve a continuous process of reinterpretation and social interaction it becomes “a silent sign that closes down the possibility of communication across the gulf between one heavily defended island of particularity and its equally well fortified neighbors” (103). Through fixity the other can only be a threat. What is particularly interesting about Sharrief's approach in fashioning Black Muslim American women's identity(s) is her endeavor to deconstruct attempts at reducing the diversity and richness of their personal experiences - wearing the headscarf is only an aspect of this experience - to convenient racial stereotypes. Generally, discussions of Muslim women have tended to focus and revolve around veiling and unveiling, as if this were the only obstacle to Muslim women's liberation and the only means to improve their status.

To overcome such rhetoric that has become a part of scholarship on the veil/*hijab*/headscarf over the years (Al'Saadawi), stress should be placed upon the lived experience of *wearing* the headscarf as it is analyzed in relation to global fashion trends. As an instance of fashion, the headscarf can be interpreted as a form of communication and self-expression. Sharrief's refashioning of the veil/*hijab*/headscarf in her photo shoots and music videos represents an actual lived experience

of wearing the headscarf to attempt mutual understanding and dialogue and avoid the mere bridging of gaps. This act can be seen as an attempt at questioning the varied experiences of veiling, only to absolute identities since discrepancies take place when “[p]eople become bearers of the differences that the rhetoric of absolute identity invents” (Gilroy 104).

Hip-hop, from its beginnings in the 1970s in New York, has always been deeply imbricated with activism. As a culture it included rapping, DJing, breakdancing as well as graffiti, all modes of art deeply connected to Youth. It became a platform for self-expression for urban subculture groups. Its ability to reach broad public interest has made activists, scholars and artists admit its power. Sharrief’s song “My Girls Rock” exemplifies this. In this, previously discussed, Hip-hop single released in 2018 Sharrief disperses any possible univocal interpretations of the veil/*hijab*/headscarf through both words of the lyrics as well as the visuals of the music video. Through displaying various intersectionality positions Sharrief simultaneously creates motion and change forging an intersectional narrative which functions through transformation. Yet, becoming a female Hip-hop artist within the general more conservative Muslim community is frowned upon. “Miss Undastood” the first Black female Muslim rapper who began rapping at the turn of the millennium faced resistance from within the Muslim community. She describes her experience saying:

They used to say things like I was ‘hip-hopping my way to the hellfire.’

Sometimes people would send their kids to the stage to tell me to shut up.

Whenever I wanted to talk about [...] stuff that’s taboo, people were taking things out of context, twisting a lot of the words and making my intentions

look negative [...] The fact that I rap makes men feel like I’m not religious enough, that I’m not pious enough. (Khan *Vogue Arabia*)

This adds one more identity-position to the intersectionality of positions which rappers like Aliaa Sharrief continuously redefine. Patriarchal conservative voices within the Muslim community stand as one further barrier between the young artists and their artistic expression. In this sense, a discussion of Black Muslim-American women’s identit(ies) linked to a politically charged article of dress like the *hijab* or headscarf, becomes a cultural instance of competing enunciations of the correlatives of identification processes. An analysis of the veil/*hijab*/headscarf corresponding to fashion sheds light upon the empowering role of fashion in reshaping representations of Muslim women. However, whether fashion is a space of revision and resistance or a space for the re-inscription of global economic hegemonic power because of its relation to a capitalist fashion industry remains a question.

Fashioning a New *Hijab* and The Modest Fashion Field

The *hijab* fashion-wise can be interpreted within the context of modest wear style. In 2015, a panel of designers gathered to draw out the guidelines for this style of comfortable loose clothing which was becoming increasingly popular but which actually has roots going back to the Adam and Eve and the story of the Fall. The decision to show less skin is considered an act of agency by those preferring modest dress. However, within the Islamic modest context we can trace a direct correlation between a matrix of domination over the representation of Muslim women and their description in mainstream culture; such representations often seek to interpret them in terms of binary opposition to the West, irrespective of the

historical and geographical intersections between both cultures historically. Samaa Abdurraqib argues that “when Muslim women are placed at the center of these binary oppositions [...] the divisions between ‘us and them’ are relied upon more heavily. Islam becomes the religion of the ‘other’ and the culture from which women need to be liberated [...] women are held accountable for both religious and cultural traditions” (56). Women who choose to wear the headscarf are often forced into binary positions of belonging, or not belonging, because wearing this item of clothes is often seen as a form of dress at odds with general fashion trends. To counter these reductive interpretations, Muslim women’s forms of dress should become a site for the exploration of multiple affiliations and deconstruction of restrictive conceptions of nation and affiliation. Arguably then, fashion and clothing can be framed “as evidence of creativity and cultural production” showing how “difference produces meanings” inviting interpretation and translation of the intersection of fashion and the headscarf (Barnard 175). Collective markers of identity cannot only be interpreted as reductive attempts to essentialize identity, since this choice of dress within the American context, destabilizes these women’s position within American identity narrative(s). In this, she stresses the “lived experience” of wearing the headscarf/*hijab* in the US, in her song lyrics. By concentrating upon the particularities of the practice of wearing the headscarf, the boundaries set between Western women and women who choose to wear the headscarf are deconstructed. Experiences of discrimination align women who choose to wear the headscarf with other members of visible racial minorities.

In the lyrics of her songs Sharrief seeks to construct what (Fraser, 1990) refers to as an alternative public sphere through creating sub-culture groups on social media

platforms like The Hijabi Chronicles website. This is a platform for cultural expression to empower Muslim female artists which can be seen as a community constructed to encourage shared beliefs and practices of Muslim female artists. As we read the various experiences of these artists, we can trace multiple versions of the veil/hijab/headscarf both in writing and fashion-wise in art. This challenge attempts at reducing it to a collective identity marker that only expresses cultural ties, and tradition since within this context it also becomes a source of stigmatization that challenges national belonging (because it connotes a dually oriented sense of belonging). It is this dual orientation that enriches the communicative message the scarf expresses.

Fashion is therefore playing an increasing role in re-shaping connotations of covering. Fashion in relation to the headscarf represents a borderline space, where modification and adaptation to individual needs can take place and new meanings can emerge. It is a space where the boundaries of collective identities can be extended and reinvented, “[f]ashion enables individuals to deal with themselves as persons and as social objects. It makes possible both individuation and social connectedness” (Rubinstein 206). The productive liminality of fashion lies in its ambiguous position between individual and group expression, which opens space for “correct(ing) the image” since “it allows individuals to pursue competing desires for group identity and for individual expression” (Rubinstein 206). It is this possibility for change and revision, which makes the relationship between fashion and the headscarf a fertile space for redefinition. Laura Nistor discusses the fact that fluidity has always an inherent characteristic of veiling across the Muslim world expressing an interplay between culture and religion. However, the contemporary refashioning and integrated modernization of veiling as Nistor

argues “have a diverse motivational base and can be read in terms of the ‘laicization’ of the veil and as a manifesto of young Muslim women in terms of their independence” (60).

In this manner this instance of fashion reinvention addresses the ongoing cultural studies debate concerned with personal agency and social structures reaching the common conclusion that “people create their own ‘fashion statements’ but are ultimately constrained by what is available in the marketplace, by dress codes and social conventions” (Kaiser 108). Joanne Eicher and Barbara Sumberg also suggest that an adherence to ethnic dress exhibits a preservation of the past as well as change (“World Fashion” 295-296). Moreover, they point out that it is impossible in a world of globalization to speak strictly of ethnic dress since “World, ethnic, and national dress are inter-related in today’s global community” (“World Fashion” 304). Accordingly, it is useless to discuss veiling without relating it to distinct intersectional historical and political contexts: “Different societies invest covering with different meanings. Some women cover from custom, others owing to state law, others in a secularizing society for various personal reasons [...] like any piece of clothing the social meaning of the *hijab* depends upon the context in which it is worn” (Bullock 86). Eicher seeks to renovate conceptions of dress by arguing that our analysis of dress should stress the social role of dress in society “as a sensory system of non-verbal communication” (5). Therefore, an analysis of veiling in relation to fashion can on the one hand be interpreted as a direct representation of globalized capitalism and its ever-present monopolization of our experiences; however, it can also be considered a positive reconceptualization of this piece of dress itself. Joanne Eicher and Barbara Sumberg argue that world fashion eases communication because “[t]he similarity of world fashion garments,

hairstyles, and cosmetics allows individuals to convey to others that they are not members of an esoteric group and consequently open to communication with others” (“World Fashion” 304). The many theoretical debates regarding covering/wrapping as a mode of religious domination as well as seduction fail to take into consideration that first and foremost the act of covering is an action related to dress and fashion. If clothes are a “coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time facilitat[ing] or hinder[ing] consequent verbal or other communication” then it is not improbable for people to attempt to express an adherence to a certain ethical code of conduct through their clothes (Eicher 1). Covering can be interpreted as an active attempt to inscribe meanings upon the female body. Refashioning covering in relation to fashion in this manner represents an interesting site where women can control and shape their relationship to the feminine beauty system, as well as their own experience and conscious modesty. Fashion, as a new correlative shaping the experience of veiling, helps to undermine essentialist interpretations, when the wearer uses it with an awareness of its activist and communicative power. Sharrief’s revival and reinterpretation of the “Black is Beautiful” motto of the sixties’ African American cultural revival movement is an example of yet another agency shaping the act of conscious covering in North America.

Intersectionality and Its Significance

Mainstream culture and some streams of feminism reduce the complex experience of veiling, to a singular meaning without analyzing why and how this item of dress becomes imbricated within the context of a variety of Muslim, Black, American, and Hip-hop women’s positioned histories, experiences and representations.⁶ Irrespective of how different women choose

to explain their clothing preferences, irrespective of how different scholars justify it, what needs to be foregrounded are the remainders of racism and essentialism that are recycled in scholarship or mainstream discourse on Muslim American women's representations and the need to explore the intersectionality of a matrix of domination of religion, race and gender.

Within this context, Sharrief and her generation's Hip-hop and fashion reconfigurations of veiling are guided by the activities of the figure of the *bricoleur*, who manages to survive and resist traditional religious interpretations as well as global fashion commodification processes by reorganizing them as a way of resistance shaping global fashion to their needs. Through Hip-hop fashion and art, the cultural politics of covering/wrapping are designated as a cultural practice through which one can negotiate affiliations, achieving in the process agency and a cultural "articulation" from which a Black Muslim-American identity can be forged. The activist aim behind such research is related to the need to uncover the inherent hatred and lack of understanding which still shapes Muslim-American lives in North America as a whole. The death of Madiha Salman and Salman Afzaal and their family, in London Ontario, Canada because of an anti-Muslim attack in June 2021 is only one sad outcome of lack of reflection and political action which are needed to alleviate forms of racism.

Through an analysis of religion as an important intersectionality node which is woven in a matrix with race and gender, we can better understand how racism and structural inequality function. In this manner, we can grasp how both intellectual and political work come together in intersectionality discourse. In the artistic production of Sharrief, we directly encounter how Hip-hop can be transformed as a cultural tool for the expression of identity as a

complex and dynamic multivocal entity which is embodied at the intersection of religious, racial, and gendered orientations and the many other correlatives which are also multi-vocal and constantly in flux. Sharrief's Hip-hop stretches the artistic boundaries of this genre creatively establishing her art as a means of redefining her Black and Muslim identity in relation to her American allegiance, challenging in the process the boundaries of mainstream Hip-hop. Her lyrics and Hip-hop cultural persona prove that to address one form of oppression we need to take others into account; since, intersectionality is used by Sharrief to draw attention to power imbalances with the goal of eliminating them.

Notes:

- 1 It is important to note here that scholars like Leila Ahmed have argued that the relation between the veil and women's rights can best be described as forced. Ahmed points out, "the veil itself and whether it is worn are about as relevant to substantive matters of women's rights as the social prescription of one or another item of clothing is to Western women's struggles" (166). She also calls attention to the discrepancies of the emancipatory rhetoric often ascribed to unveiling which is shaped by "a vague and inaccurate understanding of Muslim societies" (Ahmed 166).
- 2 "The popular media's presentation of hijab as foreign is especially problematic for Muslim women in the West, who are challenged to prove that wearing hijab does not violate Western [civil as opposed to barbaric] values" (Katherine Bullock 134).
- 3 The veil is a rather ambiguous term which can refer to covering of the face and body, or merely the covering of the head and body. Leila Ahmed clarifies that the reappearance of the hijab in the seventies in Egypt for example was characterized by "a variety of styles of headgear" and that "[b]oth men and women conforming to this code have developed styles of dress that are essentially

quite new, neither the traditional dress of Egypt nor the dress of any other part of the Arab world” (220).

- ⁴ An example of the discrimination which many Muslim women who choose to wear the headscarf experience is exemplified in an ABC primetime special entitled “How Muslims are treated in the U.S.A” presented by John Kenioness which documents the mistreatment that women wearing the headscarf can experience in the Diaspora. A confrontation between a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf and a cashier who refuses to serve her is staged in front of customers in a convenience store and out of forty-one customers who witness the incident; twenty-two do nothing, six side with the cashier, while thirteen challenge his behaviour. This experiment is regarded as hopeful according to Professor Jack Dovidio of Yale who organized it. This is because at least thirteen of the customers side with the Muslim woman. However, what shapes the negative and passive reactions of the rest of twenty-eight customers is in my opinion the

constructions of these women according to essentialist modes of thought which reduce Islam, a whole system of thought, with extremist political positions.

- ⁵ Faegheh Shirazi discusses the various interpretations appended to veiling arguing against reductive interpretations of it “[s]ome people think of the veil as erotic and romantic, others perceive it as a symbol of oppression, still others consider it a sign of piety, modesty, or purity. It has become so ubiquitous that everyone seems to have formed an opinion about it. The various connotations it has, the many emotions it arouses, testify to its continuing, perhaps even growing, significance in the modern world”. (180)
- ⁶ Fadwa El Guindi and Katherine Bullock both argue for fragmenting prevalent hegemonic interpretations of the headscarf.

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