NIQAB –AS A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE:

MUSLIM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH THE FACE VEIL

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ABSTRACT

Niqab –as a Symbol of Resistance: Muslim women's experiences with the Face Veil

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Niqab, the practice of veiling the face, is adopted by a small percentage of Muslim women in Canada, yet it is the most controversial piece of clothing. Such a practice is stereotypically seen as 'backwards', unwarranted, and forced. Some will even go as far as declaring the religious practice as "un-Canadian"– demanding a public ban. But for Muslim women, the Niqab means so much more and it can be defined in many ways. This MRP is a narrative analysis of three Niqabi experiences of this Islamic practice. With Islam as the worldview or lens for this research, these three stories serve as 'counter narratives', showing Niqab as a symbol of resistance, power and choice. They also serve as education for those seeking to better support and understand Niqab. In the words of one scholar thinking about this moment during COVID-19, of veiling the face, it might be that "*We are all Niqabis now*."

Key Words: Niqab, face veil, face-veil, Burqa, Hijab, Muslim, Muslim women, Islam, resiliency, resilient, niqab ban, burqa ban, COVID-19, Coronavirus, pandemic, Islamophobia, 9/11

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بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْم

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my loving immigrant father who unfortunately did not have the opportunity to pursue his dream of achieving higher education. Abba-Jee this is for all the sacrifices you made by leaving everything behind just so that I could have a better future. You gave me the greatest gift of all –you believed in me. I have always wanted to fulfill your dream and I hope after reading this research paper, I have made you proud. I pray that my efforts are a testament which reassures you that your sacrifices did not go unnoticed. You will always be my mentor, my motivation, and my strength. You are the inspiration that guides my life and I am forever grateful for your love and Duas. Love you!

This is also dedicated to every Muslim woman that felt misrepresented, silenced, and stereotyped for choosing to wear the Niqab. I am sorry that people did not take the opportunity to listen to your story. I am sorry others feel the need to speak on your behalf and do not let you speak for yourself. I want to let you know that I am here to listen and I hope the stories I share today inspire you to share your story. Remember that:

Perhaps sharing your story may help someone rewrite their own.

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INTRODUCTION

Oppressed. *Ignorant*. *Extremist*. These are probably a few of the words that come to mind when some look at a Muslim woman wearing the Niqab. One might even reach their own conclusions and claim that she must be forced into wearing this black cloth that completely conceals her identity from the outside world. However, if one steps away from this white gaze and reflects, one would question their own assumptions. Is she really oppressed? Can she be forced? More importantly, who defines oppression and freedom: the *outsider*, who claims that she is only liberated when she refuses to practice her religious beliefs and thereby, take off her Niqab or the complete *insider*, the Muslim woman who feels liberated because she has chosen to wear a piece of clothing that faithfully defines her identity?

The Western Eurocentric white gaze heavily influences the way Niqab is perceived. Women, wearing the Niqab, might say that it is not their wearing of the Niqab that oppresses them. Rather, it is the ignorance of the society that surrounds her. The social model of disability echoes the same sentiments; it is not those who are 'disabled' that are the problem, but a society that disables them (Poole, 2020). Similarly, opportunities are not stripped away by a piece of cloth, but by society's reaction(s) to it (Gani, 2013). As a woman who proudly adorns the Niqab, I can attest that this is not the truth that Muslim women want to be identified with. Based on my research for this MRP, this is a version of the truth that is fabricated by media, public debate, and societal stereotypes.

Niqab, the practice of veiling the face, is adopted by a small percentage of Muslim women in Canada, yet it is the most controversial piece of clothing. Such a practice is stereotypically seen as 'backwards', unwarranted, and forced. Some will even go as far as declaring the religious practice as "un-Canadian", barbaric, and dehumanizing – demanding a

public ban. But according to the Muslim women I interviewed for this MRP, their definition and views of Niqab are more than mere societal and political assumptions and stereotypes. Definitions of Niqab are unique to each individual Muslim woman, who has chosen to wear the face veil, and her lived experiences create unique meanings to *this choice*. Who is to decide what is 'Canadian' or 'appropriate' anyways?

Although the definition of Niqab is open to interpretation, there is a difference of opinion regarding its adoption in Islam. The Niqab has not been mentioned in the Qur'an specifically. However, guidelines are provided in the Qur'an in Surah Ahzaab, Verse 59. Many scholars use this verse to verify the obligation of covering a woman's face, while others use it to refute the covering of the face. For the purpose of this paper, I will highlight two of the most popular opinions: first, that the Niqab is *Fardh* (obligated) and secondly, that the Niqab is *Mustahab* (recommended). Regardless of what opinion one follows, the conclusion is that the Niqab has a place in the religion of Islam (Taymiyyah, 2010). This study is not intended to dwell upon the religious or theological basis of the practice itself, but rather to highlight the experiences of the women who wear it (Clarke, 2013). Alternatively, I will be providing 'counter narratives' to deconstruct the dominant discourses surrounding Muslim women and Niqab.

We will begin first with my story. My journey with the Niqab has been very unique but some of my experiences are very similar to the women in this study. I always knew that I wanted to wear the Niqab. For some reason, I felt women who cover themselves completely were very resilient and empowered, and I wanted to be just like them. A day before my 20th birthday, I decided to be rebellious and put on the Niqab without informing my family or friends. I use the word 'rebellious' very cautiously because it describes my circumstances accurately. Whereas

most people would assume that I was forced to wear the Niqab, they would be surprised to know that I did not even tell my parents or siblings when I decided to wear the Niqab. I simply wore the Niqab without informing any of them and did it knowing that they would have no choice but to accept it. Thankfully, I found my family and friends being very supportive. It has been more than 10 years now, and I still wear the Niqab as proudly as the day I first adorned this black garment that completely covers my face, revealing only my eyes. I knew my Niqab was very special to me, but I did not know that it would also serve a greater purpose. Initially, my Niqab became a tool for raising awareness. Peers and professors at college started sharing their views with me on Niqab and how their thought processes changed because of the way I portrayed it. Susan, my counselling professor, took me to the side one day and said: "Sadia, thank you for helping me understand what Niqab truly means because of the way you wear it." I was often stopped by peers and professors who were eager to learn more about my Niqab and often went out of their way to show support and appreciation for such a heavily controversial piece of clothing. In fact, my peers and professors were the ones that encouraged me to continue my post-secondary education to university because they felt that I had a greater purpose – to raise awareness about the Niqab. I received similar remarks when I began my Bachelors of Social Work at a highly prestigious and competitive university in the heart of downtown Toronto, making my journey with Niqab very valuable. Today, I am writing this paper with support from my peers, professors, friends, and family who have motivated me to share my story and the stories of those women who are often silenced due to their negative portrayal in media, society, and public debate. Here is my story and the stories of three incredibly powerful and resilient women who I have the honour and privilege to call my sisters. It is due time we learn about Niqab, from the very women who wear it and let them speak for themselves.

CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Niqab – the practice of veiling the face – is perceived as the most visible symbol of Islam in the West (Zempi, 2016). Women dressed in black floor-length gowns, revealing only their eyes, are often seen struggling to validate their identities in public crowds. They make their way through busy streets fighting off staring eyes, racial slurs, and threats, while simultaneously being careful of flaunting their modesty. Niqab is often stereotypically seen as a 'threat' to views of integration and national cohesion, and a visual embodiment of gender oppression and gender inequality (Zempi, 2016). Through her clothing, the Muslim woman is used to illustrate the 'abnormal,' a 'stranger among us' –an extreme belief system symbolizing the potential threat of Islamic extremism (Zempi, 2016). Such women are mislabelled, out-casted, and quick to be judged due to the piece of cloth that is deemed different to the 'norm.' Ironically, the perspectives of Muslim women who wear the Niqab and their reasons for wearing it are usually absent from media, political, and public debates (Zempi, 2016). This stigmatizes veiled Muslim women as either religious fanatics or oppressed victims with no agency (Zempi, 2016). This also erases the multiple identities of Niqab-wearing women as subjects, and reduces them to submissive victims of gender subjugation in Islam (Zempi, 2016).

Ironically, there is virtually no literature on the lived experiences of Niqab-wearing women. If you type the word "Niqab" in any search engine, most likely, you will find court proceedings on the matter or debates about its ban. Very rarely do you find concrete research studies that discuss the essence of Niqab or narratives of the women who choose to follow this practice. Therefore, for this MRP and with the assistance of the Social Work librarian, I used an 'interdisciplinary approach' rather than limiting my search to specific databases. What helped, however, was condensing my search results to 'Women Studies' so that my focus was not tainted

by irrelevant disciplines. I purposely chose to use the word “Niqab” in my search engine to illustrate the lack of research conducted on the topic. If I used the word “face veil,” my research would have been focused on the generic Islamic context of veiling, including various Islamic veiling practices, such as the hijab and burqa, which I wanted to avoid (Atasoy, 2006). I also did not want to use “feminism” as a search term because feminism has been too focused on white women’s liberation. I, on the other hand, have been of the belief that Muslim women have always been liberated because Islam has given them the freedom of making their own choices. What was useful was using the word ‘resilient’ to secure results, which discussed the personal choices of women who wear the Niqab.

Due to the nature of my topic, I faced a lot of challenges with my literature review. At first, I could not find many scholarly resources and researchers that directly spoke about my topic. I finally came across Irene Zempi, who conducted a study in the UK asking Muslim women about their lived experiences with the Niqab. I used her reference list to guide the rest of my reading. I was also inspired by Lynda Clarke’s study, which provided space for Canadian Muslim women who wear the Niqab to speak for themselves (Clarke, 2013). Many times however, I felt hopeless and defeated and often wanted to give up on my research, but I regained my confidence by coming to the realization that my MRP was filling the gap in Niqab research. I convinced myself that although a literature review was a tedious task, it was opening the door to future researchers. Hopefully, aspiring researchers will not be in despair and can use my MRP as a starting point in their future research. Upon review of the literature, three major themes can be found: *Politics of Veiling*: how the West constructs the Muslim woman and her Niqab, *Identity Diversity*: how Muslim women construct their own identities, and *Niqab as a symbol of resistance.*

Politics of Veiling: How the West constructs the Muslim woman and her Niqab

The "veiled Muslim woman" is positioned as a symbol of fundamental *otherness,* where her Niqab is seen as a tool of oppression and an expression of a threat that Muslim minorities pose to gender equality and other liberal values (Chapman, 2018). Violent political interventions in the West try to "save" the oppressed Muslim woman, both internationally, as part of the 'war on terror' and nationally, in the form of legal burqa bans (Chapman, 2018). Banning the Niqab demonstrates how the West is only willing to include cultural practices perceived as congruent with European-white mainstream expectations of immigrant and minority integration (Thomas, 2015). By prohibiting Muslim women from wearing the Niqab, mainstream societies marginalize a population that already faces discrimination (Thomas, 2015). This further excludes Muslim women from full participation in society and infringes upon their religious and personal freedom to wear cultural and religious symbols (Thomas, 2015). There is a clear message: Niqab is not welcomed in Western society (Thomas, 2015). Mainstream media portrays Niqabi women as an "iconic sign of differences" and reinforces the "us" versus "them" binary (Thomas, 2015). Furthermore, a 'homogenous identity' is often imposed on this diverse group of women, which ignores their multiple identities and strips them of their inherent liberty (Latif et al., 2018).

Identity Diversity: How Muslim women construct their own identities

There is far less research on how Muslims themselves, particularly Muslim women, construct and navigate their identities in mainstream society (Latif et. al, 2018). Muslim identities are shaped by their lived experiences and they should not be treated as a monolithic group due to the many differences that exist between them (Latif et. al, 2018). Although there is a gap in Niqab

literature, studies regarding Hijab-wearing women reveal the following motivations of Muslim women adopting the Hijab: religious piety, to avoid the male gaze, to take control of their own bodies, to assert a Muslim identity and to resist sexual objectification and oppression (O'Neill et. al, 2015). Zempi's study revealed similar motivations and there was a consensus view that women adopted the Niqab as an act of individual choice (Zempi, 2016). The wearing of Niqab plays a crucial role in being recognized as Muslim and being part of the Islamic community in the West through the expression of personal choice, religious identity, and freedom of expression (Zempi, 2016). Assuming that Niqab is oppressive towards women is patronizing those who wear it by choice and consider it empowering and liberating (O'Neill et. al, 2015).

Niqab as a symbol of resistance

Muslim women use their Niqab as a form of resistance when they challenge the symbolism of the Niqab as a 'threat' to notions of gender oppression, integration, national cohesion, and public safety in mainstream society (Zempi, 2016). These women use their lived experiences to illustrate the more nuanced meanings that the Niqab holds for them (Zempi, 2016). By resisting stereotypes and mainstream understanding of Niqab, Muslim women believe they should not be forced to choose between their religious beliefs and Western norms (Thomas, 2015). Most Niqabi women will state that they are neither "oppressed," nor is the Niqab a "symbol of inequality" (Golnaraghi, & Dye, 2016). By wearing the Niqab, Muslim women are asserting their identity and demanding respect as equal members of society (Golnaraghi, & Dye, 2016). Thus, they may be liberated from the sexual gaze suffered by non-veiled Western women and the judgements made regarding their physical appearances and conformity to Western ideals

(Golnaraghi, & Dye, 2016). They also challenge the commodification of women's bodies in an effort to oppose the Burqa Bans and further resist colonial notions of what is meant to be a Muslim woman in the West (Golnaraghi, & Dye, 2016). Muslim women are a heterogeneous group who experience the Niqab in many different ways and for different reasons (Golnaraghi, & Dye, 2016). For many Niqabi women, the Niqab becomes a form of identity through which they preserve their own cultures (Golnaraghi, & Dye, 2016). Muslim women who adopt the Niqab show their resistance every day when they confront the stigma associated with the veil (Chapman, 2018). By wearing the Niqab in various public settings, these women are resisting notions of exclusion, sexual objectification, commodification of women, challenging political debates and Western consumerist culture, as well as refusing imposed identities (Chapman, 2018).

Critical analysis of the Literature: White Researchers and the White Saviour

Despite the rich findings shared thus far, the available literature on Niqabi women is deficient. For starters, the amount of literature is extremely limited, and whatever literature is available is often inadequate and inaccurate. Many research studies tend to use feminist research lenses. However, given the whiteness of much feminism, this may not be appropriate for studying Muslim women and their choice of wearing the Niqab. Its strength is that feminist research is mostly conducted by women and stresses the need to listen to voices of marginalized women (Piela, 2017). However, O'Neill et al. point out that feminist thinking with regards to Muslim women's head coverings is conflicted (2015). Specifically, feminism is racist because it may only takes into account the perspectives of mainstream white women (Lesco, 2018). White feminist research ignores the diverse identities and experiences of Muslim women and does not

address their multiple oppressions adequately (Lesco, 2018). As a result, Western feminist scholars tend to ignore these women as unique individuals (Golnaraghi & Mills, 2016). They may also fail to see the Niqab as a powerful form of resistance and liberation for Muslim women due to the various white norms of femininity (Thomas, 2015).

As a racialized woman with experience of multiple oppressions, I have noticed that *truth* is often only accepted when it is authenticated by white researchers. They have become the primary gatekeepers of knowledge and research (Helms, 1993). I often find myself verifying my statements with facts while discussing important topics with my peers and faculty so that they may confirm the information on their own. When sharing information, I have to be extremely confident about my knowledge production so that if I am criticized, I have proof to back up my statements. Unlike racialized folks, white people are born as beneficiaries of racism, even when they are unaware of their privilege (Helms, 1993). Consequently, academic settings and research can be very oppressive, for research has been used to objectify, exploit and dominate marginalised groups by misrepresenting them and perpetuating oppressive social structures (Chadderton, 2012).

Historically, white people have spoken for and about people from other ethnic groups and have thus contributed to the continued marginalisation of non-white voices (Chadderton, 2012). In most contexts, ethnicity is defined as "othering" individuals who do not belong to the predominant group (Adamson & Donovan, 2002). Qualitative research may produce colonizing discourses of the *Other* (Adamson & Donovan, 2002). This "colonial analogy" often stems from the overrepresentation of oppressed groups as research participants, in contrast with historically empowered groups (whites) as researchers (Adamson & Donovan, 2002).

There is also an exploitative nature to research when white researchers re-center their own voice – a white voice, which sidelines the voices of the participants being studied in research (Chadderton, 2012). In order to try and ensure that participants' voices are heard, some researchers have argued respondents must be involved in the interpretation, analysis and even the writing-up of the data (Chadderton, 2012). I have adopted this method for my MRP and given my participants control over how they wanted their voices to be heard and read. In this way, I hoped to produce research which is more authentic, and is therefore, working against stereotypes, binaries and assumptions.

As noted earlier, the perspectives of Niqabi women and their reasons for wearing the Niqab are usually absent from the research literature (Zempi, 2016). Most studies rely on studying women who wear the Hijab, and only a few studies actually interview Niqabi women and study the Niqab. Even when some of the authors were Muslim, they did not practice the Niqab. In many cases, whether through research studies, political debate, or societal discussions, the authors do not identify as women nor do they belong to the Islamic faith. In instances where the authors are Muslim, they are usually providing a negative portrayal of the Niqab or often seen speaking on behalf of Muslim women when they do not possess lived experiences. Most scholars in Niqab research are outsiders which poses a challenge since they cannot understand or represent accurately the experiences of their participants (Zempi, 2016). Similarly, voices of women who wear the Niqab are often lost in political debates because the focus was on the legality of the issue and not on the meanings Muslim women ascribe to the Niqab (Piela, 2016). This makes you question the stakeholders involved and if certain voices are valued over others (Thomas, 2015).

Similarly, Western feminists continue to "campaign" for the "third world women" where Niqabi women are seen as powerless, inferior, and in need of saving (Golnaraghi & Mills, 2016). There is a constant desire amongst Western feminists to rescue and save Muslim women from their 'oppressed' practices. This is known as the "*white saviour complex*" or "*white liberal feminism"* (Jailani, 2016). Those exercising this social privilege force all women into accepting and celebrating their narrow view of feminism and concept of liberation (Jailani, 2016). They assume that Western women have the license to act on behalf of the "oppressed" woman and as a result can 'save' her from all forms of oppression (Jailani, 2016). This belief stems from an assumption that "Western white people know best and others are ignorant and have to be saved" (Jailani, 2016, p.53). This includes forcing Muslim women to take off their Niqabs, restricting Muslim women from everyday activities, or preventing their participation in society. For example, an Ukranian feminist group FEMEN, organized Topless Jihad Day where topless demonstrations took place in front of Mosques and embassies to call for a ban on the veil in order to "liberate" the Muslim women wearing the veil (Jailani, 2016). Rather than accepting the choices Muslim women make, these women are forced to choose between their faith and their citizenship in settler and/or 'Western' societies. As if to say that these women are *only* citizens if and when they decide to abandon the Niqab –the one thing they feel that truly liberates them. What these feminist groups and people with white saviour complex ignore is whether these women whom they are trying to "liberate" believe themselves to be oppressed in the first place? (Jailani, 2016). Even if these women are oppressed, is this the correct way to pursue their liberation? How is forcing someone a form of liberation? More importantly, when these women do voice their concerns, they are silenced by white liberal feminists who restrict their agency (Jailani, 2016). What this does is homogenize all Muslim women into one category: *oppressed*.

All of a sudden, every veiled Muslim woman is oppressed and in need of being rescued, completely ignoring her narrative, circumstances, or personal choices. It strips away her right to freedom of expression and universalizes her lived experiences. White and Western feminists problematize Muslim women and thus deny the autonomy and agency of minority women, when they *impose* their views in the name of "freedom, gender equality and empowerment" (O'Neill et. al, 2015).

For these reasons, I believe feminism (and its research) is a practice often conceptualized by privileged white folks to benefit their desire and need of wanting to save others as a form of exercising their power! What should be done instead with research relating to historically marginalized groups is to question the relevance of the research and what the potential outcomes might be (Adamson & Donovan, 2002). Future research on Niqab can only benefit from collaborative networks between aspiring researchers and Muslim women themselves (Adamson & Donovan, 2002).

CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (or WORLDVIEW)

Given the lack of literature and my reservations about a (white) feminist lens, finding a theory that authentically spoke to my topic was very difficult. I found myself wondering how theories, which are often formed in Western Eurocentric contexts, could ever be 'universalized' or even accessible to me. How can one common concept explain or interpret a topic which is unique only to a certain group of people? I knew there had to be a substitute. While doing research for my MRP, a Muslim scholar-activist named Jasmine Zine suggested an alternative to studying Muslim women and their choices with regards to veiling by using a *faith-centered epistemology* (as cited in Eidoo, 2018). Zine's epistemology focuses on how faith-centered women can articulate a point of view that relates to the way they see the world and their place within it (as cited in Eidoo, 2018). Zine's understanding works against cultural beliefs by claiming for women the agency to act against the negative consequences that accompany "being a woman" in various cultural settings (Eidoo, 2018). I knew I had to rely on Islamic resources to lay the foundation for my research but did not know how this would be possible. After discussing my worries with my supervisor, I was advised that I could use *Islam* as a worldview (as had been done by another MRP student). Voila! Finally, I had something that my heart was content with and could authentically speak to the lived experiences being studied. After all, as a self-identified Muslim woman, I knew I could only explain my lived experience about the Niqab by discussing my relationship with my religion. Islam was and continues to remain the foundation that guides my outlook on life and decisions I make on a daily basis. All of my participants had similar views and expressed that it was their affiliation with the religion that inspired, guided, and taught them about the Niqab.

Following this, the first realization I had to make was that theory can be interchangeable with 'worldview'. Indeed, the term *worldview* made more sense to me than the term *theory*. Abdullah and Nadvi (2011) define 'worldview' as a set of beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality that ground, and influence all one's perceiving, thinking, knowing, and doing. It is a study of the world; a view of life; literally, a perception of the world; a particular philosophy of life; a concept of the world held by an individual or a group (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011). One's worldview is also referred to as one's philosophy of life, ideology, faith, or *even religion* (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011). Therefore, such a system of value-principles may be inspired by religious beliefs (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011); for example, the Islamic World-View. The Islamic Worldview (IWV) is basically a theistic and ethical worldview which differs distinctly with the secularist or atheistic alternatives (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011). This worldview stems from the fundamental belief that life and existence came into being as a result of the will, desire and design of the One and Only Creator (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011). The Islamic World-View is a comprehensive conception of the universe and man's relation to it from the Islamic perspective which often serves as a basis for one's philosophy or outlook of life (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011). The Islamic faith is based on the two primary sources: the *Qur'an*, which Muslims believe to be the direct word of God and the *Sunnah*, which includes the traditions, Islamic customs, and religious practices concerning the life example of the Prophet Muhammad (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011; Muchtar, Hamada, Hanitzsch, Galal, Masduki, & Ullah, 2017). Both these main sources of Islamic worldview encourage using reason and rationality as a basic means to protect oneself from falsehood, inaccuracy, and evil doing (Muchtar et. al, 2017). Islamic worldview contains a system of values principles, which are based on the fundamentals of Islam and give meanings

and purpose to all actions done by human beings, particularly Muslims (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011).

Since worldviews can be one's way of life or be identified as their faith or religion, for Muslims in particular, the Islamic World-View is a distinct part of their identity. The word Islam means complete submission to the will of Almighty God and according to Islam, everything one does with the pure intention of pleasing God is an act of worship (Annalakshmi & Abeer, 2011). It is often this belief that motivates Muslims to use Islam as their guide in daily activities, life decisions, and long-term goals. The Islamic worldview defines God as the Creator and law-giver and considers worship and service in His way as the true objective in life (Annalakshmi & Abeer, 2011). In fact, a strong majority (72%) of Canadian Muslims consider Islam to be an important part of their personal identity (Delic, 2018).

There are many reasons why religion is an important part of one's identity, as some of the participants will explain in later chapters of this MRP. For me personally, religion is a huge part of my identity, not only due to my physical appearance as I adhere to the Islamic dress code but also due to my personal beliefs. However, just like my participants, my identity is not completely defined by my membership within my religion. My identity is constantly evolving and I am in a constant process of being influenced by myself, those around me, and my environment (Deric, 2018). Many of my participants have navigated through different roles and responsibilities as their identities developed and flourished over the course of their adult life. To understand and explain these multiple identities and how they came to be, in addition to Islam, I will also be using Crenshaw's concept of *intersectionality*.

Crenshaw, a Black feminist and legal scholar, coined the term “intersectionality,” in which she argued that Black women are discriminated against in ways that that do not ascribe to the effects of racism or sexism separately but are a result of the intersections of their gender and race (Clark & Salah, 2019). Using this lens means that I make space for all the ways in which Muslim women who choose to wear Niqab experience their multiple intersecting identities. Muslim women have developed complex identities due to their multiple oppressions. Their identities cannot be separated from their gender, race, age, or their religious and ethnic background. In the last two decades, intersectionality has been celebrated by feminist scholars across the globe, and is said to be the "best feminist practice" in the academy (Bilge, 2013, pp. 410). Intersectionality has since emerged as a criticism of white, liberal or second wave feminisms for ignoring differences based on multiple and simultaneous oppressions (Clark & Saleh, 2019). It has become one of the most cited theories for speaking about all social identities and power, yet it is among the most misread, mischaracterized, and misunderstood concepts in academia about social justice (Tomlinson, 2018). Since the concept of intersectionality was developed as a tool to counter multiple oppressions, there are several narratives about its origins, as well as tensions over the legibility of its stakes (Bilge, 2013). Tomlinson states that: “Critics misrepresent the history and arguments of intersectional thinking, treat it as a unitary entity rather than an analytic tool used across a range of disciplines, distort its arguments, engage in ‘presentist’ analytics, reduce its radical critique of power to desires for ‘identity’ and ‘inclusion’, and offer a ‘de-politicalized’ intersectionality as an asset for dominant disciplinary discourses” (2018, pp. 7).

Indeed, there is much critical commentary that continues to misrepresent the intersectional theorizing of women of colour (Tomlinson, 2018). ‘Powerblind’ critics proclaim

the ideas of racialized feminists who developed intersectionality to be simplistic and mere experiential, while even the most superficial ideas of white scholars are treated as sophisticated and theoretical (Tomlinson, 2018). Consequently, many white scholars position themselves as "rescuing" the concept of intersectionality from the inadequate thinking of the women of colour who established it (Tomlinson, 2018). Trying to rescue intersectionality serves to marginalize those trying to reconnect intersectionality with its initial vision which was rooted in the political prejudices and struggles of less powerful social actors facing multiple intertwined oppressions (Bilge, 2013). This is not to say that white feminists should "move over" and leave intersectionality to feminists of color who will make it transformative and counter-hegemonic again (Bilge, 2013). Rather, it is to argue that disciplinary feminists, whether white or of color, should stop doing intersectionality in ways that *undo* it (Bilge, 2013). Such critiques mislead feminist studies' goals of social justice; encouraging feminist scholars to assume that their task is to condemn, reform, and appropriate intersectionality, rather than to foster intersectionality's ability to critique subordination (Tomlinson, 2018). Accordingly, debates about intersectionality reflect power struggles, opportunity structures, and turf wars internal to specific disciplines and fields (Bilge, 2013) which cannot be discussed here. However, understanding the origins of intersectionality, it is important to ask what the introduction of this particular tool does for subordinated groups in the local context of its introduction (Bilge, 2013). As you read along, I want you to reflect on the multiple identities of Muslim women and ask yourself: *Are Muslim women empowered in some way by the availability of intersectionality?* Or, *are they disempowered because intersectionality is introduced in ways that erase their own thoughts and activism, and their own political standpoint shaped by multiple power differentials?* (Bilge, 2013, pp 410).

Why Islam and intersectionality?

As noted earlier, the perspectives of Niqabi women and their reasons for wearing the Niqab are usually absent with virtually no research literature (Zempi, 2016). Only a few studies included interviews with Niqabi women, while most studies on veiling rely on women who wear the Hijab. Overall, what we know in the research about Niqab is that it does not come from those who choose to follow this practice. Therefore, it is difficult to reach conclusions about Niqab or to even try to understand the subject. Without the actual accounts of women who wear the Niqab, we are left with non-Niqab wearing researchers to reach conclusions which are distorted, inauthentic, biased, and generalized. Speaking for Muslim women leaves the women with little to no agency. Therefore, it is important to use theories and concepts that speak to the women being studied. Since my participants self-identify as Muslim, it is important to use Islam as a worldview for my work. Islam is an important part of their identity, therefore, it is only appropriate to include such a crucial element which inspired and influenced them to wear the Niqab. Furthermore, just like Islam may explain why the women decided to wear the Niqab, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality illuminates women's many lived experiences with Niqab. It allows us to ask, how have their religious beliefs intersected with their gender, age, race, and status to create particular experiences? How have these women managed their multiple oppressions while wearing a piece of cloth that is perceived to be "oppressive"? Have their oppressions impacted their decisions to wear the Niqab or is wearing the Niqab independent from their decision? These questions will be taken up in their stories.

Since I do not know many researchers who use Islam as theoretical starting point or worldview, for this MRP, I have relied on knowledge which I have gained over the years while

journeying through my relationship with Islam. I focussed here on how I understand Islam to be and asked my participants what role Islam plays in their life. I wanted to give my participants the opportunity to share their own understanding of Islam and how it has influenced the choices they make. I trusted that every believer has their own understanding of their religion which informs their decisions and ultimately makes them who they are. More importantly, since I self-identify as a Muslim, I did not want to impose my personal views, beliefs, or understanding of the religion on my participants. I did not want my participants to be intimidated by my personal beliefs and as a result *produce* 'ideal narratives' which they may have assumed was an expectation. However, I still took inspiration from religious mentors, scholars, and leaders within my community who have aided in my knowledge production of Islam. I have mentioned these individuals throughout the MRP and shared how their words, life experiences, and our relationship has inspired my own understanding of Islam and the choices I make in life. I have found that using such a worldview was so valuable to my research and helped me in articulating the narratives of Muslim women more authentically.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

As I have emphasized throughout this MRP, it is extremely important for me to share stories of my participants but more importantly, to do this by allowing them to narrate their stories in their own words. As such, I have relied on a narrative research approach. For me, narrative inquiry is more than a research design that guides my research study. It is the foundation that finally encourages participants to take up space and speak about a matter that is so close to their heart. Narrative inquiry allows these women to no longer be silenced or misrepresented because their stories authenticate their lived experiences. It is an exchange of gifts where both parties involved feel that they have contributed to social change. I'm using this method as a means of honouring and sharing women's experiences while simultaneously challenging dominant discourses and structures of oppression and privilege in which they navigate their complex identity negotiations (Mian, 2012). Throughout the entire research process, I have ensured that my participants have agency in narrating their story. I constantly reminded my participants that this is *their* story and they can choose how they want to narrate, interpret, and present their story.

Unfortunately though, I have learned that while stories are social and cultural products, not all stories are equal in their influence (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017). Some stories hold more power than others just like some groups of people hold more power than others (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017). Such stories get circulated in a culture (through media, policies, and stereotypes) where they achieve a type of 'master status' and often become taken-for-granted as 'truth' (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017). As discussed, there is a master narrative that Muslim women who wear the Niqab are forced to do so and are oppressed because of it. To combat this problem, I will be providing 'counter narratives' (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017). Counter narratives provide another account, they support people in telling new

and more helpful stories for their lives. They explain how power is exercised and disrupt "taken-for-granted" truths, allowing space for other, more complex versions of reality (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017). Counter narratives can be used in interpreting myths and misconceptions, deconstructing beliefs and common-sense understandings regarding race, and unpacking the dehistoricized and contextual nature of law and other sciences that silence the voices of marginalized group members (Clark & Salah, 2019, p.161). Stories also influence the oppressors by disrupting their own privilege which questions their construction of a reality that is rational, comforting, and favorable to them (Clark & Salah, 2019, p. 161).

One of the primary goals of this paper is to debunk popular myths around Niqab and one way to do that is by providing factual information from its source, which is the women who actually wear the Niqab. By doing so, my hope is that individuals will gain a more realistic and honest perspective of Niqab and Niqab-wearing women. Inspired by Amandeep Singh's MRP (2018), my aim is not to 'prove' anything but to raise awareness of the implications this issue has in the current context. I want to ask critical questions that will inspire the reader (and future Social Workers) to create the change that is needed. *It may be that none of the stories told will change the world, but I write in the hope that they will* (Amandeep, 2018).

The term 'narrative' is often synonymous with 'story' (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). Narrative is both a phenomenon and method; narrative names the structured quality of experience being studied while also naming the patterns of inquiry for its study (Clandinin, 2006). Therefore, we can conclude that people lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative research is a specific type of qualitative

design in which narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions which are chronologically connected (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano & Morales, 2007). People shape their daily lives by stories of who they are and these stories are inspired by their lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006). As such, people cannot be understood only as individuals, they are always in relation, always in a social context (Clandinin, 2006). We need to ask what something is really like for the individual (Etherington, 2006). Indeed, *what is it really like for Muslim women to wear the Niqab* –from their perspective, in their own words, and through their own stories?

Narrative inquiry can have many pros and cons and depending on your approach, it can be both a helpful and damaging tool in research design. Narrative inquiry is a means of expressing personal experiences into meaningful stories that can be connected with others' stories to embody voice and agency, of an individual and a group (Mian, 2012). Narrative stories give us access to the identity constructions of individuals and can be a good strategy for giving voice to minority and/or discriminated groups (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). The personal narratives of marginalized women are critical in understanding the influence of oppressive institutional structures and practices on women's identity negotiations, hence providing a means of resistance and counter hegemony (Mian, 2012). However, in research, we must be cautious and understand that 'we cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret' (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). A person telling a story to a researcher is not only reporting on a set of events, but also communicating knowledge about how the story evolved (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). This research design includes studying one or two individuals, gathering data through collecting their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically assigning meaning of those experiences (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano & Morales, 2007). The researcher and the

participant can be seen as doing a narrative co-production, where they are involved in a dialogic exchange producing a story that evolves through the interaction process (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). Of significance in narrative inquiry is helping to view narratives on a continuum via the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin, 2006). This space involves the elements of interaction, continuity and situation (Mian, 2012). This means that narrative inquirers cannot bracket themselves out of the inquiry but rather need to discover ways to inquire into participants' experiences, their own experiences as well as the co-constructed experiences established through the relational inquiry process (Clandinin, 2006). *Interaction* refers to aspects of personal and social being and the significance of situating personal experiences within broader social contexts (Mian, 2012). *Continuity* refers to the significance of determining a chronological analysis—past, present, and future (Mian, 2012). Lastly, *situation* refers to the notion of place and the significance of determining the context and location of an individual's narratives (Mian, 2012). This three-dimensional space offers a guiding framework that helps to explore the unique positionalities of Muslim women as well as the relationship of their narratives with broader societal discourses (Mian, 2012).

Ryerson Research Ethics Board Approval

This study was approved by Ryerson's Research Ethics Board (REB). Getting approval was not easy; it was a long, tedious and yet beneficial process. At first, I thought I had everything figured out and had taken care of every possible detail that may raise a concern to the reviewers. Yet, I was surprised to find four pages of requirements that needed to be made, many of which I felt were unnecessary and self-explanatory. I took my time in making all the required changes which

ended up being a blessing in disguise. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many changes had to be made to my initial research study. I no longer was permitted to do face-to-face interviews and had to completely revise my entire data collection method. All interaction with participants was removed and I had to get creative in ensuring the safety, well-being, and confidentiality of my participants. I resorted to phone interviews and exchanged consent forms via a secured Ryerson Shared Google Drive. As tiring and long as the REB process was, when I started my recruitment process and wrote the first few chapters of this MRP, I realized how helpful my REB submissions were. Due to the REB submissions, I avoided putting my participants through further difficulty at a time of fear and panic. I was able to provide alternatives to participants which may have been difficult to accomplish during a pandemic, such as live interviews. I do, however, wish that I was able to do my recruitment at Al-huda Institute and present my findings there, as this institute is very close to my heart. I am hopeful though that one day there might be a part-two to this research study, God-Willing.

Research during COVID-19

Conducting research during a pandemic is very difficult to say the least. An epidemic of the 2019 novel coronavirus infection first broke out in Wuhan, China, but the highly infectious nature of the virus threatened public health and safety all around the world (Ma et al., 2020). The disease was so severe that as early as 30 January 2020, the outbreak was declared by World Health Organization as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (Ma et al., 2020). Currently, there are no vaccines or antiviral treatments that are proved to be effective for the management of the COVID-19 (Ma et al., 2020).

Studies conducted during an epidemic have their own characteristics and require unique guidelines to protect the wellbeing of participants and overall research design (Ma et al., 2020). This was an extremely tough time for graduate students completing their MRPs. Not only were students stranded because classes were cancelled but there was so much uncertainty with the outcome of the research studies students had anticipated to complete. I was extremely confused, lost, and anxious during the entire period as I waited for guidelines from my supervisor. For starters, I had to resubmit my REB proposal to meet requirements for research studies conducted during a pandemic. This was a daunting experience not only because I had to revise my entire ethics proposal but also because research studies being conducted on COVID-19 were being given priority. The ethical review for research regarding COVID-19 was at "exceptional circumstances' ' for a series of special considerations (Ma et al., 2020). This meant that I would receive my approval much later than expected and I simply could not afford to do that. Thankfully though, my research involved elements related to COVID-19 and I received my approval within a timely manner. Field practice was also cancelled which allowed ample time to work on my MRP. However, this was no walk in the park. The uncertainty and fear of the pandemic severely affected my mental health, and I lost all motivation to continue my work. Being quarantined was extremely difficult and it put me in a very dark place. I was unable to focus on work, had difficulty sleeping, was anxious all the time, and was overwhelmed with the impact of the virus on my loved ones. I simply could not focus on doing my research and had to prioritize my own mental health and the well-being of my loved ones. Feeling completely hopeless and wanting to give up, I turned to my supervisor for help. After acknowledging that my feelings and emotions were completely valid, Jennifer helped me regain my confidence and the motivation I needed to start my research again. I recognized my challenges and

collaboratively found solutions to meet my goals. As a result, I hired two individuals to complete my transcriptions and did weekly check-ins with my supervisor to ensure that I stay on track and meet my end goal. It is important to highlight here that, this entire process, is *also* research. Research is not easy and we must understand that challenges may not be limited only to the research design. They can include things which are out of our control and we need to recognize these challenges and work towards addressing them. Lastly, I wish I was able to integrate the photo-voice component into my research because results would have been very empowering. Although COVID-19 made it impossible, I wanted to include photos of my participants in their Niqab and add a small caption describing their Niqab through their eyes for the world to see. I believe this piece would have been the perfect final touch to my research as it would show the women's resiliency in not falling victim to society's stereotypes and misrepresentations of Niqab. Yet, I do not lose hope and hope that I can embark on future studies where I can integrate this piece into my research.

Recruitment

Although this research study was inspired by my own experience, to create strong counter narratives, I had to find other Muslim women who have chosen to wear the Niqab. Ideally I would have loved to have a large sample size, however, with my narrative methodology and MRP restrictions around time and length, I worked with a handful of women 18 years and older who have chosen to wear the Niqab. Another essential criterion was that participants must identify as educated and be able to speak and understand English. This was to avoid having to translate work because meanings can be lost in translations. Secondly, I want to show another counter narrative that Muslim women who have chosen to wear the Niqab come from diverse

professional and academic backgrounds. Such women may weigh the pros and cons and reach their own conclusions.

Initially I had planned to hold an Information Session at Al-Huda Institute in the Greater Toronto Area and recruit my participants from there. However, given the current circumstances related to COVID-19, I had to rely on other means to secure my participants. I had to redesign my recruitment strategy and cancel the Information Session which was not easy because I really wanted to incorporate Al-Huda in my study. Al-Huda has been a second home for me, as this is where I gained my Islamic knowledge and developed a strong sense of Muslim sisterhood which has helped me stay grounded in my decision of continuing to wear the Niqab. I would have loved to see my flyers posted at Al-Huda and showcasing them in public as a way of giving back to my community. Instead, I reached out to contacts from my personal social circle to approach women and ask if they would be interested in my study, which is known as convenience sampling (Mian, 2012). I then turned to intermediaries to look for potential participants within their social circles, which is known as snowball sampling (Mian, 2012). Snowball sampling is perhaps the most widely used method of sampling in qualitative research and is sometimes used as the main source through which informants are accessed, especially when other contact avenues have been exhausted (Noy, 2008). Snowball sampling is often used as a particularly effective tool when trying to obtain information on and access to ‘hidden populations’, such as Muslim women who have chosen to wear the Niqab (Noy, 2008).

Relying on other means had benefits but also came with many challenges. After REB approval, I sent an email to some of my personal contacts with the recruitment flyer and asked them to forward the material to their contacts. Participants interested in my research study were

provided with a project-specific email address where they could contact me directly. Those interested in the research study were asked to contact me directly and were provided consent forms to review in a timely manner. What I had thought would have been a smooth process, ended up being a very difficult and long process. I was expecting many women to contact me but after my first email, I did not hear back from anyone. I panicked and became very anxious. I realized though that the lack of interest was not from the research study but because most Muslim women were busy with Ramadan. Although I was very anxious because of due dates, I had to be patient with my participants and let them engage in worship during the holy month of Ramadan. Recruitment was also a very challenging yet an exciting experience. I had this deep desire to want to recruit women who would be the "ideal participant". My reasons were not to deceive my research but simply came from a place of good intentions. I wanted to recruit participants with unique stories yet practical lives so that the ordinary woman could relate to them. I wanted to use their stories to reject and counter the negative portrayal of Muslim women in the West. Searching for a particular kind of participant can be problematic in producing biased results which would impact the findings. At the same time, I was also very eager to meet women who I could personally relate to and through their stories be reminded of why I chose to wear the Niqab. I was excited to listen to their stories, be inspired, and eventually maybe even make new friends.

Indeed at the end, I found three amazing women with equally beautiful stories, who I now call my Sisters-in-Faith. Three incredible confident, intelligent, and inspiring women agreed to participate in my study and raise awareness about Muslim women choosing to wear the Niqab. They spoke both about their struggles and achievements while adopting an extremely

controversial piece of clothing in the West. To protect the identities of these inspiring women, they have chosen pseudonyms –Sarah, Zainab, and Ayesha.

Data Collection

Data collection during a pandemic is extremely difficult yet unique. During a global pandemic, deep consideration must be given to the rights and best interests of the participants (Ma et al., 2020). More importantly, researchers must adhere to the principles of privacy protection by discussing the research risks and benefits that ensure the health and safety of participants (Ma et al, 2020). Due to COVID-19 restricted guidelines, data collection was to be conducted virtually and researchers were asked to limit face-to-face interactions with their participants as it was deemed inappropriate (Padala et al., 2020; Shuman & Pents, 2020). I had to be mindful that my participants were quarantined and were facing many negative psychological effects including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, and worry that their family members may contract COVID-19 (Padala et al., 2020). I had to ensure that I was not affecting the mental health of my participants and therefore I had to avoid all physical interaction with my participants and resort to virtual interviews. Telephone interviews keep people at home, and thus prevent overwhelming of the healthcare system, the participants own mental health, and protect the researchers from feeling burdened (Padala et al., 2020). Using a qualitative narrative research design, I conducted phone interviews with 3 Muslim women who met my required eligibility criteria. The interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours and an interview guide, approved by the REB and containing a list of questions, was used to facilitate the interview process. I had to honor research participants' right to stop their participation at any time, for any reason, due to the sensitive nature of the study being caused by COVID-19 (Shuman & Pentz, 2020).

Phone Interviews

Not only do interviews help us explore beneath statistically driven generalizations that are made but they also have the potential to validate the knowledge of 'ordinary' people (Fraser, 2004). Especially, Muslim women, who are liable to being ignored and mispresented in many research projects (Fraser, 2004). Phone interviews are generally semi-structured or structured interviews conducted over the phone and conducting them may seem fairly simply but this method of data collection comes with its own set of challenges (Wilson & Books, 2014). The strengths of using phone interviews is that they are less expensive, they eliminate any effect due to the appearance of the interviewer, have a shorter data collection period than face-to-face interviews (can interview more people in a shorter period of time) and can be done from anywhere (Wilson & Books, 2014). In regards to COVID-19, phone interviews allowed participants to actively participate in research studies from their homes. I opted for an 'interviewee-oriented' interview where I used a conversational style of interviewing (Fraser, 2004). I engaged my participants in an informal and friendly way, and processed the stories *along* with the participants (Fraser, 2004). The limitations of using phone interviews is that they can be very exhausting and demotivating, can be easily interrupted with a lot of background noise, and lack visual interaction (Wilson & Books, 2014). The cues that are present in face-to-face interviews are generally absent in phone interviews which makes it more difficult to establish rapport and credibility with participants (Wilson & Books, 2014). I was a little disappointed that I could not do face-to-face interviews and meet my participants in real life. Ultimately though, I think both the researcher and participant were grateful for phone interviews because it saved a lot of time and protected their mental health from being triggered during a worldwide pandemic.

Data Analysis

Originally, my MRP was supposed to include a descriptive analysis and reflection obtained from interview answers shared by the participants. However, after discussing with my supervisor, we both felt narrative analysis was a better fit. Analyzing the themes of what is said or written by respondents in a data corpus is the most widespread but least distinctive approach to analysis (Poole, 2020). In contrast, narrative analysis avoids breaking the sequence of the narrative as each part is considered to be dependent on its location on the whole (Poole, 2020). In thematic approaches to analysis, the researchers identify themes in the way respondents tell their story (Poole, 2020). Whereas, narrative analysis concentrates on the case rather than the component themes across the cases (Poole, 2020).

"A simple definition of narrative includes: a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events (Franzosi, 1998, p.519). There are three aspects of narrative: story, text, and narration (Franzosi, 1998). Essentially, it is the story –the chronological sequence of events –that lays the foundation for a narrative (Franzosi, 1998, p. 520). Without a story, there is no narrative and the chronological sequence is crucial of any definition of story (Franzosi, 1998). Researchers are encouraged to remember that interviews are conversations where both participants –teller and listener/questioner –develop meanings together (Arnold, 1994). This way the narrative will occur more naturally when the researcher gives up some control over the interaction and allows the interview to develop as a conversation (Arnold, 1994, p. 384). What I had assumed to be a fairly straightforward process, ending up being the most exhausting and nerve-wracking process throughout my entire research study. After hearing the interviews once they were completed, I had an extremely hard time transcribing them. Due to COVID-19 and the impact it was having

on my mental health, I found it exhausting to transcribe three very long interviews. Every time I sat down to transcribe them, I got numb and was unable to continue. After about two weeks of being unable to move forward in my research study, I expressed my feelings of exhaustion to Jennifer. She validated my feelings once again and suggested I hire transcribers. After hiring two separate transcribers, and letting them do the most difficult part of research, I finally felt that I could breathe. Once the interviews were transcripts, I sent them to the participants for review and asked them to make any necessary adjustments. Upon approval from the participants, I sat down and read the narratives and organized them in a way where they told stories of each of the participants. I wanted the stories to speak for themselves, therefore, I did not dissect the stories, nor did I provide my personal commentary on the stories. Sticking to the objective of my study, I presented the stories in their raw form, creating space for women to speak for themselves, in their own words.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

"*The fabric that defines me"* –Niqab

I was tired of people *speaking for* Muslim women instead of *listening to* them, and with this MRP, I realized I could provide space for them to share their stories and counter-narratives. I understand the importance of listening and how powerful it can be because *with the gift of listening, comes the gift of healing*.

Narratives like the ones you will read below are commonly used to explain to outsiders what certain practices, places or symbols mean to the people who hold them (Fraser, 2004). In this chapter and inspired by Irene Zempi, Lynda Clarke, Ayesha Mian, and my personal lived experience with the Niqab, three participants narrate what Niqab means to them. Primarily the women are of a South-Asian background and have been wearing the Niqab for more than a decade. All three women have attained post-secondary education within Canada and are busy working in various capacities. I have abstained from editing the stories and have presented them in their raw form as they were shared by Sarah, Zainab and Ayesha.

Story One: Sarah

Sarah introduces herself as:

> *I'm a proud young mother of three toddlers, a student and teacher of the Qur'an, a UofT alumna, a business woman who sells modest clothing for women like me, and a lover of mystery and coffee.*[1]

In her own words, Sarah begins telling the story of her Niqab journey as follows:

> *I chose to wear the Niqab when I was in my teenage years when I was studying the Quran and our teacher was explaining a verse in the Quran. She mentioned the expl-explanation of it… Okay, so our teacher was explaining the verse she felt that was obligatory for women to cover but then later on I went and did my own research as well and I found a lot of scholars, like they had varying opinions on it. To this day, it's like a thing that has a*

[1] There are no line numbers for this quotation as it was emailed by the participant.

difference of opinion. And so for me I decided to wear it not believing that it was obligatory but it's something that it was like a recommended action. In a nutshell I think I would say just to get closer to Allah, for me it's a form of worshiping Allah and the things I wear and the thing I wear, the Niqab specifically. (Sarah, 90-111)

To clarify, I asked Sarah: So, it was your teacher that inspired you to start wearing the Niqab?

Sarah confirmed:

Yes I would say that. Before that I had a love of it. I had a love for it in my heart let's say but it wasn't, I would never have the guts to wear it or never found the reason to wear it I guess you could say. I'm very much text-based like I like to know how things and why I do certain things. I wanna make sure I'm doing things based on knowledge if that makes sense. (Sarah, 115-123)

Choice

Sarah first wore the Niqab when she was 16 years old but started wearing it more formally and publicly when she was 17 years old and has not taken it off since. Speaking about her Niqab, Sarah shared the following statements:

*I wanna be viewed as someone who wears it out of **choice**.* (Sarah, 358)

*I **choose** to wear it for myself.* (Sarah, 364)

To expand on her choice, Sarah shared a funny incident:

(Laughs) *I remember one time, me and my husband were walking in downtown and someone's like why you force your wife to wear that* [Niqab], *and he's like I don't, she wears it herself.* (Laughs). (Sarah, 372-374). Sarah's husband questioned the stranger: "*Why are you attacking me?"* (Sarah, 378). Although Sarah laughed at the incident, she felt offended and asked the stranger: *"Why aren't you asking me, why you are asking him?* (Giggles*)* (Sarah, 378)

Niqab is my Identity

When I asked Sarah what the Niqab means to her, she responded:

*To me, **it is my identity as a Muslim woman now**, now like, almost nine years later, I think it's a solidified my identity as a Muslim woman especially here in the West of who I am and my place in this society. I mean every time I put it on, I feel like I am different*

> *from everyone else, because, like I'm choosing to worship Allah through what I'm wearing, in a way, but that also makes me strange in a way. (Sarah, 294-298)*

I could not help but get emotional at this response, holding back tears, I told Sarah that her response was beautifully said. Having done the Niqab for over a decade now, I could resonate with how Sarah felt about Niqab being a huge part of one's identity. For me personally, Niqab is my way of life; I can never picture myself without my Niqab and almost feel naked without it. Not only does Niqab define my Muslim identity, but it also defines who I am as a person. However, both Sarah and I understand how challenging the Niqab can be. What has helped Sarah stay firm in her decision of wearing the Niqab and keeping herself grounded in her choice is consistent self-reflection. She offers the following thoughts:

> *I always struggle with it. I would say like every year I go through a struggle. Why do I keep it on, why do I even wear it right now when it's like the climate of like, just being Muslim in the West, and Islamophobia in general. It's just difficult. Now as it's growing right? It's not getting smaller. So, I think, I take like every year, I would say I go through an evaluation: why do I wear it? Why do I choose to wear it? Are those reasons the same and it always stems back to sincerity, and why did I do it then and why am I doing it now? Right?* (Sarah, 401-407).

Agreeing with Sarah's thoughts, I affirmed her response. She continued:

> *And If I want to take it off then. Okay. Then who am I taking it off for, why am I taking it off? Am I taking it off because society is like you know pressuring me to take it off? Am I succumbing to all these narratives that exist around Muslim women? What is it? Right, and so for me, like I said I try to take some time, every year. When it, especially when it gets hard in summer for me I find the summer the hardest time to wear it because the stares are many, and everyone's kind of like dressed the opposite of you and it's not like winter where everyone's covered up. So, summer is the hardest time for me where I really try to take some time out and like think about why I am doing what I'm doing.* (Sarah, 410-417)

Commending her on her self-reflection strategy, Sarah quickly clarified:

> *I wouldn't even say it's by choice* (laughs), *but like I find with like other acts of worship you don't really do that. Why do we do what we do? But this one because it's like, I mean, for me because* ***I consider it not obligatory****. It's something like an extra thing, it's like, why are you doing that? Right? So it's helped thus far. It's helped me stay firm upon wearing it and not removing it, even when sometimes, sometimes I really want to…Umm*

> *and sometimes I find it really hard to keep it on and it kind of grounds me again to sit there and reflect on these questions that I ask myself* (sighs) (Sarah, 421-430)

Niqab and the Post-Secondary Academic Setting

Sarah has not found the Niqab to be inhibiting and wanted to avoid sharing 'horror stories' (Sarah, 256). In general Sarah said her experiences of navigating through different social systems was "okay" (Sarah, 198) and "not too bad" (Sarah, 184), but a time where she faced difficulty was during her last years in university. Sarah shares her experience as follows:

> *When I was at university during my last years, that was when, I don't know if you know, if you remember like the Charlie Hebdo thing, um or draw the prophet* [affirms, yeah yeah]*...Remember that? So that happened when I was in my last year of university and at that time well I felt like very restricted, well not like, well yeah, restricted, very restricted and most of the pathways in university almost like they became narrow for me, cuz' I would feel tight because there were posters all around almost like Islamophobic, like you know draw the Prophet Muhammad and you know it wasn't like it was attacking Niqab but it was attacking, in a way it was you know putting Islam down or you know diminishing it in a way.. And part of that, part of the Prophet Muhammad's (SallalaAllahu alahi wa sallam)'s teachings was for a Muslim to cover. So that was that in university.* (Sarah, 185-197)

Besides a few problematic incidents, Sarah explained that she was "able to do everything else" in university (Sarah, 198). When asked if she had support during her years in university, Sarah replied:

> *"In university? Yea, I felt like, yea I would say I had support, and I don't think, in general, it's made professors treat me any different. I guess."* (Sarah, 203-204).

Another incident that took place in university, described by Sarah:

> *There were some professors you know they would say certain things like, certain things that I'm sure they wouldn't ask other students like "oh what do you speak at home? And you know I was studying English and I was studying Sociology as well so stuff like what kind of languages do you speak at home? And they would say to themselves in-front of me, 'I think I would get in trouble for saying this but I'm gonna ask you anyways' and I have a feeling that was to do with what I was wearing umm so there's, so I feel like they were* ***homogenizing all Muslim women*** *like a certain category of being uneducated, or coming from a family that's also uneducated kinda thing* (Sarah, 176-184)

Apart from some of the difficulties faced within an academic setting, Sarah felt "*Public transport was probably one of the hardest things"* (Sarah, 231). She explains why:

> *Cuz that was on the regular. Regularly I would face regular people just, you know, one of them was like out of curiosity, like 'why do you wear that', and the heat or people even coming up and touching my clothes, by my abaya like on my sleeve or even my Niqab and just be like 'aren't you hot in that?' When it's summer right you're saying that but everybody was hot, cuz you know, everybody was just hot, but I'm just covering, wearing something extra maybe? But everybody was hot and it wasn't like I was more hot than everybody else, if that makes any sense?* (Sarah, 231-237)

A Horrifying Experience –Assault

Sarah found public transport to be the hardest because there were people from all walks of life (Sarah, 243). She faced different people at different times, but she was particularly more scared to ride the subway at night because sometimes there would be "men that would say remarks" to her (Sarah, 244-245). Sarah shares one such horrifying experience below:

> *One time I had, this one man* (sighs), *he, I think he yelled at me, and said really lewd remarks about what was underneath my clothing just like describing me, that, like that like stuck out in my mind. To this day, and it's still stuck on my mind because I think it was like about like eight stops. And there were people all around us and* ***no one said anything***. (Sarah, 245-249).

I asked for clarification: Sorry when you say he was describing you, like physically he was describing you? Sarah continued:

> *Yea, like physically he was describing what was under me, basically like my private parts and all of that. Yeah, so that was* ***one of the most horrible things that had happened****, when I say public transport.* (Sarah, 253-256)

Empathizing with Sarah, I asked Sarah how this made her feel, to which she replied:

> *I hated taking TCC. It was almost like* ***I had to brace myself every time I entered it*** *and just like try to find a seat where, you know, nobody was around me. I would love to stay in an empty train, just because I didn't wanna deal with people*. (Sarah, 276-279.

I wanted to validate Sarah's emotions and feelings by acknowledging this horrific incident as an assault. I asked if she reported the assault, she explained:

> *No, I didn't report that, I was young, I was scared. Right? Especially when someone's yelling at you, especially when it's a man and they're yelling and there's people around you, you expect sometimes people to stand up to you,* ***when you're the victim clearly but no it doesn't work that way***.(Sarah, 283-286)

How do you want others to see you or your Niqab?

This was probably one of the most important questions I asked participants. I felt this was their chance to finally say what is in their hearts, to share their thoughts and feeling unapologetically.

Sarah's response to this question was as follows:

> *I would like the world to see the Niqab* ***the same way I see it****, which is, I don't wanna homogenize the idea that all Muslim women, they all wear it under Islamic patriarchy, or whatever stereotypes that exist right now. I don't wanna be categorized under that,* ***I wanna be viewed as someone who wears it out of choice****, someone who wears it for the sake of Allah, I don't want people to think, like when I'm out, I'm usually out with my family so I don't want them to think that, you know, she's wearing it for the sake of her husband or she's wearing it for the sake of her father, you know? Those kinds of ideas that are perpetuated in media. I don't. That's something that I would like but I know that's probably what people often think. I would like people to think of it a different way that I* ***choose*** *to wear it for myself.* (Sarah, 355-364)

Story Two: Zainab

Zainab introduces herself as:

> *A female in my early twenties working in the clinical laboratory of a Toronto hospital as a Medical Laboratory Technologist. I consider myself living proof that choosing to veil and visibly express my religious identity does not stand in the way of pursuing higher education and a career as a frontline worker in the healthcare field. You truly can have the best of both worlds, both Deen and Dunya. I have been wearing the Niqab for over a decade now and cannot imagine ever leaving my home without it. Though my Niqab journey has not always been an easy one, I have overcome many obstacles to arrive where I am today, a Muslim woman living in the West who wears her Niqab with pride and honor.*

Zainab shared her Niqab story as follows:

> *I chose to wear Niqab at age 13 when I was starting high school, so grade 9. At that point I was really young and I think the only reason why I chose to wear it was because I saw my mother and older sister wearing it. So basically because I saw females in my family wearing it. At that point I didn't know the Islamic reasoning behind why I was*

wearing it and it wasn't until second year of university, like 6 years later that I was like, people ask me on the street why do you wear Niqab? And this isn't a racist question, it is coming from a place of genuine curiosity. At this point, the answer that everyone in my family wears isn't cutting it anymore. I was like no, if I chose to wear this, if I've been choosing to wear this for 6 years now I need to have a better, more valid answer to that question. I did my research and I came to the conclusion now I have solid reasoning of why I really choose to wear the Niqab. It was a long learning process and eventually I got there. So yes, in the beginning I just wore it because my mom wore it, my sister wore it, I wore it, ***no one ever told me to wear it****, I just thought it's a good time for me to wear it. The real choice followed later on in life.* (Zainab, 46-59)

I then asked Zainab what inspired her to wear the Niqab. She shared:

*My older sister wore a Niqab, I've always wanted to be like her my entire life. I just wanted to be exactly like her, still want to be like her. Also in our family friend circle, our close family friend circle basically 90 percent of them wore Niqab. Back home, our entire extended family, the females when they hit the age of puberty they wear Niqab. So I think it was just t****he norm in my personal bubble*** *and that's why I went with it. It was totally the norm.* (Zainab, 112-117)

No one will hire you

There was this one MLA [medical laboratory assistant]*, she was this middle-aged South Asian hijab wearing lady and she was really cool with me. When I first got there that summer, she told me about the little room off to the side, that's where we pray. She was really helpful the whole time. I was there over a span of eight months, but not consecutively.* [I: agreeing] *But then, one time she told me that her daughter wears hijab, but she made her daughter take off her hijab to make new documents such as passport, health card, driver's license etcetera without her hijab because she and her husband personally felt like their daughter would not have as many opportunities because she wore a hijab.* [I: agreeing] *I'm like OK that's fine that's your decision, I didn't comment on that. But, another day she tells me you know you are going to have a lot of difficulty getting a job, especially in a hospital. And I said why do you say that? I'm here, I've done my practicum at two different hospitals and now I'm at a private lab. What makes you say that I'm not going get a job after my four years of university?* [I: mhmm] *She said it's because of your Niqab. I said I'm wearing my Niqab right now working in a lab so what's the difference.* [I: agreeing] *She's said but you know* ***when it comes to the real world and you're actually applying for jobs no one's going to want to hire you because you're in the Niqab.*** [I: agreeing] *I wasn't rude to her. I didn't go against what she said; I just kept quiet and in my mind, I'm like we shall see. Before my current job, I never ever had a job before in my life. My older sister wears Niqab, she's had jobs but for some reason, I've just never had a job. I applied for online jobs during the summers but nothing ever came of it. So when I applied for a job after graduating, it was my first time doing interviews as well, I never interviewed for a job position before. I've interviewed for lots of positions for extracurricular in high school and university. I've been a part of lots of clubs and stuff but not like a real-life job situation. So I did job interviews at four or five different hospitals before I got the job I have now Alhamdulilah.* ***Not once in my***

> ***five interviews for hospitals in the GTA did anyone ever say to me you wearing a veil will be an issue with working, never ever Alhamdulilah***. (Zainab, 194-218)

Looking back at the incident, Zainab said: "*I wish I could go back to that lab again and tell that lady that I'm working*." (Zainab, 224-225).

Guardian Angels

When I asked Zainab if she faced any difficulties navigating through different social systems, she said she did not and thanked God. She shared an incident where she felt grateful for people who respected and accommodated her choice of wearing the Niqab:

> *For three years I had been the only girl who wore a Niqab in this uniformed High School but Alhamdulillah in grade 12 there was three of us. Everyone can see your yearbook photos so we always made sure we wore our Niqab in yearbook photos. But back in the day there was like TTC photo ID cards and stuff* [I: mhmm] *and just your ID for your High School. In those types of situations we were supposed to show our full face.* [I: mhmm] *But I remember that Vice Principal had reached out to me, my sister and the other girl who wore Niqab and she said the photo sessions would take place in the auditorium; a bunch of students would be there at the same time.* [I: mhmm] *She said I'm designating a specific time for you guys this afternoon, only you guys come then and there's not going to be anyone else present and then you guys can take your photo ID's without the Niqab then.* (Zainab, 311-321)

Zainab expressed an extreme sense of gratitude for being blessed with such people and had the following to say about the above experience:

> *Alhamdulillah. Sometimes people like that come into your life; that are of a different religion, different faith, different ethnicity; everything but they are so understanding. Sometimes you don't even have to speak up for yourself. They speak up for you which is amazing. That's how I've navigated through different social systems*. (Zainab, 321-324)

More importantly, Zainab has developed a strong sense of judgement when the general public approaches her about her Niqab choice. She feels:

> *Because I've worn the Niqab for this long now, you can kind of tell when people are questioning you whether they're genuinely curious about wanting to know something versus they are being indirectly racist, trying to put you on edge etcetera… But that*

comes with time that comes with experience. You need to learn to navigate the situation regardless of whether they're being racist to you or not. You must answer those questions in a professional manner, in a manner that suits you as a Muslim. (Zainab 342-345, 351-354)

Visible Symbol of my Faith

Zainab described her Niqab as the following:

*The Niqab to me is a visible symbol of my faith. My faith is a huge part of me [*I: mhmm] and *if I can represent it in a respectable manner when I step outside the door and people can tell immediately I am a Muslim. A visible symbol of my faith. I think it keeps me grounded as well.* (Zainab, 440-443)

She further elaborates:

So, what my Niqab does is it really keeps me grounded. It makes me understand that there is supposed to be a barrier. That's exactly what hijab means, it means barrier. [I: mhmm] *me wearing a veil on my face visibly automatically provides me a barrier intellectually, emotionally, physically etcetera."* (Zainab, 448-451).

More importantly, Zainab stressed:

"*Wearing the Niqab in general makes others understand that maybe they need to act with you a certain way. They're not going to be as free as with someone as they could or would be with maybe someone who didn't wear Niqab.* [I: mhmm] *And that's fine with me, that's how I want it to be.* [I: mhmm] *So, if my Niqab prevents someone from going overly out of their way with me and they know they need to behave with me in a respectful manner* [I: mhmm] *that is something I am happy with, something I encourage. So,* ***my Niqab works as a barrier in both ways*** *and I know like, people say "oh, you wear Niqab it's like a barrier it's gonna you're not gonna be able to do something like, like it's a barrier" But no, for me this type of barrier is a good thing for me,* [I: mhmm]. (Zainab, 462-470)

I am so much more than just my Niqab

When I asked Zainab how she wants the world to see her and her Niqab, she replied with the following:

My Niqab is a part of me, I'm not going to be able to separate my Niqab from me. It is a very prominent part of me, ***but it's not the only part of me****.* [I: mhmm] *I remember when I was first applying for jobs I came across an advertisement. I think it was a UK advertisement for a hospital.* [I: mhmm] *It was a female wearing hijab and it said, "We don't care what's on your head, we care what's in it."* [I: laughs] *And that resonated with me so well. It's what I want to tell the world; yes I wear Niqab but I have a brain, I have*

intellect, I have emotions too. [I: yeah] ***I am so much more than just my Niqab***. *Yet you can't separate the two. The Niqab is always going to be a part of me, but one must see me as a whole person* [I: mhmm] *and not just a piece of cloth that I use to cover my face. There's so much more to me.* [I: mhmm] *I don't know the stats. I don't know if there's any other Niqab wearing woman who works in a hospital laboratory in this country I don't know.* [I: mhmm] *I feel pride that I go out and I represent my faith and I show the world that you can wear Niqab and still accomplish a lot of things in life."* (Zainab, 503-514)…"*So you interact with people who are not your co-workers on a daily basis and it's just it's good because it's showing people that I work in the lab.* ***I have made a place for myself in society where I'm benefitting society even with my Niqab on***. (Zainab, 524-526)

Story Three: Ayesha

In her own words, Ayesha introduces herself as:

> *Born into a Muslim family, is mother to four young children, juggling motherhood and her passion of pursuing Islamic education. Her journey of wearing the Niqab began very unexpectedly but it quickly became an integral part of her identity. The Niqab served as her constant connection to her faith as she navigated through the various phases of her life.*

Ayesha spent most of her childhood in Toronto, in a community where Muslims were a minority, and even among the minority Muslims, visibly practicing Muslims were quite rare. She had begun practicing the Hijab with a bit of struggle due to the fact that she was the 'odd' one out amongst her friends. It quickly became clear to her that the only real battle she was fighting was the one with herself and soon embraced the Hijab as a part of her identity. At that time the only thing she knew about Niqab was that her mother was one of the very few women in her community who practiced it. Ayesha's story with the Niqab began in grade 8 when her father suddenly announced that she was moving to Pakistan to take care of her elderly grandmother. She reminisces the day she decided to wear the Niqab as follows:

> *So, once in Pakistan, I started feeling very strange right away as I was going out and about my new daily life. The looks I got from the opposite gender, whether young or old – in the community were something I was NOT accustomed to, and naturally I started inclining toward the idea of covering up further. And so, whilst passing by an abaya shop in the market, a particular abaya caught my eye and I expressed my interest in purchasing it for myself, much to my mother's amazement. My stunned mother let me pull her into the store and helped me to select my first abaya, just to my liking. And so the next time I went out, I happily donned my new abaya, complete with the Niqab it came with, and that is the story of how I chose to begin wearing the Niqab.* (Ayesha, 37-45)

Blurring the lines between Religious Practices & Cultural Practices

Ayesha's life experiences made her realize that Niqab comes with its own set of rules and responsibilities. Initially Ayesha was not comfortable with wearing the Niqab to school, but seeing other girls wear their abaya and Niqab influenced her decision. She recalls:

> *I quickly became accustomed to the idea that in such favorable conditions, there was no need for me to feel uncomfortable wearing it to school when I felt safe to wear it everywhere else. By this time, I had also learned that the Niqab was a means to cover up in front all men – not directly related to me by blood. With relation to family, this was quite easy, I didn't really know my older male cousins enough to really mix and mingle with them, so covering up in front of them went off without a hitch. Also, most of my entire extended family was so encouraging and appreciative of my efforts that it was a smooth transition. So naturally, on the first day that I wore my abaya and Niqab to school, I was very reluctant to take it off as I had a male teacher for one of my classes. It took some explaining on my part to make the other girls and my female teachers understand that I was practicing the Niqab "properly" – that is – in accordance with the Islamic law and that I could not uncover my face in front of the male teacher. They all understood what it meant, but majority of the women are only following a cultural practice of covering when they go outside and in the safety of their homes and school, they did not cover up, even if they had interaction with males. For me, this was confusing, if they knew the "rules" then why were they not observing them? And thus I was introduced to the blurring lines between religious practices and cultural practices. It took some explanation on their part as well to make me understand that I had to adhere to the school rules and could not wear my abaya during school hours. Eventually, I came to a compromise, I started covering my face with the hijab I wore as part of my school uniform so that I could still cover up for the period when my male teacher came in to teach, and donned my entire garb when I went to and from school*. (Ayesha, 56-76)

> *I initially started wearing it because I wanted to be free to go about my daily life without being subjected to uncomfortable stares. As it was the cultural norm in the society that had become my new home, I naturally inclined towards it being the perfect solution.* (Ayesha, 129-131)

Considered such a 'Bold Statement' in Society

Ayesha states that her experiences with the Niqab have been both positive and negative. She feels that because Niqab is considered such a 'bold statement' in society, naturally it is mirrored with being 'confident' but she believes confidence can be defined in many ways. To clarify her point further, she states:

> *I would say, it hasn't set me back in any way compared to someone not wearing the Niqab. I never felt in any way that this was a thing that's stopping me from going places, this is the thing that's stopping me from doing anything. I went through all the growing up experiences that any individual goes through – I* ***just happened to do it with my face covered in public****. On a personal level, I think it actually helped me to somewhat overcome my natural shyness. I naturally shy away from too much attention, but I definitely gained more confidence to speak out when necessary, after wearing the Niqab.*
>
> *I haven't had much dealing within the workforce but, Alhamdulilah, I had a summer job before I began university and I was a work-study student during my last two years of university, where I had to deal with helping other students with various matters on a regular basis, but my Niqab was not a setback in any way; I didn't let my Niqab stop me from anything lawful and I was blessed that society didn't let my Niqab come in the way of me living my life to the fullest. Examples include driving, Wonderland, female-only workout sessions during university, female-only swimming classes run by the city of Toronto, volunteering during my student life.* ***Yes the Niqab is a visible symbol of my faith, but at the same time, it is just a piece of cloth covering my face and I am still another fellow human being behind the veil going through the same life experiences as anyone else.*** (Ayesha, 232-250)

Niqab = Freedom

Ayesha's lived experiences reveal what the Niqab means to her. For her, not only is the Niqab a testament of her faith but it is also a huge part of her identity. When asked to describe the Niqab in one word or phrase, Ayesha quickly answered:

> *I would definitely say freedom. The freedom for me to choose who gets to see me, who gets to know me, HOW they get to know me. Because I'm going to be covered and I will get to choose who I get to talk to. Who I associate with, and HOW I express to them... like, just through my words, basically they can't judge me based on my physical appearance. I mean, I'm sure, obviously because I'm wearing a Niqab, I do get judged anyway. Just in that sense that they still have to look past it. They have to get past the fact that I'm covered and now they have to get to know me through my words.* (Ayesha, 285-291)

Before concluding the interview, Ayesha wanted to reiterate the following:

> *I want to tell people as a Niqab wearing woman,* ***I am not oppressed****. I chose to do this at the beginning and every day even I choose to do this. It is MY identity. I will feel incomplete without it in public.* (Ayesha, 433-435)

Shared Experiences

Although each participant brought forth a unique set of experiences, I also noticed many similarities amongst them. Firstly, all three participants started wearing the Niqab at a fairly young age. For many of them, it has been more than a decade since they first chose to adopt the face-veil. Each of the women explicitly clarified that they were not forced to wear the Niqab and their decision of choosing to wear the Niqab was solely their own. Zainab made a good point when she explained that anytime someone forces you to do something, most likely you will hate it. Likewise, Ayesha found it ironic that non-Niqabi folks often force Muslim women to take off their Niqab yet Muslim women never force them to wear the Niqab. In fact, when met with challenges in public, family members advised participants to understand that they are not forced to wear the Niqab and if they fear their well-being then they should remove it. One such incident was described by Zainab when her father advised her to remove her Niqab if she felt her well-being was at risk. Although she appreciated his concern and advice, Zainab fiercely replied that no one should make you feel fearful of your well-being in public. She compared herself to Sikhs who wear turbans as part of their religious beliefs and many other folks who wear their religious symbols confidently in public.

Secondly, it is important to note that although all of the participants wear the Niqab so religiously, they understand the Islamic practice of face-veiling holds a difference of opinion. Sarah believes the Niqab is a recommended act of worship that brings you closer to Allah, whereas Zainab and Ayesha believe that the Niqab is obligatory. Regardless of what opinion they followed personally, each of the participants felt that they would respect and support whatever opinion one held regarding the Niqab. Each participant expressed that everyone interprets the religion differently and therefore they have the right to follow their religion

accordingly. Participants felt that they were in no position to judge whether or not a Muslim women wears the Niqab or what opinion she follows when she does wear it.

Thirdly, one of the hardest tasks all participants had to face was describing the Niqab in one word or phrase. Participants had an extremely difficult time answering this question and requested to come back to it towards the end of the interview. Sarah began describing the Niqab in its literal form and when I redirected her, Sarah still could not form the words to describe the Niqab. Instead, she asked for validations as she brainstormed different ideas thinking one of these statements may be 'acceptable'. I advised Sarah that I was not looking for an 'ideal answer', rather, I was asking her to describe what the Niqab means to her in her own words. Since Sarah was struggling, we came back to this question at the end. Sarah described the Niqab as a "*sense of protection*" (Sarah, 447) but kept rearranging her words saying "*It's a hard thing to describe, SubahanAllah*" (Sarah, 450-451). Zainab faced so much difficulty with this question that she requested more time to think about it and emailed her response subsequently. However, interestingly, when asked what the Niqab means, participants consistently emphasized on the words "choice", "freedom", and "identity" to describe the face-veil in their own words. As expressed above, individually, each participant recognized their Niqab as an essential part of their identity and symbolized the Niqab as a freedom of their expression.

Lastly, I noticed that despite being constantly criticized, ostracized, and challenged by society, all three women felt empathetic towards the general public. I found my participants excusing behaviour as 'curiosity' which would otherwise be labelled as inappropriate if the roles were reversed. Many of the participants were extremely understanding that people are generally curious about why Muslim women choose to wear the Niqab. Although the participants were

harassed, assaulted, and threatened, they did not feel deep animosity towards the perpetrators. In this way, each participant showed a great sense of courage, not letting others impact their decision of choosing to wear the Niqab. Sarah expressed that every day she had to brace herself before going into the public understanding that every day was going to be a challenge. Yet, when someone approached her and questioned her choice, she happily explained her reasoning and did not take offense. As a matter of fact, Sarah found herself being 'extra nice' and well-mannered because she felt she had to 'counteract all of the stereotypes that exist about Muslim women'. As discussed earlier, Muslim women have complex identities that intersect with their multiple oppressions which produce various stereotypes, myths, and assumptions about them. Zainab expressed similar views as it becomes one's responsibility to represent their faith with the best of manners. She felt that Muslim women who choose to wear the Niqab, should be prepared to be the best version of themselves and show the beauty, peace, kindness, acceptance, and easiness that Islam preaches. Ayesha explained that she is the 'face of Islam' and therefore needs to be conscious of her behaviour and actions all the time in public because *when people see her they see Islam.*

Surprises

When I began preparing for this research, I was expecting certain outcomes because of my knowledge and lived experience with the Niqab. I was confident and prepared to come across findings that I had prior knowledge of. However, I was extremely surprised by some of the findings in this research study. Due to my biases, I had assumed that Muslim women who wear the Niqab face difficulty solely from the general public. However, the participants in this study

revealed that disapproval also came from their own families and communities. In particular, throughout the interview, Zainab kept reiterating and emphasized that:

> *Mostly non-Muslims do not judge me, non-Muslims do not have an issue with my veiling. If they do it's like 10 percent and the other 90 percent of the people who have issues, the people who judge me… the people who just can't accept my decision to wear Niqab is Muslims themselves*. (Zainab, 123-127)

She expressed a lot of emotions and pain which she has suffered by the mistreatment from the Muslim community. Saddened by this reality, she shares that most of her experiences have been with Muslims having an issue with her Niqab. She shares:

> *I get that everyone interprets the religion differently. Everyone has different opinions. I accept that. I have never ever told my friends you need to wear a Niqab. Many of my friends still wear a hijab. I don't tell them you need to veil, you need to cover yourself. That's my personal experience. I can't force anyone, I need to respect other people's opinions. If someone chooses to veil, living in a Western country, they already have so many obstacles in their way regardless and when you, as a brother or sister of your own faith, instead of building a sister up, instead of motivating them, or even just maintaining a quiet stance, instead make derogatory comments, and verbally express a negative outlook, that is not okay. That's what really gets to me.* ***That's what hurts***. (Zainab, 132-140)

Both Sarah and Zainab faced a lot of struggle with their own communities because they were not very accepting of their choice of wearing the Niqab. Within the Sri-Lankan community, Sarah suffered a lot of animosity and rejection for wearing the Niqab at such a young age. She shares:

> *One of the things I was told was if you wear it, it'll be difficult for you to get married, it will be difficult for you to get a job or even go to school, and Alhamdulilah I was able to do all of that.* (Sarah, 147-149).

Zainab shared several incidents where members of the Muslim community questioned her choice of wearing the Niqab and even advised her to take it off. Some felt that her choice was 'not professional' and held no place in Islam, while others instilled fear in her heart stating that her Niqab would prevent her from future opportunities and meeting her goals of a successful career

or finding a suitable partner for marriage. I resonated with Zainab because I knew far too well how 'Desi Aunties' always offer unwanted advice. These aunties manipulate, dishearten, and discourage young Muslim women from practicing their religious beliefs due to their own biases and assumptions. They even impose their views on young Muslim women and ask them to remove their Niqab. Despite being Muslims and identifying the challenges that come with being a woman, these 'aunties' declare that such practices are 'backwards' and not needed in the Western society. There is also a 'religious hierarchy' amongst such women which is rooted in cultural and societal expectations. Within the South-Asian culture, young women are expected to respect and adhere to older women in their community and any form of resistance is not accepted or tolerated. Along with cultural clashes, there is a war on defining religious beliefs and what is considered 'acceptable'. Those who do not practice the religious devotedly, feel that those who do practice it religiously are considered extremist and strict.

There is a constant need to 'mold' these young women into more liberal and Western members of society, simply because these Desi Aunties cannot comprehend that a young Muslim women has chosen to wear the Niqab. This mentality stems from white supremacy and colonialism introduced by the British colonial system, which Raven Sinclair names as 'destroying ourselves to replace ourselves' (as cited in Poole, 2020). During the British occupation of India—or the Raja—a system was implemented by those in power to remove the language barrier and better communicate their projected ideals to the oppressed public (Gaur, 2019, para 4). They also introduced a *class system* where civil servants were used to perpetuate the ideology of the exaltation of paler skin as being deemed more superior and executed the colonizer mantra of 'divide and conquer' (Gaur, 2019). This societal hierarchy helped the Indian public to internalize the white man as the benchmark of success and culture and unfortunately,

the impact of this colonization is still intact today (Gaur, 2019). With the migration of Indians towards the West in recent years, living as an South-Asian amongst the race that was taught to be superior can call on a necessity to prove one's value in this society—a value that was stripped through colonization and white supremacy (Gaur, 2019). South-Asian ancestors were made to believe that their culture was primitive, that their ideals were basic and that their very skin tone made them lesser. This not only affected the perception of one's self but how that person would see other South-Asians (Gaur, 2019, para 9). The effects of colonialism exist in every community it ever affected and it is almost impossible to deny the judgment found within the South Asian community (Gaur, 2019). The British constructed themselves as the peak of the class system and turned communities against each other (Gaur, 2019). This mentality is passed down through generations, and as South Asians migrate more and more to white-dominated nations, the desire to feel accepted and to make it known that you belong in what is perceived as a higher class of society becomes prominent (Gaur, 2019, para 11).

For example, in Canada, the Multiculturalism Act was introduced in response to an influx of new immigrants migrating to a predominantly bicultural Canada and to encourage the integration of minority groups as opposed to their assimilation (Mian, 2012, pp. 17). However, this act is criticized for focusing on "other" cultures, implying the existence of a "self" culture to which these "other" cultures are compared (Mian, 2012). Constant "focus on other cultures highlights their difference from the 'norm,' the dominant yet silent Anglo culture" (Mian, 2012, pp. 19). Which produces "the paradox of multicultural vulnerability" coined by Ayelet Shachar, who argues that state policies enacted to create equity amongst diverse individuals in fact manifest as institutional discrimination against the very individuals they claim to protect (Mian, 2012, pp. 19). The Canadian multiculturalism discourse, then, fails to challenge socially

constructed yet pervasive hierarchies of power and instead "reduces the problem of social justice into questions of curry and turban" (Mian, 2012, pp. 19). Furthermore, Himani Bannerji affirms that this "multiculturalism from above" stems from "'organic intellectuals' of bourgeois society, who, from their elite standpoint, have created a system of political, social, and economic color coding based upon Orientalist and racist discourses (Mian, 2012, pp. 19). By default then, instead of benefiting non-white Canadians, the multiculturalism discourse seeks to maintain status quo in the form of classed, raced, and gendered hierarchies and systems of privilege and oppression (Mian, 2012, pp. 19-20). These inequities are not recent manifestations; historically, Canada placed an emphasis on "integrating other nationalities into the Canadian way" but "the Canadian way" excluded the knowledge and experiences of Indigenous peoples, women, "visible minorities," and those belonging to marginalized social classes (Mian, 2012, pp. 20). Thus, these 'Desi Aunties' are used as instruments of colonialism and other white supremacist policies of division. Not knowing where they belong, some 'Desi Aunties' turn to regain their sense of belonging and power by imposing their learned views on young Muslim women. It is argued that: "For those who are different, their inability to challenge these interpretations (their silence and powerlessness) oppresses them. It violates their sense of worth, self-esteem, and overall individual and social identities. The fear of difference is perhaps the greatest impediment to understanding among different people because it creates barriers. Further, it puts the onus on those who are different to cross the distance between their realities and the dominant consciousness, while those who represent the norm avoid their responsibility" (Mian, 2012, pp. 21-22). Muslim women face a lot of struggle trying to prove their hyphenated-identities in multiple contexts. Are they good enough Muslims, Canadians, and/or South-Asians?

So, what was most surprising was to hear that participants experienced a lot of disapproval from their own families. To clarify, I do not think the disapproval came from choosing to wear the Niqab; rather, it came from fear that is associated with the consequences of wearing the Niqab. For example, Sarah's mother was terrified for her daughter's well-being and requested her not to wear it. Respecting her wishes, Sarah did not wear the Niqab in public and after a while would wear it behind her mother's back so as not to displease her or worry her. Ayesha on the other hand faced a lot of backlash from her extended family in Pakistan due to the cultural barriers that Niqab introduces. Ayesha was amongst the eldest female –both on her maternal and paternal family side, and they felt she was setting the 'bar pretty high' for the rest of her female family members. Moreover, Ayesha wore the Niqab following religious guidelines rather than the cultural norm and therefore did not interact with the males in her extended family. As such, her family felt that her Niqab meant they were no longer welcome to visit her parents' home freely. Fortunately, her parents came to her rescue and welcomed her relatives into their home regardless of her practice of the Niqab. Due to the differences in understanding and practicing the Niqab, participants faced many challenges for choosing to wear the Niqab amongst their families, communities, and the general public at large.

"We're all Niqabis now" **–Covid-19 and Niqab**

Canada recently made an announcement that along with physical distancing, wearing protective masks slows the spread of COVID-19 (Zine, 2020). Over 50 countries have mandated wearing masks in public spaces (Zine, 2020). Along with the mask being a protective measure, it has also become a cultural icon (Zine, 2020). In Western nations, it indicates social responsibility and good citizenship and represents the wearer's compliance with public safety and communal

well-being (Zine, 2020). This “mask culture” signifies a commitment to the social and collective good of a society (Zine, 2020). Now that face masks are being used to help fight against the deadly virus, it has triggered some to look anew at general discrimination against Muslim women wearing the Niqab (Bullock, 2020). Such changing times force us to wonder: Does the perception of wearing the mask change depending on who is wearing it and why they are wearing it? Why do some jurisdictions outlaw the face veil or Niqab worn by some Muslim women while mandating protective masks? (Zine, 2020).

Fatima Khemilat, a researcher in France exposes the irony of face politics: "*If you are Muslim and you hide your face for religious reasons, you are liable to a fine and a citizenship course where you will be taught what it is to be a good citizen ... But if you are a non-Muslim citizen in the pandemic, you are encouraged and forced as a 'good citizen' to adopt 'barrier gestures' to protect the national community*." (Zine, 2020). Many public leaders have declared their anti-Niqab attitudes, including Jason Kenney, the former Canadian Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, who tried — and failed — to ban Niqab in citizenship ceremonies (Bullock, 2020). Similarly, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper called the Niqab a dress “rooted in a culture that is anti-women … [and] offensive that someone would hide their identity.” (Bullock, 2020). Niqab-wearing women are not considered good liberal citizens because their covered faces are deemed culturally irreconcilable with Western values (Zine, 2020). These women can be penalized for violating the law while those wearing COVID-19 masks are seen as good citizens upholding the public good (Zine, 2020). Oddly, the COVID-19 mask is a barrier to transmission of the virus while the Niqab is a barrier to social inclusion (Zine, 2020).

Strangely, the Niqab and protective face mask are not that different. Both are garments worn for a specific purpose, in a specific place and for a specific time only (Bullock, 2020). It is not worn 24/7 and once the purpose is fulfilled, the mask and Niqab come off (Bullock, 2020). The calling of the sacred motivates some to wear the Niqab, while a highly infectious virus forces many to wear face masks (Bullock, 2020).

Keeping these ideas in mind, I asked my participants how they have been feeling during the COVID-19 pandemic while wearing the Niqab. My participants were confused by this question and were hesitant to share their true thoughts, perhaps because they were being recorded or because their true feelings would not align with the popular or more accepted truths. However, I requested the participants to not filter their responses and to share their feelings unapologetically. I asked Ayesha how she feels with the current circumstances, she replied:

> *It's ironic, that's all. Who would have thought that there would come a day, face coverings would be promoted. Granted, it's not for religious reasons, but it certainly is a unique era we are living in.* (Ayesha, 349-351) …
>
> *Because of COVID and the constant obsession over COVID statistics, I haven't heard of the Niqab being mentioned in the media, on social media or in the news lately."* (Ayehsa, 357-358). … *I feel glad to be living in a society where I am free to practice my Niqab. At the same time, I'm concerned for those women living in a society where the Niqab is banned. My message to the sisters who are struggling is to remain strong. And to the opposers, to lift their bans, now that it is clear that life CAN go on with the faces of people hidden in public.* (Ayesha, 364-367).

Ayesha explained that:

> *So for me yes the situation is strange but I'm not bothered by the fact that others are covering their face for protective reasons. I feel I'm the wrong person to ask this question;* ***I'm more interested to know if and how the opinions of the general public have changed after COVID regarding the Niqab and Niqab bans***. (Ayesha, 374-380)

Zainab shared similar feelings:

> *With regards to COVID, I find it very ironic how places like Quebec and France where they've implemented rules where every single person who walks out in public has to wear*

> *a mask. Whereas they've always been so against face veils in particular. It's just ironic to see how time and experiences just play out and how it's really changed people's perspectives. You never know what this world will bring. You just never know what the future holds*. (Zainab, 647-652)

Zainab laughs, sharing a family memory:

> *During winter time a lot of people cover their faces just because it's cold outside. I don't know. Me and my family have a little inside joke where we say in the winter,* ***everyone suddenly becomes a Niqabi****. We understand that they're protecting their face and now everyone is wearing a mask. I don't know what to feel about it. It's just a part of life.* (Zainab, 674-678)

> *So many times you will see little kids on the street and they will point to you and tell their mother "look, she's covering her face." You know little kids they have no sense of right or wrong and they don't know what Niqab is at all. And I just find it so cute. Their moms will just kind of drag them away…These experiences with children really show their innocence and acceptance of all faiths etc. I've always told you I'm always more comfortable wearing my Niqab as opposed to not wearing my Niqab whilst in public.* ***Now because of COVID, you see little kids on the street wearing masks as well***. (Zainab, 684-696)

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Key Findings

Thank you for listening to the stories of these three incredibly resilient women. Perhaps this was the first time these women were able to share their stories in their own words without being interrupted. Perhaps, this was your first time listening to a Muslim woman share her lived experience with the Niqab. Maybe, it was your first time reading what it really means to wear the Niqab from the women who actually wear it. Maybe your own biases and assumptions were challenged, maybe you were forced to sit quietly and refrain from speaking on their behalf. I am sure many thoughts are running through your mind as you process what you have read so far.

To summarize, we have learned that the participants in this study definitely chose to wear the Niqab. They did so by their own will, without being forced by their family members, religious leaders, communities, or their friends. All of the participants wore the Niqab at a relatively young age and have been wearing it for more than a decade. This shows their level of commitment and dedication to one of the most debated pieces of clothing in Western society. These women also faced a lot of challenges and different intersecting oppressions navigating through different social systems. Some faced difficulty during their post-secondary education, while others were criticized at their workplaces. Some were threatened on public transport while others faced rejection and disapproval from their families and communities as fed by colonialism and white supremacy. At the same time, there were many positive outcomes. All three participants proclaimed the Niqab to be a strong part of their identity and could never see themselves separate from this Islamic practice. After much thought, participants chose words like ‘protection’, ‘freedom’, ‘choice’, and ‘resiliency’ to describe the Niqab. They also explained that ascribing meaning to the Niqab is a very difficult task.

The participants also explained that although they practice the Niqab very religiously, there is a difference of opinion on its adoption in Islam. We learned that despite the difficulties that society imposes on Muslim women who wear the Niqab, the women did not take offense and jumped at the opportunity to educate and raise awareness to spectators that were curious about their choices. We ended the conversation by discussing how 'everybody' is now a Niqabi due to the pandemic/COVID-19. Where Muslim women once faced criticism for covering their faces in public settings, everyone is being asked to cover their face as a mandatory precaution from the spread of the deadly and highly infectious disease. So why criticize the Niqab in the first place? Is it really an issue of safety and oppression or a failed attempt in meeting the political agenda of government bodies that wish to divide, further marginalize, and eradicate the Muslim population?

Why is this research important?

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide space for Muslim women to speak for themselves as they narrate their stories. I am also mindful that the field of critical qualitative research has a lot of work to do in honouring and representing Muslim women more accurately and truthfully. This research study is only the beginning and there are thousands of stories from a diverse group of women that need to be told and highlighted. Due to restrictions, I could only interview three women but this is not an accurate representation of Muslim women and their experiences with Niqab as a whole. This study did not include participants who do not speak English, women who have done the Niqab for less than 5 years, and women who do not have post-secondary education. Regardless of these limitations, I think the research is extremely important and needed to dismantle the stereotypes and misrepresentation of Niqab-wearing women.

More importantly, this research is important because it helps fill the gap in Niqab literature. Muslim women remain 'voiceless' despite the immense interest in studying them (Jamil, 2018). Muslim women are commonly relegated to a 'victim' position to the extent that what they think and do never constitutes as 'agency' (Jamil, 2018). We must make room and allow space for women who wear the Niqab to take the lead on research. Participants in this research study expressed that they participated in this study because they wanted to clarify the misconception about the reasons why Muslim women wear Niqab and their lived experiences with it. By participating in this study, the women felt that they were contributing to the larger conversation and making a difference in helping the general society understand Niqab-wearing women better. As many of the participants articulated, there is so much more to them than their face-veil, if only people took the time to listen to their stories.

Using a narrative inquiry focussed on those stories was extremely beneficial for this research study because it produced rich data which can inspire future studies. Narrative methods for researching Muslim women are powerful because they reveal politics of representation (Jamil, 2018). Jamil states that the 'lack of voice' among Muslim women in research is only the 'lack of will to listen' amongst researchers (2018). "Research is often reduced only to the research findings that exist independent of the process, while the process through which the phenomenon being studied came to exist is not afforded any attention." (Jamil, 2018). This is evident in many research studies pertaining to Muslim women where findings represent the 'status quo' and ignore the narratives of the women being studied (Jamil, 2018). Therefore, narrative inquiry allows the participant to create their own 'facts' and produce their narratives in their own words –something I struggled with during my academic years in Ryerson. Narrative methods allow for the voices of the researched to be heard parallel with those of the researchers

(Jamil, 2018). Consequently, both, the researcher and the researched, can gain rare insights into motivations, struggles, and realities that guide and contour the narrative pathways (Jamil, 2018). As I mentioned in Chapter Four, with the gift of listening, comes the gift of healing. Similarly, narratives heal as they explore and bring forth feelings and emotions that narrators may not have articulated even to themselves prior to the research experience (Jamil, 2018). Sharing stories can be a way of recovering what is lost and have a transformative power that frees people to imagine new stories for themselves and move onto more productive lives (Jamil, 2018). In a sense, stories reproduce and express the emotions and feelings experienced by the narrator. Therefore, instead of researchers trying to 'give voice' to Muslim women, the attempt needs to be to 'clear the space' to allow them to speak (Jamil, 2018).

Implications to Social Work

The stories shared in this study have several implications to Social Workers. Firstly, I had no readings during my BSW or MSW about the Niqab or the women who follow this practice. During my studies at Ryerson University, I almost became the 'poster child' for Muslim women, especially Niqab issues. I constantly found myself sharing my narrative and the struggles faced by Niqab-wearing women. This was challenging for several reasons but at the forefront was the difficulty in verifying my experiences since that is the expectation in a post-secondary institute. Although oral stories are appreciated, in colonial 'academic' places, they are not considered the most authentic form of knowledge nor are they accepted as the 'truth'. So, if there are no readings for Social Workers to learn about Niqab, then how will they be able to serve Muslim women who face challenges because of their Niqab? Won't Muslim women feel further oppression if they cannot seek support from a system that is designed to support them?

Social workers should be familiar with basic Islamic values and scriptural principles that will assist in providing culturally competent services to their Muslim clients (Ghafournia, 2017). Social Workers need to understand the levels of discrimination and oppression suffered by Muslim women because of Islamophobia (Penketh, 2013). Social Workers also need to consider the intersection of culture and religion (Ghafournia, 2017). This would help in avoiding potential biases, judgements and attitudes, while also protecting Muslim women from further stigmatization (Ghafournia, 2017). We must remember that *when people are already oppressed, the process of their liberation cannot employ methods of oppression* (Jamil, 2018).

Secondly, this research study has the potential to make a contribution to anti-oppressive Social Work practice because it advocates for a very neglected and misrepresented marginalized group of women. By recognizing the fluid and multiple identities of these women, critical transformative AOP would openly ask these women about their needs, rather than *predetermining* their needs. Social Workers should understand the socio-economic factors of social exclusion and the disadvantages Muslim women face (Penketh, 2013). By allowing the women to discuss their needs and goals, critical Social Workers can challenge the systems that oppress these women and strip them of their inherent rights. For Muslim women in particular, this means providing social support that is outside of religious institutes. Muslim women may not always feel comfortable seeking support from local religious leaders due to the stigma attached. More importantly, religious leaders are not always competent in dealing with the issues of Muslim women due to lack of training, resources, funds, and community support (Ghafournia, 2017). Instead, Social Workers must work collaboratively with religious leaders and Muslim communities in providing services that meet the needs of Muslim women adequately.

Lastly, giving Niqabi women agency by allowing them to share their narratives in their own words is the empowerment needed for critical transformative AOP. Women in this study expressed that religion was a significant part of their identity, therefore, Social Workers should be open to utilization of religious practices in their clients' healing process (Ghafournia, 2017). It is important for Social Workers to understand what their clients get from their religion and as such use it in prevention and intervention strategies (Ghafournia, 2017).

I desire my research study to be the stepping stone towards accepting and appreciating Niqabi women as resilient, powerful individuals, who are *not* oppressed. I want my research study to be used as a tool to educate Social Workers. Likewise, the stories that my participants share can be used as a way of healing and promoting social justice as we perform our AOP practice (Kumsa, M'Carthy, Oba, & Gaasim, 2014). We can use critical transformative AOP to help these women understand their internalized oppressions and how to cope with this pain (Kumsa et al, 2014). Furthermore, critical transformative AOP will help answer questions around the 'hierarchy of oppression' or tension between being 'oppressed and privileged simultaneously' and foster collaboration between Niqabi women and other oppressed groups (Kumsa et al, 2014).

CONCLUSION

We may have reached the end of this MRP, but in terms of research, this is just the beginning. It is difficult to conclude when the story has just begun. Throughout this MRP, I have emphasized that Muslim women have been silenced for far too long, especially those women who choose to conceal their identities from the outside world. To my knowledge, this narrative inquiry with Niqabis is the first of its kind. As there is a lot of work to be done around this topic, I remind readers to listen very carefully to the women in this study and what they have to say.

I want to end on the note that if Social Workers are trying to understand the Niqab, then learn from the women who choose to wear it and have a lived experience with wearing the Niqab. Muslim women *struggle to be seen* –both literally and metaphorically in research and I hope that this research has paved the pathway for Muslim women to be *heard*, and not just *studied* (Jamil, 2018). If you are someone who is interested in having the desire to wear the Niqab, the participants in this study have the following advice to share with you.

Sarah:

> *I would say* [pause], *if that's, that's what makes you happy then do it. If that's what makes you feel empowered then you should do it because some people find power in not covering themselves, showing themselves as people find power, empowerment in covering themselves or choosing what to show so it is hard to go against the status quo. But if that's, you know, you've done your research and that's something you wanna do then go ahead and do it. Although you might find a lot of struggles. But if you decide to do something for the sake of Allah or God then I think you should go ahead and do it*. (Sarah, 383-392)

Zainab:

> *If you know you're doing this for the sake of Allah, this life is temporary, this life is going to end. You're going to reap all the rewards and all the benefits in the hereafter. This is what I want to tell people. You need to understand why you wear hijab, why you wear Niqab. Once you stop putting your own self down, once you stop doubting yourself in why you wear it, everything will be so much easier. Society is always going to be pointing fingers at you. Society's always going to try to bring you down. Whether you choose to*

wear hijab or Niqab. But, if you yourself are also putting yourself down, if you don't know why you wear it at the end of the day that is what is worrisome. You need to build that comfort level where you love your decision to cover so much, it doesn't matter what anyone else says. (Zainab, 573-581)

I think having a ***support system really helps****. My sister-in-law wears Niqab. Like everyone in my family wears Niqab so I think having that support system where you can come home and share your stories of what happened outside and you know they'll totally get it because they'll have gone through something similar. A support system is really really helpful. So I would advise someone who wants to wear it and they don't have that support system in their life to maybe look online. There's so many forums or groups of Niqab wearing women, you can encourage each other there.* ***It's going to be an ongoing journey, just don't give up.*** (Zainab, 581- 588)

Ayesha:

Don't let anyone stop you from doing what you believe in. Also, the Niqab cannot stop you from getting anywhere in life unless you let it. I would say go for it, if that's what you feel you want to do. Try to surround yourself with people that support you. And open up your heart and learn your Deen. It's not about becoming a scholar but maintaining a relationship with your Lord, and gaining knowledge is what will make your journey easier to navigate. (Ayesha, 307-316)

FINAL THOUGHTS

Dear Non-Niqabi,

You want to fight my so-called oppression by objectifying me,

So tell me, does it make me more liberated to be forced into your ideology of free?

And if wearing a Niqab or a burqa makes me look like a criminal,

Does it attach every man in a well-priced suit to the same label, or in your court of law is that not admissible?

And I'm told time and time again that covering my body completely is outdated.

Yet I struggle to understand how stripping me of my clothing would make me modern and educated?

It may surprise you to know that I wear this veil not because I am ashamed or afraid of my identity,

Rather I wear this veil because this is my statement of who I want the world to see.

It does not make me any less intelligent by this choice I take to cover myself,

And know that I am confident enough to only need my mind to represent myself.

And when you hear this letter, did it make my message any less clear because you could not see the face behind the women who spoke it?

When you answer a phone call, does it offend you then that you can not see the person behind the phone who rang it?

So can you see how your logic to me is just pure ignorant,

A thing does not become wrong just because from you it is different.

I'm here to tell you that your hate message for social injustice

Makes you the criminal, not me.

I ask simply that you respect my freedom to clothe myself how I wish to be,
And do not oppress me with your injustice and tell me that this is free.

- Nadia Choudury

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – RECRUITMENT FLYER

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Upcoming Research Study on Muslim Women and Niqab

"Niqab – as a Symbol of Resistance: Muslim women's lived experiences with the Face Veil"

Do you identify as:

- ✔ An educated adult woman who wears the Niqab?
- ✔ Someone who has CHOSEN to wear the Niqab?
- ✔ A Muslim?
- ✔ Someone who can speak and understand English?

If you answered yes to these questions, you are invited to participate in a research study.

The study involves understanding Muslim women's choices around wearing the Niqab and their lived experiences adopting one of the most visible symbols of Islam in the West. As a Muslim researcher, I am passionate about studying Muslim women and the Islamic practice of Niqab. I want to research the driving forces that motivate Muslim women to wear the Niqab, their experiences of wearing the Niqab and what is life like for them now, during this time of pandemic and fear.

You will be asked to participate in a phone interview within the comfort of your home answering my research questions related to your journey with Niqab. Your participation will involve one phone interview with a time commitment of 1-2 hours.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or would like more information, *please contact:*

Sadia Jamal

Graduate Student; this research is part of the requirements of completing the Master of Social Work program at Ryerson University.

Email: **niqabchoices@gmail.com**

I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank You!

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board [2020-048]

APPENDIX B – RECRUITMENT EMAIL SCRIPT

Hello,

My name is Sadia Jamal. I am a Graduate Student at Ryerson University in the School of Social Work. I am contacting you to see if you might share the following email with anyone who may be interested in participating in a research study. This research is being done as part of my Master's research project under the supervision of Jennifer Poole.

The focus of the research is understanding Muslim women's choices around wearing the Niqab and their lived experiences adopting one of the most visible symbols of Islam in the West. As a Muslim woman researcher, I want to research the driving forces that motivate Muslim women to choose to wear the Niqab. I also want to understand what it is like for women to wear Niqab now, during this particular time of pandemic and fear.

I am seeking adult educated women who wear the Niqab to participate in this study. More specifically, participants will:

- **Have *chosen* to wear the Niqab.**
- **Self-identify as women and Muslim**
- **Can speak and understand English**

Exclusion criteria:

- Anyone below the age of 18 years old

- Non-Muslims

- Non-English speaking participants

If you agree to participate you will be asked to participate in a phone interview on your journey with Niqab. Your participation will involve a total of one phone interview with a commitment of 1-2 hours.

If you are interested in more information about the study, please reply to this email. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully,

Sadia Jamal

SSW, BSW, Graduate Student

Ryerson University

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE 2020

Research Study:

Niqab – as a Symbol of Resistance: Muslim women's lived experiences with the Face Veil.

1. What has brought you here today?
2. Tell me your story about choosing to wear the Niqab.
3. How has society reacted to your choice?
4. What have your experiences been with the Niqab?
5. How have you navigated through different social systems?
6. What does the Niqab mean to you?
7. Describe the Niqab in one word/phrase?
8. How do you want the world to see you or your Niqab?
9. What advice would you give to someone who wants to wear the Niqab?
10. Is there anything we haven't discussed..?

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING, YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS ARE VALUED

APPENDIX D – STUDY CONSENT FORM

Ryerson University Consent Agreement

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this consent form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

TITLE OF THE STUDY

Niqab – as a Symbol of Resistance: Muslim women's lived experiences with the Face Veil.

INVESTIGATORS

Sadia Jamal, a Masters of Social Work student, and her supervisor, *Jennifer Poole*, an associate professor from School of Social Work at Ryerson University, are conducting this research study.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study is designed to explore the lived experiences of Muslim women who have chosen to wear the Niqab –the Islamic practice of veiling the face, and their reasons for wearing it. I also want to understand what it is like for women to wear Niqab now, during this particular time of pandemic and fear.This study is being completed by a graduate student as part of the Masters of Social Work Major Research Paper requirement. There are a maximum of 3 participants being recruited for this study and the eligibility criteria includes the following:

Adult educated women who:

- **Have *chosen* to wear the Niqab.**
- **Self-identify as women and Muslim**
- **Can speak and understand English**

Ineligibility:

- **Anyone below the age of 18 years old**
- **Non-Muslims**
- **Non-English speaking participants**

What you Will Be Asked to Do/ What Participation MeanS:

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

Participation Research Process entails:

1. Interview
2. Revision
3. Final Results

Participants will be interviewed over the phone within the comforts of their home and the interview will be audio-recorded for the purposes of reviewing. There will be one interview per

participant and the time commitment for participation will be 1-2 hours. Open-ended questions will be asked such as “What have your experiences been with the Niqab” or “How do you define Niqab”.

Once all interviews are transcribed, participants will be asked to review them and make any necessary changes via a secure Ryerson Google Shared Drive. Given social-distancing, participants may take as much or as little time as needed to review the transcripts. After the revisions, participants will receive a copy of the research findings and can access the final paper through Ryerson’s Digital Repository at: https://digital.library.ryerson.ca

Potential Benefits:

There are no potential benefits to participants.

What are the Potential Risks to you as a PARTICIPANT?

- *Psychological risk:* low/minimal

During the interview, participants may experience psychological discomfort while sharing their stories. They may disclose information that is sensitive, triggering, traumatizing or uncomfortable. The risk of harm is low/minimal because the women have chosen to wear the Niqab and understand the challenges associated with adopting such a 'controversial' practice.

Before the interview they will be reminded that they can skip questions, take a break, or discontinue the interview permanently as well as withdraw from the study at any time. After the interview, the researcher will again check-in with the participant and offer information about how to access support services. Along with external resources (such as counseling, distress centers etc.), I will also remind participants to benefit from their own social supports and debrief whenever necessary. The researcher will also advise the participant that the participant can contact the researcher at any time for information about accessing support services.

- *Social risk:* low/minimal

There is some risk involved in conducting phone-interviews in terms of comfort and safety but it is minimal.

Given the situation with COVID-19, I will now be doing all interviews over the phone. I will discuss privacy with the participants and ensure aural privacy will be protected; by using the mute button on their phones and/or headphones, participants can also create aural privacy where video may be difficult. If they are interrupted, participants can know they can end the call at any moment, with no penalty and they can reschedule at any time. If they feel unwell or anxious they can also stop the process/call at any time. Participants will also be reminded that they do not have to answer all the questions where privacy may not allow it.

- *Personal identity being revealed:* low/minimal

Due to recruitment emails being shared and forwarded, participants identities may be revealed but it is highly unlikely.

No personal information of identity will ever be included in the completed research publication. All demographic data will be stored securely in password protected files and destroyed in a timely manner (see section on Data Storage). Participants will be asked to review/edit their interview transcripts as well as edit/approve the final research paper to ensure they are comfortable that the information does not identify them to potential readers. I will give each participant access to a secure Ryerson Shared Google Drive where they can review and edit their transcripts individually. Moreover, Pseudonyms will be used in the publication and individuals will only be identified with them.

Legal Risk: low/minimal

Since the participants adopt such a controversial piece of clothing and are often victims of Islamophobia, they may share experiences of abuse or violence that may need to be reported.

Participants will be advised about 'duty to report' during interviews, within their consent forms, and during email exchanges which will help clarify any questions or concerns.

***Duty to Report*:** If a participant shares information that needs to be reported, I will clarify my position as a Social Worker and explain the duty to report process and work with the participant to ensure both parties are comfortable before reporting the incident.

- *Dual-role risk:* low/minimal

Some participants may be previous/current peers/teachers of the researcher. However, there was/is not a power hierarchy between such possible candidates and the researcher during their co-education.

Participants will be informed by the researcher that their participation is completely voluntary and that refusal to participate will not have any consequence for the nature of the already-existing relationship between the two. They will be reminded of this again during the interviews.

Confidentiality:

Regardless of how the participants are recruited, they will cease to be anonymous as they will be made known to and interact with the researcher during the research process (recruitment, phone-interviews, revision of transcripts, and sharing of final results). At this point and beyond, their identity will remain confidential. None of the participant's personal information will ever be used in the research publication; instead, pseudonyms will replace their names and be used for identification purposes.

Signed consent forms, audio recorded phone-interviews, interview transcriptions, and contact information (names, email or phone number) will be collected. All digital data along with consent forms will be stored electronically under password protected files solely in the researcher's computer. All data will only ever be kept by the single researcher Sadia Jamal and periodically shared with the supervisor (Jennifer Poole) for review on a secure Ryerson Google Shared Drive and destroyed after the transcripts are completed.

The audio recordings will be password protected on the researcher's laptop and no-one else will have access to this computer. After transcription, the recordings will be deleted. The audio-recordings are kept until the transcription process for revision and accuracy purposes.

Incentives for Participation

Participants will not be paid to participate in this study.

Costs to Participation

There is no cost for participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If any question makes you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. You may stop participating at any time and you will not be penalized for doing as such. If you choose to stop participating, you may also choose to not have your data included in the study. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University or the investigators [Sadia Jamal] involved in the research.

Questions about the Study:

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

Sadia Jamal
Primary Researcher
Masters of Social Work Student
niqabchoices@gmail.com

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board [2020-048]. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study please contact:

Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
416-979-5042
rebchair@ryerson.ca

Niqab – as a Symbol of Resistance: Muslim women's lived experiences with the Face Veil

CONFIRMATION OF AGREEMENT

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that

you agree to participate in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

I agree to be audio-recorded for the purposes of this study. I understand how these recordings will be stored and destroyed.

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

APPENDIX E – EXTERNAL RESOURCES LIST

EXTERNAL SOCIAL SERVICES RESOURCES

Peel Region/GTA

Distress Centres:

- Spectra Helpline: 905-459-7777
- Toronto Distress Center Helpline: 416-408-4357
- Canada Suicide Prevention Service 1-833-456-4566
- 24/7 Peel Crisis Services 905-278-9036
- NISA Helpline (Muslim Women's Helpline): 1-888-315-NISA

Counselling Services:

- Family Services of Peel: (905) 270-2250
- Islamic Counseling, ISNA Canada: 905.403.8406
- Khalil Center (Muslim Counseling): 1-855-5KHALIL
- Afghan Women's Organization: (905) 279-3679
- **Indus Community Services:** (905) 275-2369

Faith-based/Spiritual Healing:

- Al-Huda Institute: (905) 624-2030
- Masjid-ul-Farooq: (905) 858-7586
- ISNA Canada: (905) 403-8406
- Abu Huraira Center: (416) 752-1200
- Islamic Institute of Toronto: consultation@islam.ca

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GLOSSARY

Here is a short glossary of some of the most commonly used words and phrases in Islamic religion and culture which may have been used by the researcher and participants throughout this MRP.

Allah: The Arabic word for "God"

Alhamdulillah: Alhamdulillah means all praise to Allah alone. It is sometimes used as an expression to "thank God."

Burqa: Is a garment worn by women to cover both the body and face. Not to be confused with Hijab which is just a head scarf.

Deen: The Arabic word used for religion.

Desi Aunties: Women belonging to the South-Asian community who are judgmental and bluntly offer unwanted advice to others because of their own biases, assumptions, and prejudices.

Dua: Is a supplication (invocation); a calling to Allah.

Dunya: Refers to this life, life on planet earth.

Fard: Meaning obligatory. A religious obligation or duty, Islamic ruling. Example: Praying 5 times a day is fard, neglecting fard is a sin.

Hadith: A traditional account of things said, done, or approved by the final Prophet Muhammad Peace be upon him) recorded by his followers.

Halal: Is an Arabic word that translates to "permissible" into English.

Haram: Haram are things that are not permitted in Islam. For example, eating pork, gambling and drinking alcohol are all considered to be haram.

Hijab: Literally means "veil" and is a headscarf used by women to cover their hair.

Inshallah/Insha'Allah: means with the "will of Allah" or "God willing".

Islam: A monotheistic religion based on the teachings of the final Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) as detailed in the Qur'an.

Masha'Allah: The meaning of "Masha' Allah" is "Whatever Allah wants" or "Whatever Allah wants to give, He gives." Muslims say this whenever they see something they like, wish to express their happiness, when giving a compliment to a Muslim.

Muhammad: The name of the Arab prophet who, according to the religion, was the last messenger of Allah and conveyed the message of Islam.

Muslim: A person who believes in or practices the religion of Islam.

Mustahabb: Commendable, favoured or virtuous actions. These are encouraged. These would be things which are recommended but not necessary.

Qur'an: Islam's holy book. Muslims believe this book is the words of Allah the Almighty. It was revealed over 23 years in stages to the last and final messenger of God, Muhammad (Peace

be upon him). It is preserved its pristine state just as it was when it was revealed. Early followers of Islam committed the revelations to memory, which were later recorded in the form of a book.

Ramadan: The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, during which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. It commemorates the transmission of the Qur'an by the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad.

SubhanAllah: Means "Glorified is Allah; Allah is pure". Muslims say SubhanAllah when they appreciate something. It is a short dhikr (prayer) that is often repeated.

Sunnah: Sunnah refers to sayings, actions and behavior of the Prophet Muhammad. These are recorded in the hadith books by the companions of the Prophet.

Surah: Surah is a chapter of the Quran. In total the Quran consists of a total of 114 chapters.

Wajib: Wajib is obligatory an act which must be performed. A religious duty.