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The Hijab in Bangladesh: Understanding Identity Negotiation, Religiosity, and Autonomy among Urban Muslim Women in Dhaka

By

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Abstract

Bangladesh has seen a steady rise of political Islam and Islamic revivalism since 1975 (Huq 2021, 259). The most significant changes in public behavior, dialogue, values, and attire have occurred post-9/11, with Islamic veiling among women becoming a ubiquitous marker of the population's "hardening" Islamic identities and values (Rozario 2006, 368; Siddiqi 2006, 11). This paper aims to investigate how sociocultural norms and family dynamics influence educated, upper class, urban women in Dhaka to adopt the Islamic veil or *hijab.* Through depth or life history interviews with two generations of Bangladeshi Muslim women – one group between 20-35 years of age, and the older group comprising of their mothers or other similarly-aged maternal figures from the younger subjects' families - I will investigate the ways in which the women exercise their autonomy and engage in identity construction and negotiation, with a focus on the role of religion, colonial prejudices, and power relations within the family that shape their identities. The women's narratives reveal the hijab is leveraged as a tool to navigate and resist postcolonial and patriarchal power structures. Families are a crucial vector for instilling religiosity, which the younger participants continue to nurture into their adulthood to give rise to a new form of religiosity that alters their structural and cultural location within Bangladeshi society.

Keywords: Gender, Dhaka women, Hijab, Family, Identity, Colonialism, Islam, Religion, Culture, Class, Patriarchy, Education, Autonomy, Bangladesh, South Asia.

Introduction

"Revivalist Islam" or "Islamic Revival" is a form of religious resurgence defined as a "religious ethos or sensibility" (Mahmood 2005, 3) that has permeated contemporary Muslim societies such as in Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, the adoption of the hijab by the country's Muslim women gained momentum with the Revival as an expression of piety, as well as an act of resistance against Western ideals and "the failed modernizing project" of the postcolonial state (Mahmood 2005, 24). The Islamic veil has been branded the "most tangible marker of Muslim identity for women" (Bhowon and Bundhoo 2016). As the number of women wearing the hijab continues to rise in Bangladesh and worldwide, I ask the question: how does such a visible marker of Muslim identity function in women's lives? What work does it perform and how do those reflect on the political, ideological and social structures in Bangladeshi society?

The aim of this study is to explore the ways in which macro-level sociopolitical structures and family dynamics in Bangladesh may impact Muslim women's individual autonomy and identity negotiation at the micro level, particularly in relation to their decision to wear the Islamic veil, or *hijab*. This thesis argues that veiled Bangladeshi Muslim women's public and private lives, and the construction of their religious and cultural identities are implicated in complex social processes and power relations that continually seek to disempower them. They are tasked with navigating religious obligations and commitments, cultural and gendered expectations, and expectations tied to their social class, and much of these expectations are shaped by conventions anchored in the country's colonial past. However, the women maintain a strong sense of autonomy and derive feelings of strength and empowerment from the hijab, contradicting prevailing Orientalist discourse that solely speak to their subservient status in Muslim societies. This study will challenge the colonial Western constructions of veiled women as being static symbols of ignorance and oppression,

while also illustrating the insidious power structures and relations that dictate women's private lives and their identity negotiation process within a contemporary majority Muslim society.

In this paper, I start with a brief historical background on Bangladesh and the state's tumultuous relationship with Islam. I then provide a literature review on scholarship concerned with colonialism, religion, agency, culture, identity, and family processes. Following the review of the literature, I introduce a postcolonial, intersectional feminist theoretical framework which I utilized to design my methodological approach and analyze the findings. I move on to describing the methodology of the study and then transition to an in-depth analysis of interlocutors' transcripts, while connecting the stories of those in each pair. Lastly, the conclusion section provides a summary of the analysis and offers directions for future research.

Historical Background

More than 90 percent of Bangladesh's population identify as Sunni Muslim, with numerous sub-traditions, with the most influential being Sufism (Kibria and Zakaria 2022). "Sufis" or Muslim rulers first brought Islam to East Bengal in the fourteenth century, which evolved into a religious culture fused with local folk and indigenous rituals, including ones shaped by Hindu and Buddhist traditions in the region. After the 1947 partition of India following British colonization, East Bengal was named East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) based on the Islamic Republic of Pakistan's preference for a Muslim identity over a Bengali identity (Rozario 2006, 369). Bangladesh, meaning "Bengal nation", was born out of a brutal war of independence in 1971 and the founding leadership promoted a secular nationalist "Bangalee" identity (Kibria and Zakaria 2022).

Following the assassination of Prime Minister and leader of the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman (1976-1981)

and his successor Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990) cultivated strong diplomatic and trade relations with Saudi Arabia and systematically introduced Islam into major official institutions of Bangladesh (Kibria and Zakaria 2022). Zia abetted the integration of the political group Jamaat-e-Islami into the political and cultural landscape by rescinding the constitutional ban placed on religion-based political parties to maintain secularity (Huque and Akhter 1987). Ershad then went on to approve constitutional amendments which declared Islam to be Bangladesh official state religion, propelling Bangladesh's trajectory towards Islamic revivalism. Jamaat-e-Islami is believed to have steadily cultivated the revivalist movement since, with the most significant shift towards piety among Bangladeshi Muslims occurring since the start of the 2000's (Siddiqi 2006, 11).

Since the 1990's, neither of two leading political parties (Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party or BNP) have openly advocated against the society's shift towards adopting Islamic ideologies, yet both have supported policies marked by "political expediency" which have favored Islamist parties and their political demands in exchange for political and economic deals that would allow them to maintain power (Rozario 2006, 370). Their concessions have only invigorated Islamist groups to overtly express their disdain for women's rights, religious minorities, and progressive intellectuals (Kibria and Zakaria 2022). However, since 2009, the Awami League has vilified Jamaat-e-Islami by prosecuting and executing several of their leaders as 1971 war criminals and went on to bar the remaining members of the party from running in the 2018 national elections. They also proclaimed that the rise of the sale of *burkhas*[1] between 2001-2006 was an indication of Islamic revivalism in the country and hence, needed to be curbed, which led to many public and private universities to briefly ban the *hijab* and *niqab* in the early 2010's (Islam and Islam 2018). Such public

[1] *Burkha* is a popular form of veiling in Bangladesh's context. The term is used to describe veiling that covers from head to toe, and it may be with or without a *niqab*.

displays of their disapproval of Islamic parties and religious symbols created "antagonistic relations" between the state and Islamist forces and strengthened the latter's agenda of resisting secularization, more so because they perceive secularity to be the 'absence' of Islam rather than a co-existence with other forms of faith (Islam and Islam, 2019). This tension may have also inculcated a culture of dissent against those who showed any association with religious groups, and the hijab has become a discernible point of tension in the society. Although the country's people decisively laid claim to their Bengali ethnic identity by fighting for their independence from Pakistan, ambivalence about the primary identity of the population persists to this day – are they primarily Bengali or Muslim?

In the following section, I review the literature on how Bangladesh's colonial past continue to shape social, cultural, and religious structures and power relations in the country, and how urban hijabi women's perceptions of their agency and identity are implicated within these structures.

Literature Review

The Islamic veil[2] or the *hijab* is widely recognized as a gendered practice with a controversial relationship to the Quran and the Prophetic tradition. Some claim that the veil is prescribed by two Quranic verses: Surah al-Nur (verses 30-31) and Surah al-Ahzab (verse 59) (Hoodfar 1997, 6). There is, however, great variation in the interpretations of the verses, which have sparked centuries-long, contextually constructed debates on the legitimacy of literalist interpretations which promote the hijab as a mandatory Islamic practice.

The hijab is now commonly defined as a headscarf that covers the hair, neck, and shoulders, and acts as a symbol of religious duty and devotion (Khondkar 2021, 57). It has been prescribed in religious doctrine as the Islamic standard of modesty that women are

[2] The Islamic veil can constitute a variety of styles of veiling: the *hijab* as defined; *jilbab* meaning a full-length robe-like dress that conceals the body until the feet; and *niqab* referring to the face covering excluding the eyes (Williams and Vashi 2007). For the purposes of the study, the "veil" will be used interchangeably with the *hijab* and not the others as they are not as contextually relevant due to low prevalence.

expected to observe. Aside from the head covering, the standard also includes obfuscating the shape of their body with loose clothing, specifically in the presence of any *non-mahram* men, which is any men outside of the woman's immediate family. The loose garment, however, varies across Islamic countries and is subject to local customs, innovation, and trends, which gives *hijabis* - the colloquial term of hijab-wearers - the freedom to express their personal sense of style while remaining within the bounds of what is accepted in Islam (Al-Kazi and Gonzalez 2018, 568).

In this paper, I analyze the hijab as a religious act by locating it within "the social processes where it is created and deployed" (Ammerman 2014, 196). Geertz (1993) argues that religion acts as a "cultural system" which not only shapes peoples' worldview and their moral compass but operates as a lens through which believers perceive themselves and those around them. Clothing goes beyond being an inanimate material item - it holds value as being representative of the society it is worn in and operates as a means of "symbolic communication" for the wearer (Abid 2016). The hijab is a "situationally specific symbol" (Mishra and Shirazi 2010, 193) that can have varying meanings and functions determined by the wearer, particularly during periods of rapid social change, and as Hoodfar (1997) argues "to deny this is also to deny Muslim women their agency".

The hijab has also been dubbed a "cultural practice" because of the symbolic role it plays in distinguishing Muslims in secular countries where the hijab is not the cultural "norm" (Al-Kazi and Gonzalez 2018, 567). Read and Bartkowski (2000, 397) argued that the meanings attributed to the hijab were not instrinsic to the veil itself, but rather produced through cultural discourse and social practices that are circulated and reinforced through social networks. They also employed their "theories of discourse" to argue that cultural symbols, such as the hijab, can be interepreted in different ways by people within the same society, often making a "site of struggle and contestation".

The most common meanings ascribed to wearing the hijab, as Bhowon and Bundhoo (2016, 9) listed are religious obligation (Khondkar 2021, 57); personal choice (Bhowon and Bundhoo 2016, 2017; Rozario 2006, 376); affirmation of religious identity (MacLeod 1992, 539); resistance and strategic symbolism (Mishra and Shirazi 2010, 193); to remain modest and subsequently garner respect and inner peace (Huq 2021); for safety and freedom of movement in public (Al-Kazi and Gonzalez 2018, 571); and avoiding male attention (Bartkowski and Read 2003, 404). Likewise, Bangladeshi Muslim women's relationship with the hijab and their reasons for wearing them are complex and heterogenous, but imprudent Orientalist notions of veiled women situate them within the monolithic, homogenous characterization of the submissive Muslim woman.

Orientalism

Current scholarship on the hijab continues to reflect debates on Muslim women's agency that we can trace all the way back to the writings of colonial travelers. Prior to the 19th century, colonial travellers' accounts from the Middle East focused on the "male barbarian", but then shifted the narrative with the start of the century towards labelling the men as "uncivilized", "ignorant", and whose masculinity is validated by the debasement of women (Hoodfar 1997). They chronicled their observations of veiling and gendered seclusion in the region and declared it a practice that was solely tied to Muslim communities' need to control women's sexuality, freedom of choice, and movement, without any relation to cultural norms or practices (Hoodfar 1997, 6). In part because of these colonial interlocutors, veiling has also been controversial and multi-valent within Muslim societies. Perhaps as a corrective to a long history of Western "feminist" critique dating back to colonialism, contemporary scholarship on the hijab has emphasized Muslim women's agency in wearing it. Contrary to claims that Muslim women are forced to stay in isolation by their male oppressors, scholars studying the hijab have pointed out the utility of it for women. Wearing the hijab can enable going out in

public for work, errands, or social commitments is commonplace in the contemporary world, creating a hybrid version of Islamic piety that works to empower women and allows them to lead a fulfilling life in countries with a rapidly growing economy (Rozario 2006, 369). Similarly, Al Wazni's study (2015) highlights hijabi women's rejection of one-dimensional Orientalist portrayals of Muslim women, as they asserted that they value "choice, freedom, and gender equality" just as their non-hijabi White counterparts do. Orientalist ideologies tend to minimize the more nuanced reasons that Muslim women in contemporary societies wear the hijab and label the women as "passive targets of religious discourses" without the agency to choose how to dress and practice their religion (Avishai 2008, 413).

Reformism in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's tumultuous political history and religious aspirations have and continue to shape the "social and cultural symbolic capital of the veil" (Al-Kazi and Gonzalez 2018, 587). Likewise, Islamic revivalist movements have predominantly been facilitated by "state-oriented political groups" (Mahmood 2005, 3) with the goal of promoting religious beliefs and practices informed by the "core foundations of Islam" (Kibria 2011, 2). Kibria (2011, 19-20) argues that "widespread disenchantment" with the Bangladesh government's lack of interest in meeting public demands and its hyper fixation on boosting the economy led to the collapse of the country's originally secular nationalist ideals. Political Islamic forces took advantage of this "ideological vacuum" to initiate the proliferation of "reformist" Islamic education, dialogue, rules, and policies in Bangladeshi society (Kibria 2011, 20).

"Reformism" is an ideological movement whose followers maintain a fundamental mission of ensuring that their religious beliefs and practices align with what they see as the core foundations and rules of Islam, by avoiding and dismissing any innovation, accretion, or contamination by local traditions or customs (Osella and Osella 2008, 247). For reformists, Islam, rather than their local culture, is considered the frame of reference for navigating

everyday life and making vital decisions (Osella and Osella 2008, 247-248). This repudiation of cultural heritage and influence is widely perceived and understood in Bangladeshi society as promoting values that are "alien" or foreign to South Asian Muslims and their historical traditions (Osella and Osella 2008). 'Bengali Islam' is the conventional practice in the country, as it is a "syncretic" form of Islam that accommodates and co-exists with Bengali cultural values and practices (Rozario 2006, 369). As a result, core values, traditions, rituals, and beliefs are largely the same between Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in Bangladesh, bespeaking the country's multi-faith roots. Although the practice of wearing the hijab is now common enough in Bangladesh to be considered a norm, many citizens - particularly the upper-class - still pride themselves in their "Bangalee" (Kibria and Zakaria 2022) roots and identity and those deviating from the traditional *saree* and *teep (*or *bindi)* are seen as social deviants or "norm-breakers" disturbing the status quo. Support within Western academia of an "ideologically weighted opposition" to reformism has caused many to wrongfully lump all remotely "alien", reformist practices as "Wahhabism", which is the term used to describe a brand of Islam characterized by "strict orthodoxy and a return to the earliest practices" of the religion predominantly championed by Saudi Arabian religious and political forces (Kibria and Zakaria 2022). This reinforces the agenda of liberal political forces who are determined to brand those following these practices as "extremist" or outright synonymous with terrorists (Osella and Osella 2008, 251). Hijabis breaking dominant societal norms, therefore, bear the social costs of nonconformity and this tension that afflicts their existence contributes to the formation of their religious identity as well.

Family and Identity

Contemporary gender scholars have asserted that identity construction and negotiation is a "*process* and everyday *practice*" that is everchanging and shaped by lived experience and "bodily practice" (Read and Bartkowski 2000). This process is riddled with moments of

contradiction, confusion, and ambiguity, and understanding the social forces influencing this process will help gain a deeper look at how the women engage in the construction of their Muslim identities.

However, in order to critically analyze Bangladeshi Muslim women's notions of gender, freedom of choice, their sense of self, and sartorial norms, the power of the institution of the family must be considered (S. Huq 2010, 102). Haque, et al. (2011) and Rozario (2006) emphasized the integral role that the family unit plays in shaping women's public and private identities and attitudes. Al-Kazi and Gonzalez's (2018, 579) study found that 40% of their participants reported being told or asked to wear the hijab, and more than 22% cited their parents as significant influences in their choice to wear the hijab. Additional studies by Moen, Erickson and Dempster-McClain (1997) and Dhar, Jain and Jayachandran (2019) revealed that mothers, more so stay-at-home mothers than working mothers, tend to have more power in shaping their daughters' gender attitudes than fathers. Moen, Erickson and Dempster-McClain (1997, 282-283) referred to socialization theory, which explains that social learning or modeling of those around them is paramount to the "transmission of ideologies, orientations, and behavior" across generations. In accord with their assertion that socialization theory suggests that mothers act as role models and "verbal persuaders" for their daughters, an intergenerational study utilizing a life course perspective would be most fitting for analysing how young Bangladesh Muslim women grapple with the constant tension between having the freedom to make autonomous decisions and the gendered expectations they have to adhere to. This framework would more so hold its value in this study, as the older generation of participants will have lived through and witnessed Bangladesh's Islamic revival from its inception, while the younger participants will have grown up during the revival. This means that the family could prove to be more influential in the younger participants' religious identity formation and veiling practices, as opposed to the changes and

occurrences in the political arena, which may have had a greater impact on the older participants' religiosity.

Class, Mobility, and Agency

Rozario's (2006) long-form interviews with female university students in Northern Bangladesh explores the subjects' religious and moral values and beliefs. She produced a strong project that outlines four meaning systems the students use to make sense of their adoption of the hijab – "strategic-instrumental" (veiling as a strategy to protect themselves and persuade parents to allow them to go out); "personal identity issues" (construction of the self as a good Muslim woman); "collective or national identity" (construction of their identity by resisting colonial structures); and "status concerns of middle-class women" (recapitulating their higher status by demeaning lower-class working women who cannot have the luxury of maintaining *purdah*[3]). However, her study, as well as White's (2010), only covers the middle-class and lower-class, some rural, women, as she argues that they are generally more likely to take up the veil and turn to religion due to their dissatisfaction with women's status in Bangladesh sociopolitical landscape. While this may be true, this fails to consider or explore why upper-middle class Bangladeshi Muslim women, who are afforded a much greater number of resources and opportunities, continue to don the hijab.

Sutton and Vertigans (2010, 59) highlighted the core secularist argument that only those who are culturally, socially, or economically marginalized or threatened would be drawn to religion in the modern world. By that logic, members of the bourgeoisie who are generally well-educated, affluent, and in positions of power within their community would find no reason to be attracted to religion. Despite Bangladesh's secular past, the scholars'

[3] The gendered seclusion of women from public interaction and exposure known as *purdah* is a social phenomenon whose prevalence is often overestimated by Western scholars to showcase the lack of liberty that women are afforded in Muslim communities (Hoodfar 1997). *Purdah* essentially involves having women lead a modest lifestyle - maintain their distance from non-mahram men, remain in the home, practice veiling, and minimize public outings and interactions.

statement is not reflective of the revivalist movement in Dhaka as Islam has become cemented into the sociocultural fabric of the nation. Under this movement, the sartorial practice of wearing the hijab has been gaining momentum for more than two decades and has now proliferated in the circles of both the urban rich and poor, arguably albeit for different reasons. Upper-middle class women's inclinations are unclear from the existing literature as some studies deemed them to be less likely to be pious because of their economic and social mobility (Sutton and Vertigans 2010, 59), and others reported that they are more likely as women with higher social status can afford to practice *purdah* since they do not need to seek employment outside of the home (MacLeod 1992, 539). This academic discourse would lead us to believe that upper-class women are unlikely to adopt and politicize the veil, but the reality in Bangladesh suggests otherwise. Studying the demographic of upper-class women, who have historically been presumed to have no reason to be drawn to religion, will expand both the study of Islamic revivalism beyond the secular notions posited by Western academics, and of how politics intersects with class hierarchies to govern women's religious identity construction and agency.

In the following section, I provide the framework which will be employed to theorize the narratives of the urban Bangladesh women I interviewed.

Theoretical Framework

Both the colonial Western and conservative Islamic discourses around veiling are very much intertwined with how much individual agency and sense of autonomy Muslim women are perceived to have. These victimizing discourses have pushed Muslim women towards increased political activism and public engagement to focus the attention towards the individualization of the women's motivations to wear the hijab (Al-Kazi and Gonzalez 2018, 569). The narrow focus on the hijab as a political tool or a vehicle for women's oppression completely overlooks the intersectionalities of religion, race, class, ethnicity, and gender – all

of which commingle to influence how the women practice their religiosity and engage in their identity negotiation.

I will employ a postcolonial, intersectional feminist theoretical framework to guide the analytical process of the research, and this approach dictates that I reject the Orientalist tendency of boiling down hijabi women's identity to solely their religious identity and viewing them through the same colonial lens that I seek to dismantle. This approach will allow us to consider both sides of the most popular, overarching feminist arguments in the field: the hijab is a tool of oppression forced upon women by men and religious ideology (Mernissi 1985), which is usually the collective West's stance; or that the hijab is a personal choice grounded in their religious commitment towards Islam as well as their desire for social mobility and freedom from the male gaze (Bhowon and Bundhoo 2016, 17). As Huq (2010, 101) argues, this inaccurate binary framework must not limit the scope of any research investigating the motivations for veiling, thus reaffirming the complex nature of hijabi women's positionality, which this project is geared to study. I aim to examine whether, and how, the hijab might empower the wearer and provide them a sense of liberation, and how this investigation may contribute to fourth-wave feminist theory. Third-wave feminist thought brought forth the concept of "choice feminism", which "views freedom not as simply the 'capacity to make individual choices,' but rather as the ability to determine your own life path" (Snyder-Hall 2010, 256). This is crucial for the purposes of the study as I aim to center the personal narratives of Bangladeshi Muslim women who have strong conceptions of their own agency to redirect analysis away from the harmful stereotype of the oppressed, powerless Muslim woman. In conjunction with multiracial feminist theory, I will highlight the need to recognize that women's racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural identities all shape their sense of autonomy and choice in contextually specific ways, that go beyond the dominant, white notions of agency and liberty (Al Wazni 2015, 3).

Studying the conditions of the hijabi women's autonomy, particularly within the context of family dynamics and the social norms around female agency and modesty, is central to this study. Their life trajectories and how they make sense of them will be vital in understanding how family, religion, gender, and politics intersect to affect how women engage in self-realization and the construction of their identities.

Based on the literature review and theoretical framework above, I seek to answer the following research questions: What is the role of the family and sociocultural milieu in shaping upper-class, Bangladeshi Muslim women's religiosity and perceptions of autonomy? Which enduring effects of colonization do we see impacting the everyday lives and identity construction of Bangladeshi veiled (and unveiled) women? What is the function of the hijab in their everyday lives and in shaping their religious identity? What is the utility it provides in navigating private values and public constraints?

Methodology

1.1.Life History Interviews

To delve into how family dynamics influence women's choices and positionality, I use semi-structured, life history interviews with both young women and their mother or similar maternal figure would be the most appropriate approach (Gerson and Damaske 2021). Understanding the role of the maternal figure in the subjects' lives is a crucial component of this research as previous (albeit sparse) literature on the intergenerational transmission of gender attitudes among South Asian families found that mothers are highly influential in instilling specific attitudes and views in their daughters, compared to other family members (Dhar, Jain and Jayachandran 2019, 2573).

As Read & Bartkowski's (2000) formative piece on veiling stated, "in depth, personal interviews" would best capture how women navigate their surroundings, as well as the "nuances" of their identities. Concordant with Ammerman's (2014, 194) assertion, in depth,

personal interviews were chosen as the appropriate method as my goal was to assemble a "rich collection of everyday stories" to understand how "non-ordinary sensibilities weave in and out of mundane reality". Life history interviews crucially allow for storytelling, which was paramount to facilitating and observing the women's agency while allowing me to identify how women constructed their understanding of their themselves in relation to their families and norms ascribed to them by the broader society. The chronological account of their lives allowed for a deeper understanding of the role of religion in their childhood and family life, how their views and beliefs may have evolved over time and differ between the public and private spheres, important life transition periods, or social changes which might have spurred their decision to start wearing the hijab. I further explored the participants' personal opinions on the Western discourse around the hijab being an oppressive tool, and Muslim women in their society who do not wear the hijab, in order to observe the relationship between their religious commitments and their perceptions of women's freedom.

Through life history interviews with two generations of Bangladeshi Muslim women, I investigated the ways the decision to veil is implicated in broader social forces. Having both young women and their maternal figures participate also allowed me to dive deeper into their relationship with each other and identify any power relations, which is essential for understanding the extent of the younger women's autonomy over their own lives and personal decisions. This intergenerational approach also allowed me to observe how the social structures and constraints that shaped their beliefs and actions changed over time and consequently resulted in contrasting lived experiences.

1.2.*Criteria and Recruitment*

As this study is primarily about women's motivations to wear the hijab, the interlocutors were limited only to Bangladeshi young women aged between 20 and 35 who wore the hijab, while it was not necessary for their maternal figures to be hijabis as this was

an independent variable. Their maternal figure's age was also not relevant as they were all assumed to be from the same generation, and thus their ages were also not collected during the study. The other necessary criteria for the young subjects were being based in the capital city, Dhaka, to ensure that they have been up to date with, and potentially influenced by, whatever sociopolitical changes have been occurring; and having started or completed their tertiary-level education, as this would indicate that they are from upper to upper-middle class families, a connection owing to the widespread social and economic inequality in the country (Nahar 2013). Since the subjects are coming in pairs, all of them would be from the same social class but the highest level of education completed by each respondent may differ (See Appendix sub-section 1.1).

The subjects were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling conducted mostly online. I put out a call for participants on social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, and directly contacted people from Dhaka who are hijabis or who may know other potential participants. The call for participants contained a list of the essential criteria above and I connected with interested participants via email, social media, or Whatsapp – whichever they preferred. Once they expressed their interests, I provided further details on the study, including the requirement of having a maternal figure participate as well. The younger subjects had the freedom to choose which maternal figure they would ask to participate in the study with them. This requirement, however, proved to be a great barrier in the recruitment process and slowed it down significantly, but shed light on the power relations that preside over their interpersonal relationship. Young Bangladesh women experienced ambivalence and hesitation when approaching their mothers for favors they may not have any vested interest in and gain anything tangible from. The potential recruits were quick to present reasons for their mothers being unable to participate without having to broach the subject with them at all. Some notable reasons claimed (some claimed more than

once by different recruits) were that they did not want to talk to their family; that their mother was too busy to make time; or that they were too shy to participate. Some claimed that they lived with their in-laws and were unable to discuss the study with their mother, despite visiting them regularly. To overcome this hurdle, I offered to speak to their mothers or maternal figures myself, gave them five questions as an example for what sort of questions I would be asking, and reiterated the strict, confidential nature of the study. Some were under the impression that I would be conducting the interviews in each other's presence, but I assured them that the interviews would be conducted privately and separately.

What was clear from several interactions were that while they themselves were eager to participate, they were unable or unwilling to go through the labor of explaining the study to their mothers, and the prospect of raising the issue was a source of anxiety. The hijab also seemed to be a contentious subject to discuss for them, possibly signaling that it is a site of struggle in their lives. Future research on the power relations underpinning this sense of anxiety and alienation from their parents could be fruitful for understanding the nature of parent-child relationships in contemporary South Asia and what social processes are molding these relationships.

1.3.Interview Guide

The interviews began with a briefing which I read to each respondent to inform them of their rights, and the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study, and to allow them to ask questions and provide consent to be interviewed. The interview questions were broken down into the following sections: demographics; their childhood; education; family; political affiliations; religion, including their journey to wearing the hijab; romantic relationships; opinions; and their future goals.

The questions were aimed at learning about the subjects' religiosity and religious practices in their daily lives, family dynamics and influence from parents, their personal

understanding and beliefs around Islam and veiling, how they navigate romantic relationships, their political views, and their sense of autonomy and choice. The interview questions varied slightly for the two different groups based on what was relevant to know from their perspective. They were structured in a way that would encourage storytelling, and I was able to cross-analyze and corroborate details across interviews. As the interview was intended to derive a chronological account of their lives, I asked to know how each of these factors looked from their childhood up until now to gain a clearer picture of how their personalities, along with their surrounding institutions, social structures, and gender norms, evolved over time and what social forces shaped their experiences. The interviews started with factual questions and gradually ended with more reflection and opinion-based questions to better identify specific life incidents that may have shaped their current ideologies.

1.4.Data Engagement

I conducted interviews with a total of 10 informants or 5 mother/maternal figure-daughter pairs. As all the informants were in Bangladesh, interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom. The interviews were sound recorded with the respondents' consent and then transcribed for further analysis. The interviews were conducted in English and Bengali, as per each respondents' preference. I ensured that all the interviews were conducted individually where the informants had privacy. To maintain confidentiality, I was diligent about ensuring that none of the information provided by the younger subjects were shared with their maternal figures and vice versa. I transcribed, listened, and took real-time and exploratory notes, which allowed me to identify emerging themes and pinpoint important direct quotes. Given the complexity and depth of their life stories, I traced connections between themes and their different experiences to observe commonalities. I drew conclusions by conducting an in-depth theoretical analysis of each transcript to understand the views,

beliefs, and broader sociopolitical changes that influence the women's decision-making and identity negotiation.

The first limitation of this study is the small sample size, which would mean that the results are not necessarily generalizable across demographics outside of the combination chosen for this study. Secondly, the quality of interview questions and the execution of the interviews, which were contingent upon the researcher's experience, must also be improved for future iterations of the study. In hindsight, certain answers could have been probed further and at more appropriate times, which may have elicited more detailed answers.

Results

In this section, I analyze a number of common emerging themes from the subjects' answers, and they have been organized under two overarching categories: broad social and structural forces that have shaped their religiosity and religious identity; and ideology and beliefs that motivate them to adopt and maintain the hijab, along with the structural benefits of exercising agency over their public perception. Pseudonyms have been used in the following sections for all the respondents' names to maintain their privacy and anonymity. The non-English words from the subjects' direct quotes have been presented in the glossary, which is sub-section 1.2. of the appendix.

The hijabi daughters and their mothers' narratives revealed that the hijab is leveraged as a tool to navigate postcolonial class and patriarchal power structures. They are challenging class structures that ascribe a demeaning, "lower class" label to those who wear the hijab and follow reformist Islam by overtly expressing their piety to dismantle colonial stereotypes among elite, privileged communities. The institution of the family is crucial in promoting a culture and lifestyle that invariably asserts the importance of Islamic beliefs and rituals. However, the younger generation face a crisis of authenticity and seek out Islamic knowledge that is more inclined towards reformist practices. They familiarize themselves with revivalist

traditions and shun the Western and Bengali cultural influences that minimize the authority of Islamic teachings. They immerse themselves into revivalist communities and circles that continue to strengthen their religiosity and desire to practice proper adherence. They also perceive the hijab to be a trade-off of their beauty for greater autonomy. Their economic and social opportunities have been historically suppressed, and the older and younger generation both now refuse to sacrifice their freedom of movement and the ability to live independently *by* adopting the hijab. This is a complete dismissal of Orientalist scholarship which argues that the hijab is a tool for and a symbol of the dispossession of Muslim women's autonomy, when in these women's reality, it is a tool *for* exercising their autonomy. The hijab becomes an indispensable part of their identity and lifestyle, and provides a sense of empowerment and safety that helps them navigate a society constantly seeking to objectify and subdue them.

I. Social Forces and Processes

1.1. Class

The women's stories reveal the complexities of class structures in postcolonial Bangladesh and exhibit how high levels of class stratification have produced and perpetuated classist prejudices against hijabis, as they are seen as incompatible with being upper-class, progressive, and educated. Societal power imbalances in Bangladesh are manifested and reinforced through the educational system, as only about the 4% of the population have the privilege of accessing higher education (Nahar 2013, 106). Those in this minority are from upper- and upper-middle class families and the language of instruction in these schools are primarily English, as fluency in English considerably improves employability and marriageability, and this bias is inextricably tied to colonialism as well (Nahar 2013, 106). This is a significant indicator of the country's social stratification as receiving an English medium education has become synonymous with higher social class and "elite identity"

(Jahan and Hamid 2019), and the respondents' narratives reflect the prevalence of this outlook. This discursive value given to the ability to speak English originates from their time as a British colony, as familiarity with English and Western sensibilities was an indicator of being from a dominant social class. This has only been reinforced further by modern globalization, and upper-class families in Bangladesh are also known for their ability to travel and pursue higher education overseas because of their elite, English medium education. Coupled with Orientalist notions, it is widely assumed in Bangladeshi upper-class circles that rigid adherence to Islam and the hijab are signs of low social mobility and cultural capital.

Bina, 32, comes from a joint family that shares a dedication to Islam through mutual support and knowledge sharing. They are well established in upper-class, affluent social circles in Dhaka, and attended an elite English medium school in Dhaka. She started wearing the hijab around the seventh grade as it felt like the natural next step in her religious journey. Bina succinctly stated the words commonly used to describe overtly religious people, and these terms are brazenly tied to social class and education.

Bina: "Islam was considered a very low class, Bangla Medium, or *madrasa*[4] thing."

Jannat is the mother of one of the younger subjects, Rahnuma, and worked as a legal advocate before retiring recently. She started wearing the hijab after being exposed to and developing an appreciation for Saudi Arabian culture and customs when she lived there in the 1990's. She derives a sense of safety and comfort from wearing modest clothing, and classist stereotypes did not hinder her from continuing to veil.

Jannat: "In our country, there is the perception that people from the village wear the *burkha* or a veil – the ones who are uneducated, that level of class. When I wore the hijab at

[4] *Madrasas* are Islamic religious institutions that focus on teaching the Qur'an, the recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, sacred law and other Islamic subjects. They have gained notoriety for promoting revivalist Islamic values and practices, and those who attend them have been stereotyped as uneducated or hailing from lower social classes. It also has been dubbed as a "major impediment to the secularization of Bangladesh", thus looked at unfavorably by most upper-class Bangladeshis (Islam and Islam 2018).

the courts, people had that sort of attitude towards me, but I didn't care. I felt like their idea of the world was very small. But over time, I felt like people respected me more because I was always covered up. There is beauty in being covered."

1.2.<u>*Identity*</u>

Respondents in the study recalled stories of their childhood and emphasized that they grew up completely immersed in Bengali culture and participated in traditional music and dance, which shaped both their religious and cultural identities.

Aisha, 25, was introduced to Islam at a very young age by her grandmother, who continued to cultivate Aisha's religiosity until her demise. She started wearing the hijab when she was in high school, and subsequently had to give up traditional Bengali cultural activities in order to practice Islam in line with reformist ideologies. She admired and idealized her mother, Amina, who grew up in a liberal household that valued Bengali culture but did not compromise their dedication to Islam either.

Aisha: "As a practicing Muslim, I must tell you – I have danced *kathak;* I am a classically trained singer, I did that for 12 years. I'm sure no one can tell from how I look that I have such a strong cultural background. But at the same time, my parents pray five times a day, my family members do too. So, I wouldn't say we were conservative – we were just practicing Muslims."

Amina: "I used to wake up either hearing my father reciting the Quran, or my mother listening to Indian music – she used to like listening to artists from Kolkata while she was working, so I had a mixed upbringing. My sisters and I learned to play music, to dance. Now after I got married, this family was cultured too, but my mother-in-law – she was a little more Islamic, kept her head covered."

Tension seems to exist between practices that are traditionally "Bangalee" or cultural with following strictly Islamic practices. Amina admits that the way she was raised was in

more of a “mixed” style, which is a reference to ‘Bengali Islam’. She compared the kind of Bengali culture she grew up around as closer to West Bengali (or Kolkata[5]) culture, which is a common comparison made among Bangladeshis. Her daughter, Aisha, emphasized the fact that her history of dancing and singing was an indication of her liberal upbringing, alluding that these practices are not appropriate for a Muslim as she gave them up in the name of religion. It is a declaration that hijabis are falsely stereotyped as “uncultured” people or too far removed from Bengali culture.

Amina elaborated on this tension by drawing attention to Bangladesh’s secularist roots and how the society still clings onto that identity. She commented that while the hijab is everywhere in Bangladesh nowadays, it was not always like this - women were unable to get certain jobs like work at a front desk or anything on television if they wore the hijab. She spoke about why she thinks that is:

Amina: “You see, our country isn’t a traditionally Islamic country. We became independent with all sorts of religions as a part of the country - Hindu, Buddhists…There’s influence from all of them – Pakistani influence, Kolkata influence. Now since media has progressed so much, there is a Western influence now too, which some of our children have taken up, some haven’t. We also had the impression that a woman who wears a hijab, she probably doesn’t even speak English, she’s *khaet,* not modern. When my daughter started wearing the hijab, other people thought the same thing. Then when she did speak English in public, everybody’s jaws would drop. I think people’s perceptions are changing now with time.”

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[5] Kolkata is the capital of the Indian state of West Bengal, which previously was part of what was known as Bengal. During the Indian Partition, Bengal was divided into West and East Bengal, the latter of which became East Pakistan before becoming what we now know as Bangladesh. As a result, Bangladesh and West Bengal are believed to have many similar customs and traditions which are what make up the “Bangalee” culture.

Aisha: “After I started wearing it, my parents got calls from the school asking if they forced me to wear it, which my mother didn’t like because they really never did. They asked ‘what’s going on? Are you all becoming extremists or something?’”

Extrapolating from their stories, traditional Bengali culture is widely still viewed as being incompatible with what is perceived as “extremist” Islam. A sole focus on Islamic values contradicts the essence of Bengali culture; it is also tied to the way class structures are imagined and reinforced. She speaks about how Aisha and her choice to wear the hijab superfluously garners the perception that she couldn’t speak in English, which in other words as being uneducated, backward, or from a lower-class background. These words are similar to, if not exactly, the words that Orientalists often use to describe Muslim hijabi women, indicating that there is enough of an imprint of these notions in Bangladeshi society as well.

Mahia, 23, had a similar story of giving up dancing to practice wearing the hijab in a manner that aligns with revivalist teachings, which promotes the idea that Islam is incompatible with cultural activities. She was a classically trained dancer who delved into Islamic revivalist knowledge on the internet, prompting her religious identity to take salience over her cultural identity. Teachers and adults in her community reacted negatively to her adopting the hijab, viewing it as a barrier to the promotion of Bengali fine arts and as a step towards the Islamization of Bangladesh’s once-secular society. Her mother, Keya, is a non-hijabi but has not let her personal opinions obstruct Mahia’s agency and offered her unwavering support from the start.

Mahia: “When my parents used to go to the parent-teacher meetings in school, the teachers said they were disappointed in me because I started wearing the hijab and that I left dancing. They were just saying “oh, how regretful, she used to dance so well” and it pissed me off because I still danced the same, just not publicly, and what is there for her to regret anyway?”

Keya: "When Mahia started wearing the hijab and let go of other things, I had to hear criticism for this too. She was a very good dancer, and she could have done very well, so her dance teacher and others had many disturbing things to say to me – why did I allow her to stop doing that, why didn't I do more to keep her in those activities."

It seems from these stories so far that upper-class Bengalis have a greater tendency of ascribing Western stereotypes to hijabis and shuns them for their backwardness and lack of attachment to Bengali culture. This, however, does not deter any of the young women, or their mothers, from maintaining their own religious and political views.

1.3.<u>Politics</u>

All the participants were asked if national politics or political figures were a part of their life in any way and whether it has had any influence on their decision to wear the hijab. None of them reported any political motivations at any point in time, and none of them other than Bina expressed clear and strong political views. Only stories from Bina and her *chachi* (aunt) and maternal figure, Tasneem, suggested a possible correlation, as they shared connections with prominent national political figures. These findings go against the expectations from the previous literature by presenting little evidence to suggest that increased religiosity and the adoption of the veil is correlated with political association.

1.4.<u>Family</u>

Some of the informants stated that wearing the hijab was a personal choice and an expression of their religious devotion. Nevertheless, it is evident that their families often played a role in instilling core religious values in the young women.

Aisha: "My grandmother had *a lot* of influence on how I think or how I behave. A lot of people say that I'm a lot like her. I think my grandmother exposed me to religion when I was 3 or 4. I would stand next to her while she prayed and do the motions, then I would ask why she was doing those things and wanted to learn more. I was

very interested, especially the *duas*, because they are all in a different language, so I was curious. My condition was that she could teach me anything, but she would have to tell me stories about the meanings, what had happened. I was always into stories."

Aisha's narrative gives us an example of how storytelling is integral to the way that religion is taught and understood across generations. It is the stories that invoke a sense of fantasy and imagination that draws them in, and this initial exposure to the religion is enough to trigger an intense curiosity that carries them towards greater piety. Furthermore, Aisha's grandmother had told her once when she was little that the hijab was "not optional" – she could choose not to wear it, but it is mandatory in the religion. This lesson stuck with her and eventually led to her wearing it years later. Aisha firmly believes that wearing a veil was her choice because no one ever explicitly forced her to start wearing it – yet the idea had been ingrained in her mind at a very impressionable age by someone she trusted. They had framed it as a non-negotiable. This is a religious practice that other informants in this study called optional or subject to personal choice, but Aisha learned that it was not and made her decisions accordingly, which leads us to contend the conditions of her autonomy here as she was not given a choice at all in the matter. I asked her if she thought her grandmother's teachings is what instilled these views, but she responded that "Allah (SWT) has commanded us. That's it. It isn't because my mom or my grandmother told me so." This case also does not indicate that there was intergenerational transmission of attitudes or views from the mother to her daughter. Rather, it skipped a generation and indicated that family in general - not just parents – can play a massive role in shaping one's religious identity, and more so if they all live within the same household, interact, and share knowledge regularly with one another, and perform rituals and practices together.

Bina: "Friday after Jummah, we used to go up to my Dadi's place, sit for a bit and talk about Islamic things but it was mostly family time. I started keeping all the *rojas* from Class

8 or 9, and other ritualistic things. When my *fupus* started wearing the hijab on their own, we found out that standing up and reciting "*Ya Nabi Salam Alayka"* is *bid'ah*[6], not actual *Sunnah*, we were some of the first ones who sat at a *milad* and wouldn't stand up. Everyone would stare at us and say, "they wear hijabs, and they're not getting up?" At the time, we tried to know as much about Islam as possible, tried to learn about the authenticity, and then whatever we did we were quite driven about it. We didn't care very much about what other people would say."

Bina's narrative demonstrates that strong Islamic values and wearing the hijab was traditional within the family, and that the family collectively shifted towards reformist or revivalist Islam. There is a clear rejection of Sufi religious tradition and a conscious repositioning towards following literalist interpretations of Islam. Additionally, her anecdote about her family's overt displays of their unflinching faith in Islam at the *milad* is an example of a claim to "exceptionalism" (Mandviwala 2020). Her self-assurance in the matter indicated that their "performance of identity" may have also been done with the "goal of becoming an authentic religious subject against an image of a secular other" (Avishai 2008, 413), which in this case a Sufi 'other' as her family rejects all Sufi tradition, which has historically informed most religious traditions in Bangladesh (Kibria and Zakaria 2022). Nevertheless, their ties to Islam and the veil act as important sources of confidence and individuality.

Mahia also believes that fostering an environment in the household where other members follow the same religious practices can often make it easier to adhere to all of them.

Mahia: "I try my best to pray, even if it's on and off. There's no pressure at home to pray but sometimes I think if everyone else at home prayed, maybe it would've become more habitual for me as well because I think there is an influence from those around you.

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[6] *Bid'ah* is the term used for innovation in religious practices. It linguistically means "innovation, novelty, heretical doctrine, heresy" and is seen as a repudiation of literalist Islamic traditions or the recommendations from Prophet Muhammad known as *Sunnah*. Many Sufi or Bengali Islam practices are innovation because of the country's multi-faith history but these practices are now being rejected by revival Islamists.

My *khala* has been living with us for the past few months and she prays regularly. So now that there is something in my home who prays, there is someone to hold me accountable. My parents don't ever pressurize me or check if I prayed which a lot of my friends say their parents do. It's kind of a blessing but sometimes I wish I had that because then someone would hold me accountable."

1.5.<u>*Environment*</u>

An individual's surrounding community and environment plays an indispensable role in strengthening their faith and ensuring the diligent and religiously accurate performance of ritualistic practices. Religious group membership is also believed to facilitate "social solidarity" or a feeling of connectedness with other members (Ammerman 2014, 192). Varying pathways of community-based learning and exposure to Islam were mentioned by the subjects as well.

Mahia: "Since my house was so close to a mosque, the first floor of our building was a mini madrasa for girls. I was put there as well. I just learned how to do basic reading in Arabic, how to pray. My classmates were also the *hujur's* daughters and our neighbors too, so it was a small community thing."

Bina: "The main Islamic shift came about in Class 6 through my *boro fupu*[7]. The Pakistani High Commissioner's wife started taking Islam classes in Gulshan and everyone from the Gulshan "high society" used to go and I used to go for the food. The great thing there was there were no sessions where they said, "you should wear the hijab, or you should pray" but we were learning about Islam mainly through stories."

[7] *Boro fupu* is the Bengali term meaning "elder aunt" – *boro* meaning big, *fupu* meaning father's sister.

What seems to have appealed to Bina was the storytelling and community aspect of the classes which facilitated a more positive outlook towards learning about the religion, rather than a rigid emphasis on following specific rituals. This story also provides another glimpse at the social stratification in Dhaka, as she states that upper-class people from Gulshan, one of the most affluent areas of the country, frequented these classes. Other girls from her elite English medium school went as well, denoting the intersection between higher social status and English medium children, as well as their involvement in Islamic communities. The following statement demonstrates the implicit assumption that those from the upper-class were not seen as "traditionally" Islamic but seeing those from the same social class allowed her to rationalize the adoption of the veil but also distance herself from normative assumptions that tie class to religiosity.

Bina: "A big influence on wearing the hijab were these girls from school I knew who also went to the Islamic classes. They were the first to start wearing it and I had never seen others in the same age range wearing it, and it stood out because of the kind of people they are - not traditionally very "Islamic"…One thing that was constant was that most, if not all, [in the classes] were from English medium and our mentalities matched. The entire thing was conducted in English, it was easy to understand, and I could absorb a bit more. Having a link to that community and everything was based around Islam so that was important."

Participants cited having meaningful friendships or peer relationships with like-minded individuals who shared and practiced the same religion as a key factor in feeling comfortable with their overt display of spirituality. Bina and Aisha both expressed their dismay at Dhaka's youth, including many of their acquaintances, becoming increasingly Westernised with easier access to alcohol, drugs, and unregulated parties than ever before. They asserted that they feel a disconnect with others their age but expressed no regret as they

preferred maintaining close circles of religiously aligned friends and steering away from *haram* activities. The hijab gave the women a way to navigate increasingly "westernized" environments that are crucial for social mobility and cultural capital such as English medium schools, while maintaining more conservative Islamic values.

Watching other women around their age in the community wearing the hijab also gave Rahnuma, Bina, and Tasneem the confidence to take it up as well, more so if it was a move that was already on their mind. They admired the women who chose to do it before them as they gave them the first glimmer of hope that they would be able to shoulder the responsibility of veiling. Seeing other hijabis alleviated feelings of alienation and subsequently acted as social models they could emulate.

Rahnuma, 30, was the only participant who openly admitted that religiosity was not the primary motivator for adopting the hijab. While her motivations will be illustrated in detail in sub-section 1.8, she was spurred on by her aspiration to be like a hijabi woman she interacted with in professional and education spaces.

Rahnuma: "I also felt like I needed to be more focused on my career, my future and it felt like the hijab might help with that too…There was a hijabi girl who went to the same class, and she was very advanced, progressive, always getting straight A's. Maybe that was a secondary influence too because if they are doing well, then I should also follow one of the practices they are following."

What I deduce from the women's narratives is that they were brought up in environments that encouraged Islamic practices, while also participating in elite, secular spaces because of their higher position in Bangladesh's social class hierarchy. The hijab allows the women to bridge the gap between their two identities, by symbolically communicating their difference and exceptionality within secular environments but their

adoption of the hijab is also facilitated by increasing normalization of the practice in their surrounding community.

1.6.Seeking Religious Knowledge

While parents and schools were the primary source of knowledge of Islam for the young women during their childhood, some turned to books and technology as they grew older and began learning more independently. The interviews revealed that it is the younger generation leading the revivalist movement, partly because they are highly influenced by and immersed in the world of the internet and social media compared to older generations.

Aisha: "I learned so much from YouTube."

Mahia: "The internet exposed me to religion in a way I had never been before."

Bina: "As you said, people wear the hijab for different reasons but if anybody wants to do it for the sake of Allah SWT, it is mostly a lack of knowledge that hinders them. This lack of knowledge is from a lack of avenues to gain that knowledge. My family got access to that knowledge, and we are still learning new things, like I used this site called Islamqa.info – when you go there, you need to know how to navigate that."

The young subjects were more unwilling to deviate from literalist Islamic rules than their mothers; 4 out of 5 of expressed progressive attitudes towards religious observance. The young women's internalization of revivalist values could perhaps be a result of the unconstrained access and exposure to revivalist teachings and resources on the internet, as they seek out and encounter new knowledge that resonates with them and strengthens their faith (Abid 2016, 193). They trust the sources they gain knowledge from and are confident enough in it to construct their identity and ethos around it. It is, however, also clear from all the subjects' narratives that Islam is a core part of Bangladesh's sociocultural fabric and was present in their lives from the beginning. Although this study looks at a limited subset of this society i.e. upper- and upper-middle social classes, accessing and disseminating Islamic knowledge and communities is normalized and hassle-free, because of how deeply

entrenched Islam is in the country. Their religious families sow the seeds but the increasing threat of Westernization of the society raises an authenticity crisis, leading the younger generations to seek out more information on what is or is not Islamic, thereby shaping their lives and identities in a revivalist direction.

Isra, 26, grew up in a family that valued her independence and allowed her to exercise her agency in cultivating her own religiosity. She was always a curious child and wanted to learn more about any topic presented to her, until she eventually found revivalist Islamic teachings. It satiated her intellectual curiosity and motivated her to learn and practice the religion as authentically as possible.

Isra: "For my parents, it's about praying and fasting, that's it. They aren't educated about the tiny details themselves so what would they have taught me? Islam is so vast, it's a guide for our life. After I found the *tafseer*[8], I finished the Quran, and I started talking about the *tafseer* to my relatives and other women in the community. I felt like I had this knowledge, I learned something new today, so why not share it? I did it all myself. It wasn't like some *Jamaat* person forced me to learn any of this. My parents weren't involved in this at all – they taught me to read basic Arabic, teachings from the Quran and Hadith, *surahs.* But Islam as a religion, as a philosophy, as science – no one taught me these deeper aspects. These are things you find out on your own."

Isra's childhood fascination with books and learning continued into her adulthood, and her discovery of religious texts provided the confidence and reassurance that she was more knowledgeable than her parents about religion. She takes on a new form of piety and claims exceptionality by asserted that her parents' practices were not perfectly aligned with what is religiously prescribed, and how the Islam she follows is based on extensive and

[8] A Quranic *tafseer* attempts to provide explanation, interpretation, context, or commentary for clear understanding of Quranic scripture.

reliable knowledge. She also underscores her agency in this narrative by showcasing how she made a conscious and autonomous choice to seek out religious knowledge on her own without her parents' cue or influence. Set against the backdrop of a country whose secularist identity rejects revivalist efforts but has become increasingly vulnerable to Western dispositions, all the young women choose to immerse themselves in process of growing their religious knowledge and in turn, their faith and conviction, which cultivates and strengthens their religious identity. This religious knowledge is primarily grounded in reformist or revivalist conduct and practices, leading them to reject Bengali Islam, Western ideals, and associated innovated traditions which are perceived as not being "purely" Islamic.

1.7.Beauty

A women's marriageability in South Asia is often judged by her skin tone and her physical appearance; colonialism and patriarchy are the core underlying reasons behind the prevalence of colorism in the region (Dhillon-Jamerson 2019). There is the common perception that the hijab masks or conceals a woman's beauty, and this affects how hijabi women view their own desirability as well. Tasneem spoke about how her husband preferred her dressing up in traditional Bengali garb and did not find the hijab attractive when she first mentioned the prospect. It affected her perception of her own beauty, which was reconciled by a woman she met while on Hajj who assured her that her beauty was not compromised because of her hijab.

Tasneem: "She said that she had been noticing me for three days and thought I was pretty and wanted to talk to me. I thought what?! Me? This Iranian woman was so beautiful, I just cannot explain. How could she be calling me beautiful? But we chatted and she praised me so much that I feel like I got my confidence from her. Her words made me realize that I looked good in the hijab, that I didn't look ugly, which is the first thing that women struggle with after putting on the hijab."

Rahnuma: "I feel like the romantic distractions in my life reduced after I started wearing the hijab because I think I wasn't as pretty as I was – I haven't really figured out how to wear a hijab in a stylish way. I think I was comparatively prettier before and guys used to talk to me. At university, everybody is kind of looking for someone to get involved with. I think the flirtatious interactions reduced once I started wearing it."

Isra expressed that the hijab allowed them to shift their self-policing gaze and mental energy towards more productive things that enable them to improve their self-perception, such as their education or a successful career.

Isra: "When I started hijab, I wore it on and off and eased into it. People thought it was a phase, but I was hellbent on it, I was getting used to it. For me, hijab is about discipline. When I started wearing it, I was so comfortable. I wasn't worried about how I looked, what people could see. I was able to focus on more important things like books, my career. I was reading about Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, all these people – why do they always wear the same clothes? When you lead a simple life, wear simple clothes, you create a sort of discipline in your life and these things are like a given. You have more of your energy to focus on other things. The same happened for me, and it's become so normal for me, it takes me very little energy to get dressed every day, it won't take any brainpower."

It is remarkable that although most of the young hijabi women, including Isra, share a common dispassion for Western and secular thought, she seems to hold a neoliberal outlook on the benefits of wearing the hijab in contemporary Bangladesh, which is in tension with revivalist values they strongly endorse. For these women, the hijab functions as a protective buffer against "appearance-based public scrutiny" by concealing their bodies, but also by adopting a religious symbol that men in particular feel intimidated by (Al Wazni 2015, 3). It also acts as an avenue towards shifting the focus onto their intrinsic beauty and reclaiming

their sense of confidence. It is a form of resistance and empowerment in the face of the patriarchy that constantly seeks to disempower them, as they reject normative beauty standards, while also enjoying respite from the criticism by focusing on the intrinsic rewards of wearing the hijab. Several qualitative studies on the internalization of beauty ideals found that although Muslim women are still subject to their own self-policing gaze, the hijab insulates them from the sexualization by other people (Al Wazni 2015, 3).

1.8.*Public safety and the "male gaze"*

Rozario (2006, 369) argues that women's inequality in Bangladesh could be a result of deeply ingrained patriarchal gender norms and values in its society, rather than conservative religious ideology. Gender-based harassment and abuse in public spaces including sexual harassment - colloquially called "eve-teasing" - is a major social issue that constantly jeopardizes Bangladeshi women's safety and freedom of movement. Families have become increasingly paranoid about allowing their daughters to move and travel freely, often placing them under strict curfews and rules to prevent exposure to predatorial men, or rushing to marry them off to pass on the responsibility of protecting them to their husband (Rozario 2006, 376). Public safety and evading the male gaze are, thus, strong underlying motivations behind supporting and maintaining the hijab.

Rahnuma: "I started wearing the hijab during my second year of university – not from a religious perspective, but I didn't like the way people looked at me. I'm taller than average so people stared more. I even remember when I was a kid in class 6 or 7, drivers would look at me like you know when they say 'raping with their eyes' – I was just sick and tired of it. So I started wearing the hijab because I just wanted to stop the way people were looking at me, the eve-teasing was making me feel bad."

Tasneem: "Because I had my own boutique and I had to go to shop in big crowds, I used to wear a big shawl to make sure no one looked at me in the wrong way. This is the first

thing I experienced really – now that I'm wearing the hijab formally, it doesn't feel bad when anyone looks at me. The confidence, the protection, the security that I get from the hijab can be a very big thing for a woman. When I go abroad, I don't feel as conscious because no one overseas really looks at you to make you uncomfortable. They're civilized people, but here they would walk right into you. So, to save yourself from that experience, if you're covered up a little bit, they know not to push and shove a woman who is covered up. There is respect, and I saw this respect in people around me."

Keya: "You don't know the boys back then were so vulgar, they said such disgusting things. I still slap them across the face from time to time. The other day, I was at New Market, and I suddenly overheard a girl behind me saying "excuse me, why did you touch me like that?" and I looked over and believe me, she was saying it to this guy with a beard! I just went and slapped him right that moment, then a few boys he probably knew came over and I just threatened to call the cops on them, and they ran off."

While every single one of the subjects mentioned public safety as a benefit of wearing the hijab in Bangladesh, only Rahnuma stated that it was her primary reason for adopting the hijab. Upwardly mobile urban women have historically adopted the hijab to participate in gainful employment and education without compromising their morality or religiosity (Abdelhadi 2018). The hijab allows women to continue striving towards modernity and progress by enabling them to feel comfortable and safe navigating public spaces that they would normally not feel protected in if they were unveiled such as co-educational schools, public transportation, or male-dominated workplaces (Read 2007, 232). They can exercise their right to freedom of movement while still adhering to cultural and religious conventions around fashion and modesty.

Rather than the hijab being leveraged as a tool to control women's liberty, it gives women the right to exercise their autonomy in public spaces without the threat of harassment and objectification by men. The hijab is a "great equalizer" that allows women to continue working alongside men, without leaving them vulnerable to sexual harassment (Read and Bartkowski 2000, 405). Wearing the hijab emancipates them from the male gaze and the respect and protection they perceive it provides enables them to partake in activities outside of the confines of their homes.

It is vital to consider that the presumption of choice in adopting the veil may be limited to their social class, as those from lower income levels or class may feel as though the hijab is often not a choice at all but rather a necessity. Upper- or middle-class women have the luxury of being able to avoid public spaces where they might be exposed to gender-based violence simply by virtue of their class position, as they can afford the material resources to do such as their own cars (Odeh 1993, 32). Women living in poverty are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence because of the geographical areas they live in and their lack of access to safe and private transportation. Furthermore, patriarchal gender norms are a much more alarming issue among low socio-economic status groups. However, women are having to bear the complete burden of protecting themselves under the patriarchy. Mahia echoes this sentiment:

Mahia: "It's common to be catcalled or sexually harassed in Dhaka, as you know. Catcalling, winking, staring – I feel like they all happen anyway, and I don't feel any more protected because of wearing the hijab. It's a hijab – it doesn't suddenly make me rape-proof. They'll still stare. You'll wear layers of *orna* and they'll look at you as if you still need more. Staring is a problem in Dhaka, women do it too…it is unfortunate when women have to wear the hijab for protection, and not for its religious purposes but it is a burden to be thinking about your protection all the time."

Although the women deploy the hijab as a means of achieving progressive ends, they are also simultaneously accommodating and reinforcing the prevailing notion that men cannot control or resist their temptation towards women. Pro-veiling discourse generally posit the notion that men have a natural penchant for "untamed sexual activity" and the hijab is a God-ordained solution to this gendered disparity and "protects a woman's virtue" (Read and Bartkowski 2000). While the hijab may shield a woman from the unsolicited and unregulated male gaze, this attitude ultimately pushes the burden of managing men's apparent lack of self-restraint onto the women, rather than recognizing and denouncing the culture of impunity that protects male sexual predators, absolving them of any accountability (MacLeod 1992, 552). This social dilemma sheds light on the occurrence of women shouldering responsibilities to ensure their safety, rather than their community's responsibility to foster an environment that is free from harassment, violence, and discrimination. However, at the same time, the cruel reality is that these women are tasked with reacting to very real circumstances on the streets where they feel unsafe and vulnerable, which spotlights the utility of the hijab for them. The hijab is their compromise in exchange for refusing to compromise their freedom of movement and the ability to earn and live independently without constant oversight or guardianship, which would be a much greater blow to their sense of autonomy and empowerment.

Rahnuma's adoption of the hijab was a desperate measure to subvert the seemingly ever-present male gaze, and she expressed her frustration at being structurally constrained and unable to live out her true identity, which she insists is not one that aligns with that of the quintessential hijabi. She is the only subject for whom the hijab and the gendered expectations tied to them are a hindrance to her self-actualization and positive self-perception.

Rahnuma: “I started wearing the hijab because I didn’t like the way people stared at me. I felt like I had no option, and I didn’t like that…Sometimes I do take a break from the hijab, I know I shouldn’t, but I do. I think about the independent and free-spirited type of person I was, and I feel like I can’t be like that anymore. So, when I go travelling, I take it off and my personality kind of goes back to how it was before, trying to enjoy my life. Now this is a responsibility I chose to take on and I should continue to do it but sometimes when I feel like I need to relieve my stress, or be more like myself, I take it off. So, I wouldn’t say I follow it very religiously, but I have chosen it and I know there are bitter consequences or punishment for taking it off later. But then again, I also want to be like I was before. I take it off when I don’t feel comfortable in my skin or when I feel like I should lead my life for a bit. So, it is contradictory and I’m working through these feelings.”

Rahnuma’s sentiments towards the hijab are unique among all the participants, as she seems to be constrained not only by the patriarchy, but by Islam as well. She admits her dissonance and awareness of the fact that her religious commitment is shaky but does not see relinquishing the hijab as an option, as she remains religious enough to believe that being indecisive about this process will have negative consequences in the afterlife. Her autonomy here is complex, as she argues that taking up the hijab was her personal decision, while also arguing that she had “no option” but to wear it because of the structural constraints that come with being a woman in a deeply patriarchal society.

II. Ideology

<u>*2.1 Independence and autonomy*</u>

Despite the Western discourse around the oppression of hijabi Muslim women, all the subjects had deep conviction and appreciation of women’s liberty and individuality. Western critics justify their opposition to the veil by referring to patriarchal rulers in Muslim societies

in the past who have used the veil to justify gendered seclusion and the restriction of women's mobility and autonomy (Hoodfar 1997, 9). This argument, however, fails to hold up when applied to the subjects' narratives in this study, as the veil is hardly perceived as a barrier to their independence and progress.

Tasneem: "[After Hajj], he [my husband] thought I would agree to take the hijab off and go with him, but I've never been the kind of person who likes being held back…I also want to be free to go wherever I want to go. I told my friend who was the most vocal of all of us that "look, I'm going to be wearing a hijab. If any one of you criticize me, or tease me, I will leave the group but don't think that I will give up the hijab".

Isra: "Personally, hijab gives me great freedom. I can go out however I want…My parents really raised me to be an independent person who will not have to rely on anyone else for things. When it came to my marriage, they didn't want me to be overly dependent on that person. They wanted him to protect me and take care of me, but they didn't want anyone stopping me from studying or working or anything else because they themselves gave me a lot of freedom growing up."

We see from the participants' stories that although they faced resistance from those around them, the hijab was something that aided their self-realization and it was not something they were ready to compromise regardless of the societal pressure to conform to certain gendered and cultural expectations. The women's stories also revealed that Orientalist discourses have infiltrated Bangladeshi society as well and have instilled deep prejudice against hijabis – perhaps another remnant of colonialism. There seems to be a common perception that these women were "forced" into wearing the hijab, as suggested by Isra, Mahia, and Amina's narratives, indicating that hijabi women are believed to lack agency and decision-making power in their own lives, which is precisely what the West have promoted. None of the younger subjects reported being forced to wear it at any point in their life, and

their respective mothers' stories corroborated the former's claims. The subjects also stated that they do not believe that it is something that can be enforced upon another person. Mother-daughter relationships in this study were thus not as coercive as commonly believed or suggested in previous literature. Moreover, mothers supported their daughter's choices regardless of the alignment of their beliefs. The mothers also seemed far more accepting of their children getting married at a later age and granted them more freedom than they themselves received as girls, aiding their process of establishing their own autonomy.

Keya: "I wasn't even 18 yet and I was forcibly married off, the way Bengali women often are. Since then, I knew that I wanted to raise my children differently – like human beings. If I had a daughter, I wanted to make sure she had everything that I couldn't have. Whatever they want to do, whatever they want to study – I wanted to give them the complete freedom to decide…I was very upset when I had my first baby and my second one because I was forced into having both of them. Anyway, I decided I would never let things like that happen to my children, as long as I'm alive."

Amina: "When the proposal for my marriage came, I said I'm an adult now, I've graduated from university, I have a say too, why should I just listen to my parents, I can make my own decisions. Then I find out they had already agreed to the marriage without telling me! They just told me that they were taking me out to buy clothes. I have to mentally prepare myself to marry a person! I don't even know who he is! It's such a massive decision. I was just so angry. Parents back in the day didn't understand these things *at all*...I did end up telling them I wouldn't get married yet and wanted to stand on my own two feet first."

The narratives reveal that there is an intergenerational difference in attitudes when it comes to women's agency and autonomy. The mothers expressed very strong feelings about having important life choices made on their behalf by their parents, particularly when it came

to choosing their husband. Amina and Keya's experiences of being stripped of their agency bolstered their determination to respect their children and their individual autonomy. What one generation's oppression has resulted in is a new generation of women and a new form of feminism, where they refuse to even entertain the possibility of having a life without agency and liberty. It is the mother's generation that seems to have instigated a tectonic shift in the way that these Bangladeshi women construct their identity and sense of self.

Previous literature from South Asia has suggested that daughters tend to emulate their mothers (Dhar, Jain and Jayachandran 2019, 2584). However, the daughters in this study still maintain their own sense of autonomy and diverge from how their mothers chose to live out their Muslim identity, as the subjects independently familiarized themselves with Islamic regulations and adopted the hijab without their mothers' lead. Their ability to exercise their agency and control their public appearance facilitates a sense of empowerment, dignity, and individuality that plays an essential role in strengthening their dedication to the practice. The informants' level of education, type of schooling, and higher social class also resulted in having weaker beliefs around maintaining strict *purdah*, meaning they were more likely to support or have gainful employment outside the home, work and study in mixed gender environments, or travel and live overseas.

Isra: "The hijab gives you so much peace and empowerment. You are stating to another person without telling them that I am a Muslim woman, and you have to behave with me in a certain way. I demand respect and attention and if you can't give me that, you don't have to talk to me."

Tasneem: "You might feel bad when you're all covered up and you see beautiful women around you all decked out in nice clothes and jewelry. But when you recognize the honor and protection the hijab is giving you, it's really not something you need to force onto anyone, it's something that comes from within."

The hijab with time becomes second nature and an essential part of the wearer's appearance. Their agency is complex and simply labelling them as products of social coercion, false consciousness, or patriarchal oppression is a disservice to the depth of their identity and existence. Although they are unable to divorce themselves from the popular depiction of the powerless, subservient Muslim woman, they continue to give rise to "new forms of feminism" and "subjectivity" by reclaiming the sartorial practice as an act they do for themselves and Allah – not one done to appease any other mortal being (Bracke and Fadil 2012, 47).

2.2. Islam as "forward-looking"

The participants' stories paint a portrait of a religion that is intrinsically hopeful, motivating, and comforting to them. The importance given to the act of forgiveness, and the encouragement to constantly strive for improvement and growth, are two major aspects of Islam that resonate with them, and therefore draws them to the hijab. Prayer and connection to Allah not only gives them a sense of comfort during times of need and distress, but constantly pushes them to strive to become better versions of themselves. Islam is the most powerful motivator in their lives, further increasing the salience of their religious identity.

Bina: "Two biggest things I gained from Islam is to not have any regrets in life, whatever happens you can always gain something from it, right now or later; the other is there is no ceiling attached to anything. There is always scope for you to improve. When I reach a "ceiling", I feel lost and knowing that you always have something better to pursue, you will always keep moving. Same with the hijab – I am wearing the *jilbab*[9] now, what can I do next? I learned that covering your feet falls under hijab, so I am currently struggling with that, but I know that Allah SWT sees my struggle as well. The main point is not to stay stagnant about it."

[9] *Jilbab* meaning a full-length robe-like dress that conceals the body until the feet (Williams and Vashi 2007)

Isra: "Islam is a journey. You start with prayer five times a day, you fast 30 days, that's enough. Once you get the peace from observing those things properly, you feel like learning more, transcending. The hijab is a command from Allah, that's why I follow it. Hijab is a discipline, that's why I try to maintain it every day. Hijab is also modesty and a way to represent myself in front of others so it's confidence for me."

Sins and mistakes do not distract them from their goal of being "a good Muslim woman" as they unflinchingly believe that recognizing their own mistakes and repenting is what Allah values. Complete trust in Allah and His plans for them, including potential divine rewards in the afterlife, informs their decision to maintain the veil.

Bina: "Implementation is a work in progress, I'm not too worried about that. But decisions in life must be based on Islam. My concern is if I die and don't go to Jannah to meet my mother, then what's the point of this life?"

Tasneem: "You see, The Quran is actually a source of light. It will automatically take you out of any trouble you are facing. If you're asking for help from Allah, Allah will help you. Even when you're not asking for help, Allah knows what kind of stress you're under. You can be connected with Him through the Quran, it's like charging your phone constantly. The battery will never go down."

Conversely, Rahnuma, Isra, and Isra's mother Rozina expressed that their fear of Allah and the consequences for deviating from what is religiously ordained is what sustains their commitment to the veil.

Rahnuma: "Now that I have voluntarily taken it on already, I should continue it for the sake of religion. I do think of leaving it sometimes because I realized that this is not me, but life after death scares me. So now I would continue the hijab even if I go abroad."

Isra: "The hijab is a religious obligation – Allah commanded that women wear it, but it doesn't mean you can force anyone. You cannot force anyone in religion – there are

Muslim women who don't wear it. Why they don't wear a hijab is their matter, but I'll be answerable as to why I didn't wear it…You can encourage women to wear it but criticizing her clothes is totally inappropriate, they didn't do that during the Prophet's time either. She can wear what she wants."

Rozina: "I fear Allah a lot now. I know He is always watching. I don't feel comfortable dressing up like I used to, and I don't even like looking at my old photos wearing less conservative clothing and with stylish, short hair. I feel naked without the *burkha* now. It's not about safety or respect – it's about listening to Allah's commands. I do believe in independence so I don't like forcing women to do anything but wearing the hijab should be something that comes from within because Allah wants us to."

2.3."All-or-nothing"

Sociologist Nancy Ammerman (2014) aptly states: "What is odd about the way we have often understood religious identities is that we have assumed that they have an all-or-nothing character that no other identity is expected to have." This contention encapsulates the frustration that many participants expressed in the way that society expects perfect religious congruence from hijabis. They are granted "exceptionality" for publicly proclaiming their religiosity through their attire and are thus, perceived to be the exemplars of a righteous and noble person who practices their religion perfectly. This expectation has brought them varying experiences, but all borne out of the dominant societal conjecture around hijabis and their faultless religious observance. This societal pressure fuels Rahnuma's cognitive dissonance, as she continues to express her anxiety over having to behave a certain way in public based on what is expected of her as a hijabi. She talks about how her non-adherence not only garners negative reactions from people, but is also a reminder of the potential punishments in the afterlife.

Rahnuma: "I've been depressed for a long time and sometimes I smoke to clear my mind. It is also a social thing – I like smoking with friends. When I wear a hijab and smoke cigarettes, it is contradictory, and people will talk about how I'm a hijabi yet still a smoker. I would suffer for the sin of not wearing a hijab, but I would also suffer for wearing the hijab imperfectly, it's just a constant tension."

Mahia: "I have friends who saw themselves as hypocrites like my best friend who said, "oh there's so many women who wear the hijab and they pray regularly, and I don't do that" and felt really guilty. Just because I'm wearing the hijab doesn't mean I'm declaring "guys, I'm religious! I do religious things all the time". It is necessary in our *deen*[10] but just because I don't do one thing doesn't mean I have to give up the other thing. These are your choices, things you do intentionally – prayer, hijab, clothing, what you do with your money, what you eat – they are all different journeys. They don't have to be interconnected with one another."

Mahia speaks to the pressure that hijabi women feel to display perfect religious congruence as they fear being judged and criticized for practicing Islam imperfectly. It is truly a paradoxical position to be in as they are both revered as pious women but vilified for the slightest deviations from what a true Muslim woman is supposed to do. She rejects exceptionality and asserts that hijab shouldn't be a sign of perfect piety, instead it is only one "journey" towards being a good Muslim and the wearer sets the pace and exercises their agency in every part of their identity negotiation process.

2.4. Hijab as a Lifestyle

While the hijab operates as a symbol of devotion to Allah (Bartkowski and Read 2003), the respondents asserted that it cannot simply be reduced to a garment either as they

[10] *Deen* in Islamic terminology refers to the way of life Muslims must adopt to comply with divine law, encompassing beliefs, character, and deeds.

perceive that many do. They contend that wearing a hijab is a commitment to an entire ethos or lifestyle as they must fulfil duties beyond ritualistic Islamic practices.

Isra: "The hijab is also about modesty and good behavior. If I am in a room with a *non-mahram,* I cannot be there for more than a few minutes because it is inappropriate. I can't be overly friendly or show that much emotion like laugh super loudly or flirting or anything. I can speak to them confidently and strongly, but I have to maintain a distance, stay reserved."

Aisha: "My *dadi* never really said hijab is just about covering your hair – it's about behavior. It's not just a piece of cloth, it's a lifestyle. You cannot wear the hijab and shout at people. Modesty is not a bad thing. She taught me a lot about good behavior… it's about how you carry yourselves, how you are representing your fellow Muslims and Islam… I knew some girls from an Islamic school who used to wear the hijab at school because it was part of their uniform but then they would take it off outside! They made me realize that just because you wear a hijab, doesn't mean that you are very religious or anything. There were others too who would wear the hijab and b*tch and gossip about other people, but you can't do that either."

Aisha's idea of committing to Islam and the hijab is a holistic thing as it is complete overhaul of one's values, attitudes, and behavior. Wearing the hijab as a performative act defeats the entire purpose, as it would reduce it to a garment that has little relevance apart from optics when it is supposed to be a code of conduct or a value system that guides them through every aspect of their lives. The veil is "self-prescriptive" and a constant reminder to live their life in line with the Muslim belief system (Bhowon and Bundhoo 2016). This dedication to religious observance may also be a way of defending their claim to exceptionality, so they can continue to act as an example of the archetypal "good Muslim". It is noteworthy that Isra and Aisha's statements about proper adherence to the rules hijabis are

expected to follow seem to be in tension with the "all-or-nothing" attitude some of the other women claim to be displeased with. They deem those who cannot maintain a righteous lifestyle alongside veiling as doing the practice imperfectly, just as they are scrutinized by unveiled bystanders who police them based on their own culturally manufactured expectations of veiled women. I also draw attention to the fact that it is the younger participants that maintain and follow more strict interpretations of religious lessons and recommendations than their maternal guardians, further demonstrating that there may be a generational repositioning more towards reformist Islam in play.

Conclusion

The narratives collected from ten upper-class, urban Bangladeshi women can allow us to conclude that the hijab is "neither liberating nor oppressive" - the meanings ascribed to it and the power relations surrounding it are contingent upon the "circumstances under which it is worn" (Mishra and Shirazi 2010, 193). This study provides a multifaceted view of religion and women's agency by shedding light on the fact that religious identity is fluid and becomes hybrid in nature with the incorporation of cultural and social mores (Rozario 2006, 369). The amalgamation of "language and symbols and interactions of public" and private spaces inextricably tied to cultural and social norms contribute to a society's religious practices and beliefs and produce a form of the religion that is most compatible or suitable for living in a particular society or community (Ammerman 2014). Their identity negotiation process is full of contradiction and nuance; distilling their experiences and their agency down to a binary is a disservice to the complexity of their identities.

The hijab is a powerful symbol of Bangladesh's shifting religious norms and these women's narratives elucidate the utility it has for them in a postcolonial, patriarchal society. The hijab is used as a mediator for navigating elite institutions, where they gain vital cultural and social capital which in turn help them dismantle dominant colonial discourses that deny

Muslim women's independence and agency. It also allows them to resist and outmanoeuvre patriarchal structures that enable and perpetuate their sexualization under the male gaze by reclaiming control over how their body is displayed in public. This resistance to the patriarchy provides a sense of empowerment and dignity, and their proximity to religion attracts greater respect in public. I derive from their narratives that this enhanced sense of self prompts the women to double down on their religious identity and utilize the hijab as an overt display of their moral superiority to communicate to the world that they will not engage in the secular decadence that their upper social class is engaging in, such as drinking alcohol or wearing garish attire. This also allows them to confute prejudiced stereotypes of hijabis as uneducated, passive subjects who are dispossessed of all agency, and only use it as a means to achieve upward mobility in the absence of social and economic opportunity. The uniqueness of their position allows them to claim exceptionality, and they do this not only by showcasing their commitment to the religion but by doing it as a form of resistance in the face of postcolonial class structures.

Furthermore, the hijab allows them to adhere to both their private belief and value system which is shaped by Islam but also the gendered and religious expectations prescribed by the broader society. They are constantly navigating a multitude of choices and constraints, and introduce new constraints shaped by their religion that continue to govern their decisions but also shape their understanding of their agency. They view themselves are highly agentic beings, yet their imagination of agency is restricted within the boundaries set by Islam. The conditions of their autonomy are circumscribed by an external power, yet they maintain a strong sense of autonomy and independence. The hijab brings with it an expectation to adhere to a code of conduct that is emblematic of a true, faithful, righteous Muslim woman and a commitment to wearing this symbol is a commitment to an Islamic lifestyle. While some find the unyielding social scrutiny for imperfect religious observance unjustified, they also

embrace the discipline that Islam promotes and emphasize the importance of adhering to practices purely as a commitment to Allah.

The young subjects' commitment to veiling and Islam is palpable in their stories, but markedly stronger than they felt their parents and families were throughout their upbringing. Although families did not necessarily directly influence the women to wear a hijab, Islam was an ever-present, indispensable part of their households and their families still promoted basic religious observance from a young age. The older generation, thus, sow the seeds of religiosity, which the younger generation reap and nurture to give rise to a new form of religiosity that alters their structural location. Their fortified piety is a strategy for resisting postcolonial class and patriarchal structures, but also allows them to see the utility of the hijab in subverting the male gaze. The hijab also wields the symbolic and prescriptive power to segregate the wearers from Bengali culture, which is perceived as incompatible with reformist Islam. It confines them to a liminal state where they are constantly forced to invest more time and energy towards establishing themselves as integrated enough with Bengali culture and the local gendered expectations.

We learn from this study that upper-class, urban Bangladeshi hijabis' agency is relentlessly negotiated in the face of structural constraints, rejecting the one-dimensional agency-no agency binary that hijabis always find themselves perpetually located in. The limitations of their agency are arbitrarily defined and negotiated depending on each woman's level of submission to the religion and perception of their own autonomy. Nevertheless, they are able to access and navigate elite institutions in pursuit of greater social and cultural capital and use that capital to practice a contemporary feminist form of religiosity and shatter dominant stereotypes of the powerless, passive Muslim woman. The hijab is a powerful negotiating piece in their identity construction process and provides them a sense of

empowerment and independence that has become imperative to their resistance of patriarchal power structures.

A future study centered on the women's own perceptions of class and cultural heritage would help elucidate how they view their own positionality in Bangladeshi society and how it affects their processes of self-realization and identity negotiation. Focusing on working class women, would also help us understand how they navigate postcolonial class structures and how religion may aid their experiences. Such a study would help provide a comparative class analysis which would add texture to the current understanding about Bangladeshi, Muslim women and the connections between their class, culture, and religiosity.

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Appendix

1.1 Interlocutor Characteristics

Table of interviewees' characteristics

Participants*	Age	Current Employment	Highest level of education achieved	Marital Status	Maternal Figure (MF)**	MF Current Employment	MF Highest level of education achieved
Bina	32	Manager at privately-owned local fuel company	Master’s	Never married	Tasneem (Aunt)	Small business entrepreneur – runs her own fashion boutique	High School Certificate
Aisha	26	Communications Specialist at a multinational oil and gas company	Bachelor’s	Married	Amina (Mother)	Homemaker - formerly English Medium school teacher	Master’s
Isra	26	Works at a real estate company	Master’s	Married (with one daughter)	Rozina (Mother)	Homemaker	High School Certificate
Mahia	23	Private tutor/ Student	High School Certificate	Never married	Keya (Mother)	Non-profit industry	High School Certificate
Rahnuma	30	Human resources professional at a pharmaceuticals company	Master’s	Never married	Jannat (Mother)	Homemaker – formerly lawyer	Master’s

*All the participants’ names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.
**All the MF’s were married with one or more children, and never separated or divorced.

1.2.Glossary

Term*	**Definition**
Chachi	Aunt - father's brother's (uncle) wife
Dadi	Paternal grandmother
Fupu	Aunt – father's sister
Hujur	Islamic teacher or instructor
Khaet	Colloquial derogatory term for being tacky or uncouth
Khala	Aunt - mother's sister
Milad	Literal translation is "time of birth", referring to the birth of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In this context, it is referring to a community or family gathering after a person's death or funeral to pray for the departed soul.
Orna	Scarf that women in Bangladesh use to conceal their hair and body in public

*All the words in this glossary are from the Bengali language.