

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Subversive Poetics of Hijab: Veiling and Unveiling in Contemporary Muslim Women's Poetry

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Abstract

This article explores how contemporary Muslim women poets engage with the theme of hijab, transforming it from a symbol often perceived as oppressive into a site of complex agency and subversive artistic expression. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of selected poems, the study investigates the poetic strategies employed to redefine narratives of veiling and unveiling. The research identifies recurring themes where the hijab is reclaimed as a personal choice, a marker of identity, and a form of resistance against both external pressures and essentialist interpretations. Findings reveal that poets utilize rich metaphor, imagery, and narrative voice to articulate multifaceted understandings of the veil, challenging monolithic representations and asserting individual and collective selfhood. This work contributes to feminist poetics and cultural studies by highlighting the nuanced ways Muslim women artists leverage their creative practice to negotiate identity, challenge stereotypes, and expand the semiotics of the hijab within contemporary global discourse. The study underscores the vital role of poetry in fostering a more complex and empowering understanding of Muslim women's experiences.

Keywords: Hijab, Poetics, Muslim Women, Veiling, Unveiling, Contemporary Poetry, Cultural Identity, Subversion

Introduction

The hijab, a veil worn by many Muslim women, stands as one of the most potent and contested symbols in contemporary global discourse. Its meanings are manifold, encompassing religious devotion, cultural identity, social conformity, and political resistance. While often framed by Western media and certain feminist discourses as a symbol of oppression or forced seclusion, a growing body of scholarship and artistic expression challenges such singular interpretations (Droogsma, 2007; Glapka, 2018). For many Muslim women, the hijab is a personal choice, an assertion of faith, or a statement of agency, reflecting a complex interplay of individual conviction and communal belonging. This complexity is particularly pronounced in contemporary Muslim women's poetry, where the act of veiling and unveiling transcends its literal interpretations to become a rich metaphor for identity negotiation, self-expression, and subversive critique.

Historically, the veil has held diverse symbolic weight across cultures and epochs, often associated with modesty, status, or seclusion (Seyed-Gohrab, 2005). However, in the modern era, particularly within diasporic communities and postcolonial contexts, the hijab has been reappropriated and reinterpreted, becoming a dynamic site where cultural heritage, religious tenets, and personal autonomy converge (Gould, 2014; Zinira, 2017). Despite this evolving understanding, a significant gap remains in critically examining how contemporary Muslim women poets specifically utilize the **poetics** of hijab—the artistic and linguistic strategies—to subvert conventional narratives and articulate their lived realities. Existing scholarship on women's subversive

poetics generally addresses broader themes without a specific focus on the hijab (Kaivola & Yorke, 1997; Kinnahan, 1996; Murray, 2011).

This article addresses this critical lacuna by investigating the subversive poetics of hijab in contemporary Muslim women's poetry. We aim to explore how poets transform the veil into a complex symbol of resistance, empowerment, and multifaceted identity, moving beyond simplistic binaries of oppression and liberation. Specifically, this study seeks to answer two primary research questions: (1) How do contemporary Muslim women poets subvert traditional narratives of veiling and unveiling through their poetic works? and (2) What specific poetic strategies and rhetorical devices are employed to express agency, identity, and critique through the symbolism of the hijab? By focusing on the artistic choices and linguistic innovations, this research offers a nuanced understanding of the hijab as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation and creative expression. Our contribution lies in illuminating the distinctive ways poetry serves as a powerful medium for Muslim women to reclaim and redefine their narratives, thereby enriching the discourse on feminist poetics, postcolonial studies, and the politics of representation. The paper proceeds with a comprehensive literature review, followed by an outline of our qualitative methodology, a presentation of key findings, a discussion of their implications, an acknowledgment of limitations, and suggestions for future research, concluding with a summary of the study's broader significance.

Literature Review

The concept of veiling and unveiling has been a perennial subject of academic inquiry, spanning religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and literary criticism. Understanding the subversive poetics of hijab necessitates an examination of its historical, cultural, and political contexts, alongside an appreciation for the broader landscape of women's subversive writing.

Historical and Cultural Symbolism of the Veil

Historically, the veil's symbolism is rich and varied, predating Islam in many cultures. Seyed-Gohrab (2005) provides insight into the complex symbolism of veiling and the poetics of unveiling in Early Modern Persian poetry, illustrating how the veil could signify modesty, beauty, mystery, or even political power. This historical perspective highlights that the veil's meaning has never been monolithic, constantly shifting with cultural and social tides. In many pre-Islamic societies, veiling was associated with status and honor, distinguishing noblewomen from slaves or commoners. The advent of Islam integrated veiling into religious practices, primarily as a symbol of modesty and piety, though its specific forms and interpretations have varied significantly across different Muslim communities and historical periods.

Hijab, Identity, and Agency in Contemporary Contexts

In contemporary discourse, the hijab has emerged as a particularly charged symbol, often at the nexus of East-West relations, secularism, and multiculturalism. Western feminist perspectives have frequently viewed the hijab as a symbol of patriarchal oppression, an interpretation that Muslim women themselves have increasingly challenged (Glapka, 2018). Droogsma (2007) explores how American Muslim women redefine hijab, asserting their agency and diverse standpoints on veiling, moving beyond imposed interpretations. Similarly, Zinira (2017) examines the politics of veiling in Indonesia, highlighting how the hijab functions as a complex representation of female Muslim identity, intricately linked to national and religious narratives. Gould (2014) delves into the concept of hijab as a commodity form in contemporary Iran, discussing how veiling, unveiling, and even 'misveiling' become tools of expression within a regulated public sphere. These studies collectively underscore the agency inherent in Muslim women's decisions regarding the hijab, whether to wear it, how to wear it, or to challenge its conventional forms, transforming it into a vehicle for self-expression rather than mere compliance. The narratives of Arab women, often contentious and subject to scrutiny, further emphasize the complexities of identity assertion in the face of societal expectations (Kholoussi, 2019).

Subversive Poetics and Women's Writing

The concept of 'subversive poetics' in women's writing refers to the artistic strategies employed to challenge dominant patriarchal, social, or literary conventions. Kaivola and Yorke (1997) discuss 'impertinent voices' and subversive strategies in contemporary women's poetry, illustrating how poets use language, form, and imagery to disrupt established norms and create alternative spaces for expression. This tradition of challenging the status quo extends to experimental poetics and the lyric, as explored by Kinnahan (1996) in British women's poetry, where linguistic innovation becomes a tool for re-imagining selfhood and social roles. Murray (2011) further examines the interplay between lyric and language in contemporary women's poetry, emphasizing how formal choices contribute to the subversive potential of their work. Struloeff (2011) also reviews contemporary women's exploratory poetics, highlighting their innovative approaches to form and content. Scholars like Burris, Benstock, and Yorke (1993) have traced the intellectual lineage of American feminists engaging with continental sources, further solidifying the theoretical underpinnings of subversive literary practices. Moreover, the exploration of 'voices of errancy' and 'spaces of silence' in the narratives of authors like Assia Djebar resonates deeply with the idea of finding expressive forms beyond conventional boundaries (Ouahmiche, 2016). Mohja Kahf's work, for instance, exemplifies an encounter, clash, and confluence of cultural elements, demonstrating how narratives can bridge diverse experiences (Arami, 2018).

While extensive scholarship exists on the symbolism of the veil, Muslim women's agency, and general subversive poetics, a critical gap remains in the specific intersection of these fields: how contemporary Muslim women poets leverage poetic language and forms to articulate subversive meanings of the hijab. Most studies tend to focus on sociological or political aspects of veiling, or on women's poetry without specific emphasis on the hijab's semiotics. This article intends to bridge this gap by conducting a focused analysis of the poetic strategies through which the hijab is re-imagined as a dynamic, agentic, and often subversive symbol within contemporary literary expression.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design to explore the subversive poetics of hijab in contemporary Muslim women's poetry. This approach is particularly suited for in-depth textual analysis, allowing for a nuanced understanding of symbolic meanings, rhetorical strategies, and the complex interplay between text and context (Baumann, 2018).

Research Design

The research design centered on close textual analysis, a method frequently employed in literary and cultural studies to uncover the layered meanings within poetic works. This involved a systematic examination of selected poems to identify recurring themes, dominant imagery, rhetorical devices, and narrative voices related to veiling and unveiling. The interpretive nature of the design allowed for an exploration of how poets construct and deconstruct meanings, challenging conventional perceptions and asserting alternative narratives.

Data Sources and Sampling

The data for this study comprised a purposive sample of poems by contemporary Muslim women poets who write in English or whose work is widely translated into English. The selection criteria included: (1) poets who self-identify as Muslim women; (2) whose work has been published in the last two decades (post-2000), reflecting 'contemporary' perspectives; (3) whose poetry explicitly or implicitly engages with themes of hijab, veiling, unveiling, or related concepts of modesty, visibility, and identity; and (4) whose work has received critical acclaim or significant recognition within literary circles. While not exhaustive, the sample aimed to represent a range of experiences and poetic styles. For instance, poets like Mohja Kahf, whose work explores cultural identity and the American Muslim experience, often engage with themes related to the scarf and veiling (Arami, 2018). The final corpus included selections from five prominent poets, ensuring a diverse representation of voices from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., North American, European, Middle Eastern, and South Asian diasporas), all engaging with the central theme.

Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure involved several stages of thematic analysis and close reading. Initially, poems were read multiple times to grasp their overall thematic content and emotional resonance. Subsequently, a more focused reading was conducted to identify specific lines, stanzas, and poetic devices related to the hijab, veiling, or unveiling. Data coding involved categorizing these instances into emergent themes, such as 'hijab as agency,' 'veiling as protection,' 'unveiling as self-revelation,' 'critique of external gaze,' and 'metaphorical uses of fabric/covering.' Particular attention was paid to rhetorical strategies, including metaphor, simile, imagery, symbolism, irony, and narrative perspective. The analysis sought to understand not just **what** was being said about the hijab, but **how** it was being articulated through poetic form and language, thereby identifying the 'subversive poetics' at play.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the validity of the interpretations, a rigorous process of reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis, acknowledging the researchers' own cultural backgrounds and potential biases. Interpretations were cross-referenced with existing literary criticism where available, ensuring that the readings were grounded in scholarly discourse. While quantitative measures of reliability are not applicable to qualitative textual analysis, the systematic coding process and detailed documentation of analytical steps provide an audit trail, allowing for transparency and replicability of the interpretive framework. The use of multiple poets' works also allowed for a degree of triangulation across different voices and perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations primarily involved respectful engagement with the cultural and religious sensitivities surrounding the hijab. The analysis aimed to avoid essentializing Muslim women's experiences or imposing a singular interpretation. Instead, it sought to highlight the diversity and complexity of their poetic expressions. All selected works were publicly published, and their use for academic analysis falls within fair use guidelines, ensuring the intellectual property rights of the poets were respected. The focus remained on the artistic output rather than the personal lives of the poets, maintaining a respectful distance and scholarly integrity.

Results

The close textual analysis of contemporary Muslim women's poetry revealed several distinct thematic and stylistic patterns in how the hijab, veiling, and unveiling are represented. These findings underscore a consistent effort by poets to challenge conventional narratives and imbue the veil with new, often subversive, meanings.

Reclaiming the Veil as a Site of Agency

A prominent finding was the recurring motif of the hijab as a symbol of personal agency and choice, rather than imposition. Poets frequently depicted the act of wearing the hijab as an intentional decision, an expression of faith, identity, or even rebellion against secular pressures to unveil. For instance, some poems utilized imagery of 'wrapping' or 'donning' the veil as an active, empowering gesture, contrasting sharply with external perceptions of it being 'imposed' or 'forced.' This agency was often linked to a sense of inner strength and self-possession, where the veil became a boundary that protected the self while simultaneously defining it. The language used emphasized ownership and volition, transforming the hijab into a garment of self-assertion.

Unveiling as an Act of Self-Revelation and Critique

Beyond the physical act of veiling, many poets explored 'unveiling' as a metaphorical process of self-revelation, intellectual awakening, or critique of societal norms. This was not necessarily about removing a physical head covering, but rather about uncovering truths, challenging stereotypes, or revealing the complexities of an inner world. Poems often employed imagery of 'peeling back layers' or 'lifting curtains' to expose hypocrisy, prejudice, or superficial judgments. In some cases, the 'unveiling' was directed outward, critiquing the Orientalist gaze or the narrow interpretations of Muslim women's lives prevalent in dominant discourses. This metaphorical unveiling served as a powerful tool for intellectual and emotional liberation, articulating an authentic self that defies external categorization.

Metaphorical Language and Imagery of Veiling/Unveiling

The analysis revealed a rich tapestry of metaphorical language and imagery associated with veiling and unveiling. Poets frequently employed extended metaphors where the hijab was likened to a 'sky,' a 'shield,' a 'garden,' or a 'whisper,' each carrying specific connotations of protection, spiritual connection, growth, or quiet strength. Fabric itself became a potent symbol, often described with textures, colors, and movements that evoked deeper meanings—softness, resilience, flow, or stillness. The interplay of light and shadow was another common device, with veiling sometimes associated with the sacred mystery of shadow, and unveiling with the harshness or clarity of light. This sophisticated use of imagery allows the poets to transcend literal descriptions, creating a multi-layered understanding of the veil's significance. As shown in Figure 1, thematic clusters of veiled imagery often converged around themes of interiority, protection, and spiritual connection.

Figure 1. Thematic clusters of veiled imagery in selected poems

Furthermore, the narrative voice in these poems often shifted between personal confession, collective assertion, and defiant declaration. Poets utilized various poetic forms, from free verse to more structured lyrical expressions, to convey their messages. The rhythmic qualities and sound devices (alliteration, assonance) frequently reinforced the thematic content, adding to the subversive impact. For instance, repetitive structures sometimes mirrored the persistent societal gaze, only to be broken by a sudden shift in tone, signaling resistance. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of these subversive strategies across the poetic forms examined, highlighting a preference for lyrical and narrative approaches that facilitate personal voice and storytelling.

Figure 2. Distribution of subversive strategies across poetic forms

The findings indicate a deliberate and artful re-appropriation of the hijab's symbolism, transforming it from a passive object of observation into an active subject of poetic inquiry and redefinition. This poetic engagement empowers Muslim women to articulate their complex identities and challenge the reductionist narratives that often surround them.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the profound ways in which contemporary Muslim women poets engage with the symbolism of the hijab, effectively subverting conventional interpretations and creating new spaces for identity and agency. This poetic engagement moves beyond the binary of oppression versus liberation, offering a more nuanced understanding that resonates with broader discussions in feminist and postcolonial studies.

Reconfiguring the Semiotics of Hijab

Our analysis demonstrates that poets actively reconfigure the semiotics of the hijab, imbuing it with meanings that often contradict dominant societal narratives. This aligns with Glapka's (2018) argument for understanding hijab from socio-culturally located positions of knowing, turning back the gaze on Western feminist frameworks. Instead of being solely a marker of religious compliance or patriarchal control, the hijab in these poems becomes a complex signifier of personal faith, cultural pride, and deliberate self-presentation. The poets' use of rich metaphors and diverse imagery, as highlighted in our results, allows them to dismantle simplistic associations and build a multi-layered understanding where the veil can simultaneously

signify protection, spiritual connection, and a chosen boundary against an intrusive world. This re-semiotization echoes Gould's (2014) observation of how veiling can become a form of commodity or expression, even within restrictive contexts, indicating a dynamic interplay between individual agency and external pressures.

The Poetics of Resistance and Self-Assertion

The subversive nature of this poetry lies in its capacity to transform a contested symbol into a tool of resistance and self-assertion. By articulating their personal experiences and interpretations, these poets challenge both patriarchal interpretations within their own communities and Orientalist misrepresentations from outside. This resonates with Kaivola and Yorke's (1997) concept of 'impertinent voices' and subversive strategies in women's poetry, where the act of writing itself becomes a political gesture. The metaphorical unveiling in many poems is an act of intellectual and emotional liberation, revealing an authentic self that defies categorization, similar to the contentious practice of Arab women's autobiography that elicits strong reactions (Kholoussi, 2019). Poetry, in this context, becomes a vital space for reclaiming narrative control, allowing Muslim women to articulate their agency and push back against a monolithic understanding of their identities. This aligns with Ouahmiche's (2016) exploration of finding 'voices of errancy' and 'traces of writing' in narratives that navigate spaces of silence, where poetic expression carves out a presence for marginalized experiences.

Intersectional Identities and the Veil

The poems further reveal how the hijab intersects with other dimensions of identity, such as nationality, diaspora experience, and individual belief. The poets' diverse backgrounds contribute to a multifaceted portrayal of the veil, moving beyond a universalizing 'Muslim woman' experience. For instance, the experience of wearing the hijab in a Western context, as discussed by Droogsma (2007), adds layers of negotiation and self-definition that are distinct from those in Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia (Zinira, 2017). This intersectionality is crucial, as it demonstrates that the meaning of the hijab is not static but is continually shaped by the unique confluence of an individual's cultural, social, and personal circumstances. The poetry thus contributes to a more complex and nuanced understanding of identity formation among Muslim women, challenging essentialist readings and celebrating the rich diversity within Muslim communities.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical implications

This study significantly contributes to the fields of feminist poetics, postcolonial studies, and the sociology of religion. Theoretically, it expands our understanding of how marginalized voices utilize literary forms to subvert dominant narratives, demonstrating that the hijab is not merely a passive symbol but an active site of semiotic contestation and redefinition. It challenges universalizing theories of oppression by illustrating agency within seemingly restrictive contexts, enriching feminist theory with non-Western perspectives. The research also refines postcolonial literary theory by showcasing how poets from Muslim backgrounds actively engage with and deconstruct Orientalist tropes, offering an internal critique that reclaims cultural symbols. Furthermore, it provides a literary lens through which to understand the evolving relationship between religious practice, personal identity, and modern self-expression, highlighting the dynamic nature of religious symbolism in a globalized world.

Practical implications

The practical implications of this research are far-reaching, particularly for educators, cultural commentators, and policymakers. For educators, these findings offer valuable resources for teaching contemporary literature, promoting cultural literacy, and fostering a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women's experiences beyond stereotypes. Cultural commentators can use this framework to engage with artistic expressions more deeply, moving beyond superficial interpretations of the hijab and appreciating the complexity of Muslim women's agency. For policymakers and social advocates, understanding the diverse and agentic interpretations of the hijab, as articulated in poetry, can inform more inclusive policies and public discourse, combating Islamophobia and promoting genuine cultural understanding. This study encourages a shift in perception, recognizing Muslim women's poetry as a powerful testament to their intellectual and creative contributions to global cultural identity.

Limitations

Despite the insights gained, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the qualitative nature and purposive sampling of poems, while allowing for in-depth analysis, inherently limit the generalizability of the findings to the entire spectrum of contemporary Muslim women's poetry. The selected corpus, primarily consisting of English-language or widely translated works, may not fully represent the diverse poetic traditions and linguistic nuances present in other languages.

Second, the focus on published poetry means the study primarily reflects voices that have gained visibility within literary spheres, potentially overlooking emerging or less formally published poets whose works might offer different perspectives. Third, while the study analyzed the poetic representation of the hijab, it did not delve into the specific socio-political contexts of each poet's country of origin or residence in exhaustive detail. Such deeper contextualization, while beyond the scope of this

article, could further illuminate the specific pressures and inspirations shaping the poets' engagement with the hijab. Finally, the interpretive nature of textual analysis, while robust, always carries an element of subjective interpretation, despite rigorous methodological steps to ensure validity.

Future Research Directions

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several promising avenues for future research emerge. First, comparative studies could expand the poetic corpus to include works from a wider range of linguistic traditions (e.g., Arabic, Persian, Urdu, French) to explore how cultural and linguistic specificities shape the poetics of hijab, potentially revealing unique forms of subversion.

Second, interdisciplinary research could compare the poetic representations of hijab with its portrayal in other art forms, such as film (Taheri, 2024; Baumann, 2018), visual arts, or performance art, to understand the multi-modal strategies of identity negotiation and resistance. Third, audience reception studies could investigate how different readerships (Muslim and non-Muslim, Western and non-Western) interpret and respond to these subversive poetic representations of the hijab, shedding light on the impact of such works on public perception. Fourth, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of hijab symbolism in poetry over time could provide insights into how these representations adapt to changing global political and social landscapes. Finally, research could explore the pedagogical applications of this poetry in promoting cross-cultural understanding and challenging stereotypes in educational settings.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that contemporary Muslim women's poetry offers a powerful and sophisticated platform for engaging with the complex symbolism of the hijab. Through a rich array of poetic strategies—including metaphorical re-imagining, nuanced imagery, and diverse narrative voices—these poets actively subvert essentialist interpretations, transforming the hijab from a simplistic symbol of oppression into a dynamic site of agency, identity, and critique. The findings underscore the vital role of artistic expression in challenging dominant narratives and asserting multifaceted selfhood in the face of both internal and external pressures. By reclaiming and redefining the semiotics of veiling and unveiling, Muslim women poets contribute significantly to feminist poetics and broader cultural discourse, offering profound insights into the negotiation of cultural identity in the 21st century. Their work not only enriches the literary landscape but also provides crucial perspectives for fostering greater understanding and appreciation of the diverse experiences within Muslim communities globally.

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