

*Muslim Woman:
Heavenly Body, Communal Autonomy*

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Introduction

Shall I be saved?

Body shame, honor killing, stoning, domestic violence, dependence, limited civil rights, commodified body, genital mutilation, forced marriage, domesticity, child marriage, slavery. These are the characteristics Muslim women are defined through the lens of Western feminism.

Purity, labor of love, loyalty, sacredness of motherhood, dedication, femininity, honorable obedience, qualitative, holiness of fraternity. These are the notions that is corresponded to Muslim women by the Muslim Feminists.

But *'who is a Muslim woman?'* is a question barely defined by Muslim women themselves. Every woman would define herself differently based on the social class, race, sexuality, religion, and culture; so does a Muslim woman.

Disregarding these social constructions would disable us from learning how a Muslim woman's autonomy can be claimed.

There is a controversial debate on Muslim women's choice and autonomy on their body and the embodiment of identities such as womanhood, motherhood and presentation as an active social actor.

What is highly neglected by the activists and the critical analysts of Muslim women's status is the context in which their autonomy is defined. The misreading of Muslim women's issue is tied with mistakenly equating consent/choice with autonomy. As Dr. Raihan Ismail asserts, the matter of Hijab, for instance, "vary widely and take in influences from culture, fashion as well as religion" (Vyver, 2017).

This project is a quick review and analysis on different socio-cultural impacts that influence the formation of a Muslim woman's identity through the embodiment of womanhood and motherhood. I will argue that the self-determination of a Muslim woman's body and autonomous social identity is highly influenced by their cultural and economic notions of self; the ground based on which their emancipation can be better paved.



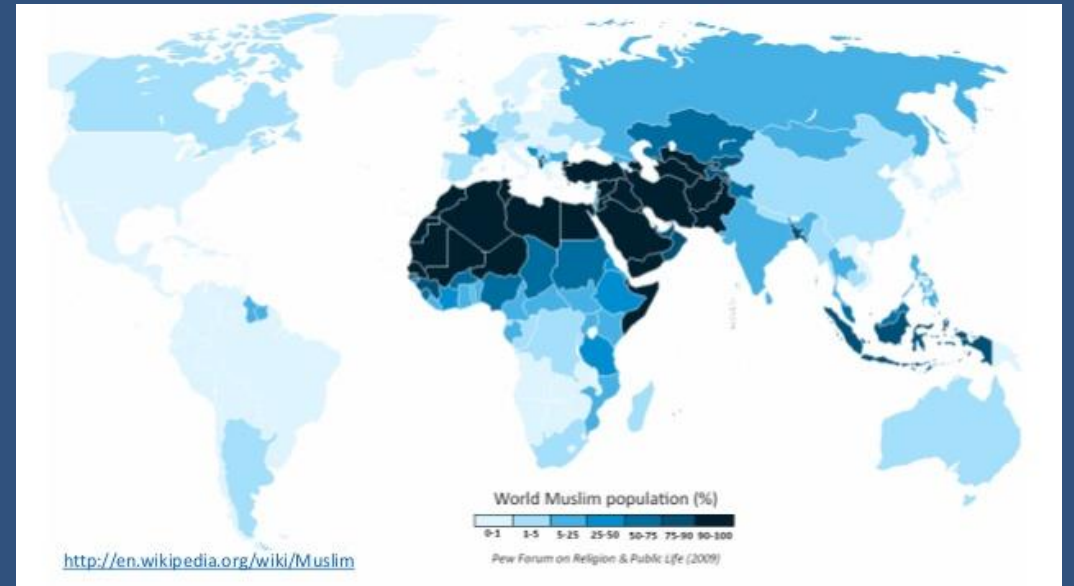
Islam is a Nation

Muslim Pakistani Poet and Philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal (1994: 202) :

**Don ' t compare your millat with the nations of the west
Distinctive is the qaum of the Prophet of Islam
Their solidarity depends on territorial nationality
Your solidarity rests on the strength of your religion
When faith slips away, where is the solidarity of the community?
And when the community is no more, neither is the millat**

[millat: a community with a religion; qaum: tribe] (Siddiqi, 2010).

Practiced by over 1.8 billion people globally, Islam announces itself beyond religion. Muslims consider themselves not only believers but also a worldwide nation. This nation's identity is more than what Benedict Anderson (1991) described as "imagined political community", but a universal law that impacts social constructions of the nations and cultures within itself while is rebuilt in each community with communal values (Lucic, 2012). As subtle as it may sound, women's identity in the Muslim nation is also complicated and highly related to the communal existential identity. In simple words, Muslim women are not regarded as an individual autonomous social entity but a part of a community which is itself a sub-entity to the wholistic identity of the Muslim nation (Kandiyoti, 1991).



From Heavens To The Nation, God Watches

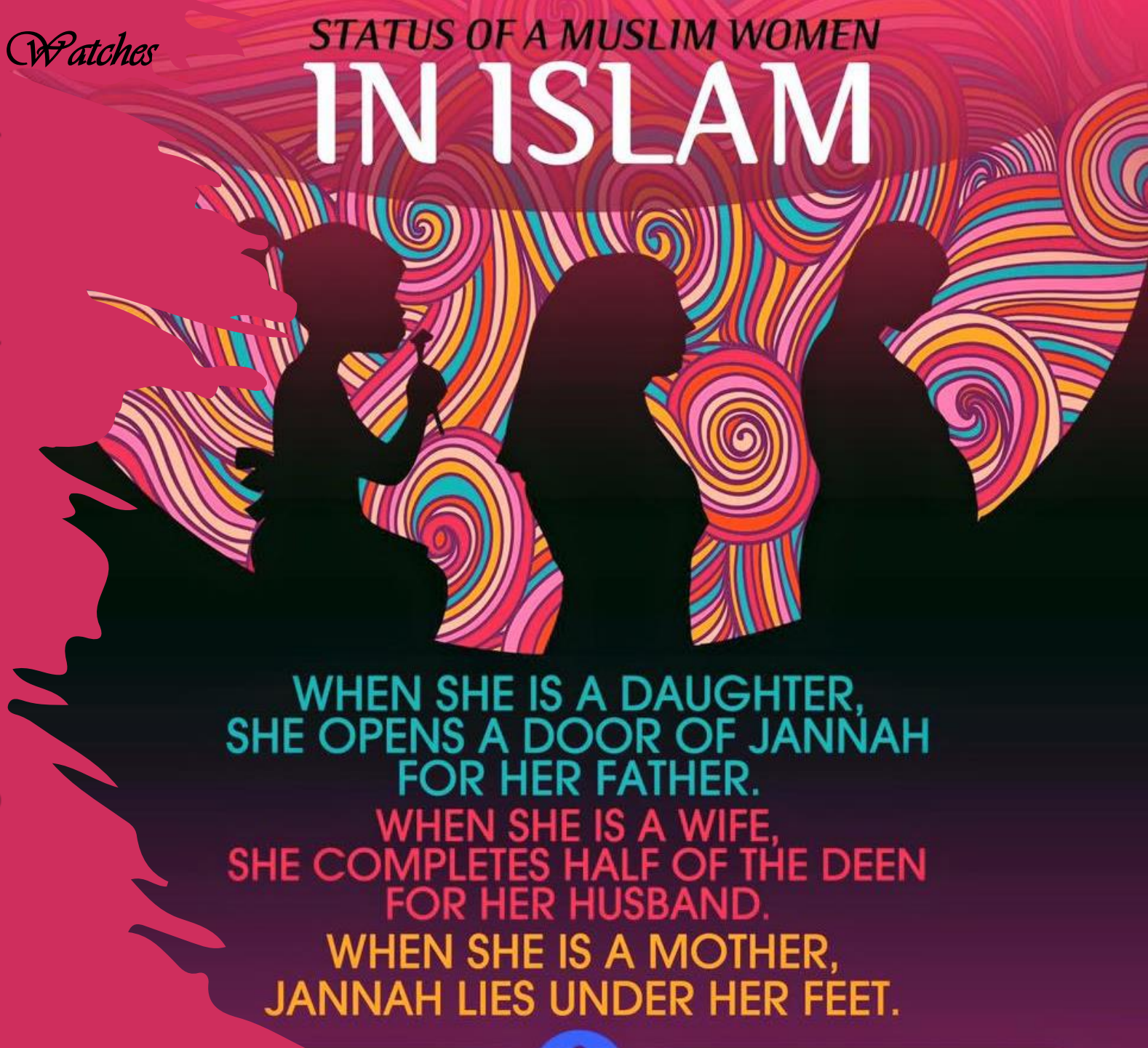
STATUS OF A MUSLIM WOMEN IN ISLAM

I established my career with Allah's
guidance
single amount is a product of my sweat
though you often stare as you see me
my veil signify my being Muslim
I believe in modesty and trying to lower my
gaze

I was taught that peace is not that
absence of war
But peace, is a feeling that can only come
from remembering your God.

I am a Muslim Woman
I stand up for what I believed
for GOD has guided me to the right path
I prostrate to the One GOD.
(Poem by Fatma Zahra, 2014)

“Many women who cover talk about it as a way demonstrating their submission to God” (Killian, 2019).



**WHEN SHE IS A DAUGHTER,
SHE OPENS A DOOR OF JANNAH
FOR HER FATHER.**

**WHEN SHE IS A WIFE,
SHE COMPLETES HALF OF THE DEEN
FOR HER HUSBAND.**

**WHEN SHE IS A MOTHER,
JANNAH LIES UNDER HER FEET.**

Marriage, Womanhood



Dignity, Motherhood

A Muslim woman's identity is excessively defined as a caregiver, not only to her children, but to "families, communities, and larger society" (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2015). To Muslim women, home means family and family is sacred. In this sacred place motherhood is the not only a role but also the identifying character of a Muslim woman, "central to [her] identity" (Hu, et al., 2009). This communal possession of woman's body, is sacred in Islam and is ruled by God. Woman's womb, as in Arabic *rahm* (also meaning mercy), is regulated and claimed by God, is referred to four times in Quran (Husain, 2019).

"Allah—surely nothing is hidden from Him in the earth or in the heaven. He it is who shapes you in the wombs as He likes; there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise." (Q. 3:5-6)

"Allah knows what every female carries and what the wombs lose [prematurely] or exceed. And everything with Him is by due measure." (Q. 13:8)

Virginity, Daughterhood



As pure as a Muslim virgin is wedded to a Muslim man, he owns the autonomy of her body. However, no dispossession of body has happened to the Muslim wife, as she had no prior possession over her body before marriage. Her body belongs to heavens, for what she is a guardian not only to deliver it to the man but also to lead him to the sacredness and purity of heavens. It is due to the same notion that a Muslim man may seek for polygamy once he fulfills its requirement that is gaining the consent of the first wife and keep being fair to all his wives, as the key to the heavens is in the hand of his wives. Therefore, Islamic polygamy, though is in alignment with the dispossession of women's autonomy and the proof of higher economically social class, is not slavery (Abdullah et al, 2015).

The dispossession of autonomy happens to a Muslim woman since birth. The little angel from the heavens, the Muslim daughter, must stay pure, which in Islamic culture means out of reach of *other* men who can be possessors but are not the entitled possessors at birth (*maharem*). As Jacobson (2013) describes "many trace [the] lineage to tribal cultures that were organized around the idea that women's virginity represents the honor of male relatives and the good of the community at large". However, Muslim communities follow the religious notion of sacredness which is tied to women. It is vital to bear in mind that Islam historically was established in Hijaz where some patriarchal Sami tribes would bury their daughter alive due to the fragility of agriculture in the dryland desserts and the issue of scarcity, which made boys preferable. As Prophet Mohammad was a merchant, his Islam came with saving women from death and including them in the trade workforce. The women became sacred from 'birth to death'.

Hijab, derived from the Arabic root of *hajaba* means “to hide from view or conceal” (Institute of Islamic Information and Education). It implies the concept of barrier, detachment, as well as protection, or as Dr Lambret (2019) describes, “curtain, separation, wall and, in other words, anything that hides, masks and protects”. Hijab is supposed to do to a woman’s body what walls do to one’s property, i.e. to save it from *others*. However, the autonomy of this body does not belong to whom it corresponds (the woman) but to whom it is possessed. As a property has no autonomy, so does a Muslim woman’s body. This fact does not include the matters of choice or consent, which still belong to Muslim women. It is why their lack of autonomy is not anything close to the slaves’ lack of autonomy, contrary to what Western feminism argues.

The appropriation of a Muslim’s woman body does not necessarily equate its commodification. A woman’s body is a communal property than carries not its individual identity, but the communal. In this sense, a Muslim’s woman body is like a homeland; appropriated but its privatization is communally owned, therefore it is not tradable, and its protection is tied to the identity of the whole nation who would fight for it, kill for it and die for it. It cannot be shared by other nations and must be guarded. In fact, the law of Hijab was first for the sake of differentiation of the Muslims from other coercive nations. As Lambret (2019) also describes, “The ‘Hijab’ was imposed on Muslim women as a way of “separation” in order to show them their place in society, and exclude them, in the name of Islam, from the socio-political sphere”.

Born in the patrilineal society of Hijaz, Islam reapplies the patriarchal structure (with few reformations) in considering the right to the leadership of the tribe (or nation) to men, while acknowledging the conditional ownership rights to women. What Muslim women can own is anything that is tradable, while possessions such as land or home are not exceptions, they cannot be owned by Muslim women through inheritance. It is the power of leadership tied with the inheritance of land that makes it stay out of their possession. As a Muslim woman’s body is a communal possession, such as homeland, it loses its autonomy and transfers its identity to not only the man (who must be her Mahram, meaning father, brother, uncle, grandfather, husband, son and son-in-law) but also to the entire tribe and nation. In other words, her body is communally privatized; the state which limits her agency and rights.

“(Qur’an 33:59): *O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them (when they go out or are among men). That is better in order that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not annoyed...*” (Institute of Islamic Information and Education).

Love's Divine: Universalization, Communalization, and Privatization of The Body

Like all Abrahamic religions, Islam strongly believes in the foundational absolutist values. The faith in the eternal existence of one truth as one invisible God of all powers and the unquestionable will, this absolutist monotheism, sets up a universalist outlook to reality. Regardless of its universalist absolutism, as Muslims build a large international nation that includes various geographical nations and races with their distinct socio-cultural constructions, it is highly effected by the rules of communities. Communalism and Universalism, in their adversary dialectics, synthesize a common paternal regime in which not only the man owns the right to possession but also is entitled to rule. However, this masterly position for men does not regard women as slaves whose bodies are owned but as subjunctives whose identity is defined with regard to its relationship with the communal order. In this way, not only the 'man of the house' rules over the woman's body, but also do the communal leaders, aka Imams. This is the reason why the female subjects in Gleeson et al.'s (2018) express lack of agency over their body, decision, marriage, or divorce.

[Quran 4:34]: "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard."

The Islamic instrumental values make the body of one a shared possession, and as a result there are serious restrictions for the foods one eats and the way one dresses. A Muslim's body does not only belong to oneself but to others who might find it a stimulus for their sins. The body of a Muslim woman, characterized as sacred, privatized at different scale by her family, community and nation who collectively share its privatized possession, must stay private at the same scale.

Love, although believed as an interpersonal affections in the Western philosophy, is defined as a naturalized duty for a Muslim woman. As a guardian of the Nation's dignity and purity, women are ordered by God to love their family. Due to their commitment to their family, tribe, community and Nation, Muslim women have rarely expressed their intimate feelings of love and joy of mothering beyond their naturalized duty and only in the relationship to their body. Sexuality, passionate affections, and speaking about their body is highly tabooed. However, rare expression of their passion does not mean their inability in sensing it beyond their naturalized feminine duty.

Conclusion: Claiming Autonomy

To have a comprehensive knowledge about female identity formation and social status, it is vital to acknowledge that femininity is not a universal concept. Unlike Federici's (1974) emphasis that "Every woman is a working woman", there are many socially constructed factors that disrupts women's united social class. These factors include race, sexuality, (dis)ability, culture, religion, nationality, class and geography. In other words, the historical process of antagonist struggle between the social forces which has constantly caused different social, political, economic, and cultural syntheses, determines the stratified social categories in which a woman identifies her existence.

Thus, the synthesis of the antagonism of socio-economic forces in an agrarian society, for instance, is different from a nomadic society (Amadeo, 2020) ; in the former the system of paternalism and communalism form a distinctive culture in which a woman's identity is defined in subjunction to a male leading community; in latter the geographical environment would play a significant role in the formation of either patrilineal or matrilineal society.

The autonomy, then, would gain its conditioned meaning, realizing how communal socio-economic history of Middle Eastern Islamic nations has functioned as a determinant to Muslim women's notion of body, self, womanhood and mothering and how their claim for autonomous bodies and social entities can be demanded and declared.

Based on these factors, Federici's (1975) "Autonomy from men is Autonomy from capital that uses men's power to discipline us" would sound too broad, generalized, homogenizing and universal to be comfortably applied as a fact to all women. Contrary to Federici's universalization of womanhood and autonomy, Friedman (2003) considers the conditioning factors in the formation of concept of autonomy for women. She asserts: "The distinction between the constitutive and casual conditions required for autonomy will be particularly important for appreciating the role that social relationships and cultural context play in realization of autonomy".

The dominant rhetoric amongst the activists who fight for the emancipation of Muslim woman has either suffered from the universalism of Eurocentric framework such as Federici's, or relativism of Eurocentric framework such as those of Islamic/Muslim Feminists. What both overlook is the dialectical social synthesis that can be understood through a historical materialistic analysis of the society Muslim woman are identified.

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Citation to Images

The images are from Google Images.

Slides (pages) 1, 5, 7 and 8 are the art works by Shirin Neshat. The images contain scripts on the body which are not religious scripts but the Muslim women narrations in Farsi.

Slide (page) 10 is an artwork by Husan-elDeen, British Iraqi photographer: <https://themuslimvibe.com/western-muslim-culture/new-exhibit-in-london-captures-a-unique-take-on-the-female-muslim-silhouette>

