

The Mathar Orna and Authority Among Middle-Class Bangladeshi
Women: Personal Reflections on a Collective Phenomenon

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Ethics Statement

Abstract

This thesis explores the socio-cultural aspects of veiling among middle-class Bangladeshi women, especially the mathar orna. The subtle yet powerful maneuvering qualities of this specific form of veiling work to ensure a certain authoritative position for these women. This has significant implications for existing relations of domination and subordination, which women are able to partially reverse because of the ambiguity that characterizes the mathar orna, and its capacity to accommodate different meanings and usages. In this regard, rigid religious attributes can be dissociated from the practice of veiling to permit a much broader understanding of a social symbol such as the mathar orna and how it defines different facets of women's daily lives.

Keywords: veiling, mathar orna, authority, middle-class, religion, society

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Chapter-1: Introduction

1.1 Veiling and the Mathar Orna

The practice of veiling has been taken up by both Muslims and non-Muslims around the world in various forms. Still, veiling is most commonly associated with a Muslim identity, and has been instrumental in discussions revolving globalization/modernity on one hand and Islamic fundamentalism, or 'backwardness' on the other. Yet it does not fit perfectly into either of these categories, and has, over the years, gained more moderate traits. Where it used to be an absolute marker of Muslim women's oppression and misery within Islamic regimes as designated by the West, more perceptive studies show how veiling has evolved to become identified as an empowering and self-standing practice, a practice that women themselves take up for reasons as complex as systematic political protest, such as in Cairo, to something as simple as protecting one's hair from the sun and dust, such as in Bangladesh. This does not mean that veiling has lost its religious attribute. Instead, as a topic of much broader analysis, it can be separated from religion to gain a more independent understanding of how it may be applicable to women situated in a diversity of cultures and situations, where their individual veiling practices signify both major and even the most minute socio-cultural aspects of their lives, many of which do not necessarily involve religious practices and haven't been so closely inspected before.

In this thesis, I venture towards addressing such socio-cultural aspects of veiling with regard to middle-class Bangladeshi women, who, apart from the cultivation of piety and modesty, also veil for more moderate and ambiguous reasons, a crucial one being the assertion of a kind of subtle authority over certain groups of people in society, an authority that women are able to maneuver in ways which allow for a partial reversal in existing relations of domination and subordination. I introduce the term 'mathar orna', which is a more nuanced form of veiling and

does not fall into any quintessential veiling category. This form of veiling is not formally acknowledged but widely accepted and adopted. It is simple, yet complex, and it is relevant to contemporary veiling discussions because of how inextricable it is linked to the lives of Bangladeshi women. I argue that the mathar orna is, like any other form of veiling, be it the hijab or the burqa or anything else, a ‘lived experience’ (Shaheed, 2008; Huq, 2021) which is authoritative, rather than a religious injunction and so it allows for a more dynamic understanding of women’s lives which religious explanations alone cannot decipher. Such an understanding helps unearth invisible power relations and agentic endeavors that are inconspicuous because of how simple a social symbol may appear, which in this case is the mathar orna. Discussions on the hijab and the burqa only do so much justice to the myriads of applications that veiling embodies, and so the mathar orna is a better term in the sense that it allows for a break from the constant religious and traditional attributes that come attached to the other two terms. This thesis thus tries to understand veiling more extensively, besides its obvious religious and traditional attributes, and to look at its more everyday uses so that how the mathar orna helps women exercise the kind of authority that is referred to can be identified.

1.2 Objectives and Research Question

The main objective of this thesis is to look at the practice of veiling independently, separated from the sphere of religion and rooted in local, everyday practices. What then, does the mathar orna entail? How is it different from other veiling practices, and how does it help understand the more cultural aspects of veiling? Most importantly, what kind of authority does it demonstrate?

1.3 Methodology

This study was conducted relying on close contact with the women who were interviewed. I have been a part of the lives of these women for many years. Most of them belong to my paternal and maternal families, while some belong outside of the family. Women who fall into the age group of 30-60 were especially chosen because they are the ones who wear the mathar orna or some other form of veiling on a regular basis. These women were also chosen because in Bangladesh, wearing the mathar orna is primarily seen as a sign of marital status or age, and even widowhood in many cases, and so wearing a mathar orna is a little less prone among younger women in Bangladesh. However, some younger women or girls who veil in some other form, were also interviewed to maintain an impartial view. A mixture of participant observation and interviews were used for the study. Focus group discussions were not exactly ideal because isolated interviews helped gain a broader span of reasons for wearing the veil. When in groups, women tended to lean more on arguments emphasizing piety and modesty, as though this was something intrinsically exclusive to veiling, because they didn't want to offend the other women who actually do veil for piety and modesty and for no other ulterior reasons. However, during individual sessions, most women expanded on their original answers to reveal very interesting reasons for putting on a mathar orna. That is why I relied mostly on isolated interviews to record my findings.

Chapter-2: Literature Review

2.1 The Veil and the West

Historically, how the practice of veiling had come to be synonymous with Muslim women's ultimate misery is discussed by many scholars, three of whose accounts are provided below to gain an overall perspective. These scholars also call for an urgency in realizing that women's actual sufferings are masked by a fixation on veiling, and so we need to be wary of such deductions as provided by the West regarding how the veil is a real obstacle to women's freedom and so needs to be gotten rid of if women were to truly flourish.

Leila Ahmed

Leila Ahmed's (1992) research on Middle Eastern women draws a trajectory of the history of the veil's gradual debasement following the rise of city states, especially the archaic state. Archaeological evidence shows women were practically worshiped before there were city states, and this was "the rule rather than the exception" (Ahmed, 1992). The complexity that came with city life and the rising significance of military competitiveness contributed further to male domination, forming a "class-based society" where the "military and temple elites made up the propertied classes" (Ahmed, 1992). Families were patriarchal to ensure the "paternity of property-heirs and vesting in men the control of female sexuality, became institutionalized, codified, and upheld by the state" (Ahmed, 1992). The sexuality of women became male property, which first remained with fathers and were then transferred to husbands, and it was "negotiable" and "economically valuable". Women were also eliminated from the economy, and with the advent of different rulers in Mesopotamia, laws regarding women, especially in the context of the veil, became more cruel and rigid (Ahmed, 1992). In the Assyrian law, it was clearly specified and detailed which women could veil and which couldn't. The 183rd law stated: "Wives and daughters of "seigniors" had to veil; concubines

accompanying their mistress had to veil; former “sacred prostitutes,” now married, had to veil; but harlots and slaves were forbidden to veil. Those caught illegally veiling were liable to the penalties of flogging, having pitch poured over their heads, and having their ears cut off” (Ahmed, 1992). Ahmed (1992) finds the analysis of Gerda Lerner most illuminating in this matter. She explains how Lerner’s analysis demonstrates that the veil did not merely mark the upper classes but also served to draw distinctions between “respectable women” and women who were “publicly available”. Ahmed (1992) further informs: “Lerner’s analysis makes clear, as she goes on to point out, first, that the division of women into “respectable” and “disreputable” was fundamental to the patriarchal system and, second, that women took their place in the class hierarchy on the basis of their relationship (or absence of such) to the men who protected them and on the basis of their sexual activity— and not, as with men, on the basis of their occupations and their relation to production” (Ahmed, 1992). One after another, the invasions of different rulers led to an amalgamation of native norms and those of the conquerors, causing a further decline in women’s status and a “broader dissemination of the more negative attitude towards women” (Ahmed, 1992). Veiling women, confining them and a degrading attitude towards their body and sexuality became the new rule.

Ahmed (1992) further informs: before the seventeenth century, ideas about Islam were drawn from tales of Western travelers and crusaders and further confused by recounts of clerics who did not have a good understanding of Arabic texts. When eighteenth century came along, the Western narrative of women’s status in Islam had elements which “bore a resemblance to the bold external features of the Islamic patterns of male dominance, but at the same time it (1) often garbled and misconstrued the specific content and meaning of the customs described and (2) assumed and represented the Islam practiced in Muslim societies in the periods in which the Europeans encountered and then in some degree or other dominated those societies to be the only possible interpretation of the religion.” (Ahmed, 1992).

When more perceptive Western travelers, especially women, began exploring the Middle Eastern regions, they began to provide a much clearer picture of how things really were. For example, in the eighteenth century, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, a writer and traveler, explained that the idea that Muslim women had no souls was not at all true. She believed that this idea was fueled by mistranslations made by Greek priests of the Quran, who did it out of great spite. She reveals that having worn the veil herself, she came to see that it was not only not oppressive, but provided veiling women with a level of freedom, because it allowed them to remain unrecognized. Sadly, such explanations could not defeat the prevailing degraded views of Islam. Interestingly, even though ideas of Islam being oppressive were already in formation in Western narratives, women became more central to such discussions in the nineteenth century, and more so in the late nineteenth century, when Europeans became the actual rulers of Muslim countries.

This new focus on women resulted from a combination of the old narrative of Islam, the “broad, all-purpose narrative of colonial domination regarding the inferiority, in relation to the European culture, of all Other cultures and societies”, a narrative that gained rigorous popularity throughout the nineteenth century, and finally, feminism. (Ahmed, 1992). Colonial powers (Britain especially) measured the cultures of the colonized against Victorian ideas of womanhood, which was considered the best state for women. These ideas were backed up by seeming proof which pointed to women’s biological inferiority and their confinement to domesticity. This became a political tool when the Victorian establishment was challenged by feminism. The language of feminism was cunningly ‘redirected’ towards ‘Other’ men and their cultures and thus it was made “morally justifiable” to attack the cultures of the colonized. Thus, the new version of Islam created from the blending of the three aforementioned elements was exposed to colonial attack, and veiling became the sole target, with the argument that if all

those practices that were “intrinsic” to Islam could be uprooted, only then would it be possible to acquire true civilization (Ahmed, 1992).

The final blow came from Lord Cromer, who was absolutely set on the idea that Islam was, in simple words, a “complete failure” as a social system, and that it “bred inferior men”. He particularly called attention to Islam’s treatment of women, and put it up against Christianity, which, according to him, only held women in high esteem whereas Islam only debased women. This debasement was manifest in veiling and segregation practices, and so, according to Cromer, it was important to alter women’s positions to defeat such debasement, achieve proper ‘moral and mental development’, and an ‘alleviation’ of thought and character (Ahmed, 1992).

Ironically, such views were not in par with Cromer’s actual activities, which were far from beneficial for Egyptian women. He put restrictions on government schools, raised the school fees, discouraged the training of women doctors and only limited it to midwifery. What was most shocking was the treatment of women in his own country. He opposed women’s suffrage, and resisted feminism back home but encouraged it in projects of white male dominance. (Ahmed, 1992)

Eventually, everything boiled down to the idea that Muslims had to either give up or ameliorate their religion and ways, and veiling and other traditions surrounding women were the main areas of rectification. Whatever claims were made to save women from their ‘misfortunes’ were only assisted further by Western feminism, which, when it came to cultures outside of theirs, “turned from being the critic of the system of white male dominance to being its docile servant” (Ahmed, 1992).

Lila Abu Lughod

In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Lila Abu Lughod (2013) describes how after the 9/11 incident, images of oppressed Muslim women started to get mobilized in order to justify

American and European interventions into Middle East and South Asia in the name of ‘saving’ women from their veiled states. In case of ‘burqa-clad’ Afghan women, Abu Lughod (2013) clarifies that the burqa was not a Taliban invention. It was already in use among Pashtun women, and what happened when the Taliban came along was that one particular style of covering, i.e., the burqa, which was tied to a respectable class of women, was imposed on women as “religiously appropriate”, which was only one of many ways in which women were abused. There were already many ways in which women marked their “propriety” or “piety”. In fact, before the Taliban regime, most Afghani women came from rural areas and belonged to the non-elite classes. These women failed to get away from all the violence but if they were freed from the burqa, they would still choose some other modest form of head covering in place of the burqa (Abu Lughod, 2013). Therefore, Abu Lughod (2013) warns us against equating veiling with a lack of freedom or agency, because there are numerous forms of covering and each form has a distinct meaning in different communities and regions. She contends: “One cannot reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing. And we should not underestimate the ways that veiling has entered political contests across the world.” She notes how highly presumptuous of the West to think that Afghan women need any kind of saving, because of the sense of superiority and arrogance that comes with such presumptions, justifying violent interventions. She thus cautions us against the “reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential of women’s unfreedom” (Abu Lughod, 2013), because of how variegated ideas of freedom are between people who are products of different histories and situations. To designate the burqa as a “medieval imposition” is to violate “women’s own understandings of what they are doing” (Abu Lughod, 2013).

Drawing on Hannah Papanek’s definition of the burqa as ‘portable seclusion’, Abu Lughod (2013) uses the term ‘mobile homes’ to describe the burqa. She observes: “Everywhere, such veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life

in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women”, and asks: “Why would women suddenly want to give up the burqa in 2001? Why would they throw off the markers of their respectability that assured their protection from the harassment of strangers in the public sphere by symbolically signaling to all that they were still in the inviolable space of their homes and under the protection of family, even though moving about in public?” The burqa and other such forms of covering had become such a quotidian part of these women’s lives that women often did not pay much attention to the momentous debates surrounding such a mundane aspect of their lives. Those who did were completely conscious of the political statement they were making by wearing a burqa or some other form of covering and were quite happy and willing to do so, because they wanted the world to know that veiling had nothing to do with women’s oppression, and just because the Taliban had left, they wouldn’t give up on something that was their own and had only temporarily become a tool for the Taliban to control them.

Myra Macdonald

In *Muslim Women and the Veil*, Myra Macdonald (2006) provides an interesting analysis of how the media plays with images of the veil, because there is a ceaseless tendency to base discussions of Muslim women around veiling or ‘unveiling’. Even though the 9/11 incident provided an opportunity to identify the “plurality of Muslim women’s voices”, this was consistently thwarted by an obsession with “veiling/unveiling” (Macdonald, 2006). Macdonald’s (2006) work draws from texts that help understand Muslim femininity in different ways. She talks about how not only is the veil not a unique product of Islam, but it has also been observed by both men and women in many cultures. Despite this, all different kinds of covering clothing are brought together into a “singular discursive frame” under the category of ‘veil’, which becomes an “all-encompassing symbol of repression”, dismissing the fact that not only are there many forms of veiling, but there is also coerced and uncoerced veiling. This is

alarmingly intensified by the media, and Muslim women are made to seem dangerous, exotic and vulnerable at the same time, apparently in dire need of saving which was only possible through 'unveiling'. Owing to this, the Afghani blue burqa became "a suddenly familiar trope of oppressed womanhood", and was constantly linked to the execution of Zarmina in Kabul. The brutalities committed by the Taliban upon Afghan women and the burqa became one and the same. Zarmina's story was passed around through images and documentaries, emphasizing mostly on the Taliban's cruelty and very little on the bravery of the woman who secretly filmed the execution with a digital camera that was hidden beneath her burqa (Macdonald, 2006). The conclusion that 'unveiling' was thus the ultimate solution was immediately drawn and marked by the media through selective images of Afghan women getting rid of their burqas. (Macdonald, 2006).

A very interesting thing Macdonald (2006) points out is the persistent blame put on harems for Muslim women's debasement. Insistent on establishing the idea that the harem symbolizes suppression of Muslim women's sexuality, Western portrayals of the harem and veiling and seclusion accompanied by it as barbaric and degrading for women completely disregarded the fact that the harem served as a practical and safe outlet for most women. While it is definitely true that many women hated the seclusion imposed by the harem, many enjoyed the respectable and communal atmosphere it created. In fact, many Western women compared harem life to their own constricted lives, an account that was completely missing from Western male narratives.

Owing to such biased accounts of male travelers and commentators, the harem and veiling were demarcated as a deviant practice and so 'unveiling' was the only way to return to a 'normal' and 'natural state', which was where women enjoyed "sexual expressiveness" through "bodily display". Interestingly, though, where Christianity marked sexuality as sinful, Islam encourages sexual fulfilment (Macdonald, 2006).

Moreover, women's own ways of getting involved in beauty rituals within oppressive patriarchal regimes is also ignored in the process of Other-ing the harem. An example of this would be the underground beauty parlors in Kabul, where the dangers involved in visiting those parlors illustrate women's own way of protesting against the Taliban. (Macdonald, 2006). Most remarkable is the way women's diverse voices and subjectivities are erased in films and documentaries (e.g., *Beneath the Veil*, *Unholy War*). All such portrayals highlight the 'plight' of Afghan women and the urgent need to save them. Macdonald (2006) sums up the whole thing as such: "That so much can be invested in a symbol of religious adherence suggests the lingering potency of a trajectory of repeated imagery and narratives, and the efficacy of those modes of representation in silencing the diversity of Muslim women's voices."

2.2 Veiling Minus Religion: Veiling as Lived Experience

To understand more fully how veiling is enmeshed with the lives of women, it is important to look at veiling independently and separately, and not as a religious matter, a point whose significance is stressed by Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed (2008). In *Dress Codes and Modes: How Islamic Is the Veil?* Shaheed (2008) talks about how the "language of veiling" is "slippery" and so taking the veil as a starting point for veiling discussions is troublesome, owing to its multiple meanings. According to her, this problem arises because people often mix up the veil (which is an item of clothing) and the actual practice of veiling (which suggests modesty and moral conduct) (Shaheed, 2008). This difference was quite apparent among my interlocutors. Most talked about the hijab or the mathar orna as an item of clothing, and for each of them, veiling in this sense had a unique purpose or meaning.

Shaheed (2008) notes: "In practice, to some Muslim women, veiling may simply mean tossing a scarf or the end of a sari over the head", or "draping a sheer scarf over hair tied into a bun". For others, "the primary requirement of veiling is that the hair be completely covered while

others take this to include the wearer's ears and neck". Even the covering of the face varies, ranging from "the white, filmy yashmak (face veil) popular in late Ottoman society, to a niqab, which allows only the eyes to be visible, to the all-encompassing burqa" (Shaheed, 2008). Therefore, owing to all the variations in "acceptable Muslim clothing" from place to place, we should move away from analyses of a singular "Islamic culture" and consider women "in multiple Muslim contexts, in Islamic states, in secular Muslim-majority states, in Muslim families and communities in the diaspora, among migrant Muslim communities, for non-Muslim women who are subject to Muslim laws because of their country of residence or their children's, and for women who do not identify as Muslim but who are automatically categorized as such because of their family heritage or the laws of their country" (Shaheed, 2008).

With reference to 'Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLMUL)', Shaheed (2008) describes how WLMUL wishes to emphasize the fact that the lives of Muslim women are shaped by historical specificities, creating variations in the "local construction of Muslim-ness", which set women in one Muslim context apart from those in others. WLMUL also states that most women are not even aware of such variations. Under WLMUL, 'Codes and Modes' observed that veiling practices have historically been irregular across regions. From women declining the veil, to rural women veiling more flexibly and ignoring seclusion, to even veiling due to environmental reasons, all "begs the question whether religion or circumstance determines what we wear" (Shaheed, 2008). On top of that, clothing regulations of Muslim men remain missing in analyses of clothing in Muslim contexts, which usually focus on women's clothing (Shaheed, 2008).

She thus proposes a separation of religion from analyses of the veil. She explains: women's clothes are "functionally designed to simultaneously conceal and attract attention according to prevailing local standards of beauty, modesty and gender roles", so it isn't just about religion

impeding women's freedom, but about making women inaccessible to certain people. Shaheed (2008) asks: "whose honor is being protected: that of the woman beneath the clothes, her father's, her husband's, her family's, her community's, or her state's?" Moreover, Shaheed (2008) explains how clothing regulations put on women are often political in nature, in order to maintain social control over women's sexuality in many forms, one of them being veiling policies (such as a ban on veiling, or legally enforced veiling). All of this is validated in the name of Islam and preservation of 'codes of honor'. Fundamentalist movements such as these have "a vested interest in projecting an impression of homogeneity, arguing that there is an authentic, traditional, morally correct, and essential form of "Islamic dress" for women" (Shaheed, 2008). Women taking up veiling or going back to it is not something they do thoughtlessly or because Islam forces them to do it. Reasons range from group solidarity, to cultural identity, to improved access to the public sphere, and many more. Therefore, Shaheed (2008) offers an explanation or understanding of the veil that is "politically informed" and dissociated from religion, because otherwise all other forms of clothing and their cultural specificities are invalidated if we keep marking the veil as particularly 'Muslim women's clothing'. In any case, Shaheed (2008) thinks looking at 'lived experiences' is better, and I agree with her completely. Lived experiences provide us with a more insightful understanding of the complexities that women's lives comprise. Such complexities are often left uninvestigated in religious and traditional analyses. Once we separate religion from an everyday practice, we would be able to look closer into underlying meanings and local implications of what is an institutional phenomenon, i.e., the practice of veiling.

Chapter-3: Veiling in Bangladesh

3.1 Veiling in Bangladesh

Most literary works on veiling in Bangladesh cover the burqa and the hijab. This, in my opinion, is due to the seemingly religious attributes of these two forms of veiling. Since the mathar orna is more cultural and open-ended in its interpretations, scholars tend to pay little attention to it as a topic of systematic study and analysis, like the burqa or the hijab. My thesis calls for a very small but hopefully illuminating contribution to starting a systematic discussion of the mathar orna, since it elucidates so many different aspects of Bangladeshi women's lives. Discussions on the hijab and the burqa are extremely helpful in shaping such a starting discussion of the mathar orna, since it is nothing short of being a prominent form of veiling besides the hijab and the burqa.

By definition, veiling in Bangladesh and much of South Asia is known as 'purdah' (literally meaning curtain), which basically means seclusion and separation of women from men and the public sphere. Such seclusion did not only have a religious basis, but was also largely used to social control women and keep them confined to domestic duties. However, this was not the only factor determining female subordination. A discussion on purdah in the early 90s illustrates that it was only one of the many ways in which women suffered from gender inequality owing to a complex social order (Feldman and McCarthy, 1983). Feldman and McCarthy (1983) analyze the functions of purdah in case of rural women in Bangladesh, showing how the reasons behind adoption of the burqa varied drastically before and after independence. Before poverty and landlessness hit in the 1960s, women more or less remained confined to their homes unless they had to go on yearly or monthly visits to their father's houses. The ability to seclude the women of one's family was considered a symbol of prestige besides being a religious virtue. Burqas could only be afforded by the rich, especially by

families who could go on Hajj (pilgrimage). Men going to Hajj brought back burqas for the women of their families and the burqa indicated the esteemed status of a village family because the men of the family would afford to go on pilgrimage. The burqa enabled women to be able to move around with lesser rigidity because now they did not need men or bullocks to travel. (Feldman and McCarthy, 1983). Gradually, after independence, women from poorer families began adopting the burqa because of the mobility it provided and because they were forced into work due to poverty or landlessness. Taking up the burqa made the statement that the increase in mobility did not affect purdah ideals and respectability, and also enabled poor women to aspire towards an improvement in their statuses.

The early 2000s was marked by rising tensions between Islamist movements and Western ideas of modernity. Rozario (2006) informs how a growing number of women have taken up the burqa, which is deployed as a symbol indicating a return to 'purer' Islamic ideals. Before the twentieth century, the subordination of Bangladeshi women was locally grounded in gender inequalities which applied to Muslim, Hindu, Christian or Buddhist women (Rozario, 2006). The early twentieth century called for "a separate political identity for Bengali Muslims" (Rozario, 2006), which came with the rise of East Pakistan that prioritized a Muslim identity over a Bengali identity. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 showed the power of the Bengali ethnic identity, but the uncertainty regarding whether the population of East Bengal was "primarily Muslim, or primarily Bengali?" (Rozario, 2006) remains, which brings into question the "religious purity" of those who identify themselves as being "Bengali first and Muslim second" (Hussain, 2010). This causes a lot of strain between the two major political parties, namely the Awami League, which is characterized as more 'religiously tolerant', and the Bangladeshi National Party, which is characterized as more religious in the sense of Islam. However, none of these parties had anything to do with the establishment of the Muslim legal code or the radically Islamic transformation that Bangladesh has undergone (Rozario, 2006).

This was done by small Islamist parties of which the Jam'at-i-Islami is the most victorious. To maintain power or to sabotage the other ruling party, one made adjustments with the policies of these minority Islamist groups (Rozario, 2006). The growing prominence of these Islamist parties owing to global Islamic forces makes it increasingly troublesome to 'institutionally separate' religion and politics. (Hussain, 2010). These Islamist parties vehemently oppose Western ideas of modernity and argue that there is a need to return to 'purer forms of Islam' to prevent "moral decay" (Rozario, 2006; Hussain, 2010). However, changes and shifts in economic and social realities (Rozario, 2006; Hussain, 2010) force an adjustment between Western modernity and Islamic ideals in place of repressive measures taken up against women, where some selective aspects of Western modernity are accepted and adopted along with a retainment of Islamic virtue. This is mainly mobilized across purdah or hijab, which women use to act as both 'negotiators in the public sphere' and 'performers of domestic roles in the private sphere' (Hussain, 2010). Hence veiling for women does not remain merely a religious matter, but becomes a political matter as well in shaping national identities (Hussain, 2010), especially for middle-class women (Rozario, 2006). In the process of making amalgamations between modernity and Islamic values, veiling becomes instrumental in helping women achieve various goals, such as to avoid being pestered by men; to break away from familial and societal norms which enforces veiling; to meet a satisfactory life partner; to 'reconstruct' oneself as a 'good Muslim' as a way of compensating for 'past sins'; to be part of a collective identity; and, most interestingly, to make sense of middle class statutes, i.e. maintaining enough distance with lower class women while at the same time ensuring that even though they are left out of employment opportunities provided by development unlike lower class women, they can 'at least' think of themselves as better than lower class women (Rozario, 2006).

This instrumentality is neither thoughtless nor impulsive, as one may argue that women are either simply giving in to religious subservience or have only ulterior motives to attain. In fact,

women's involvement in practices of veiling or even unveiling are much more complex and dynamic than it may seem. This is beautifully articulated in Samia Huq's (2021) work on religious aspirations and conditioning among Bangladeshi female university students with regard to the hijab. Huq (2021) argues how for these women, religion is a daily lived experience which, most importantly, characterizes individual growth in one's own understanding of religion, which is neither fully religious nor fully secular, but a middle ground that these women explore throughout their lives, being fully aware of their positions within their religion, and their unique understanding of it, which is placed outside of societal and familial norms and regulations. This illustrates how deeply women think about their subjectivities and how conscious they are when it comes to a practice that is the object of much debate that is based on women but does not necessarily involve them. This points to how powerfully women are able to place themselves within discussions that basically undermine or highlight them, both of which work to satisfy the patriarchal conditions of Bangladeshi society. If this is the case, then, does it not imply that even patriarchy can sometimes readily give in to the subtle arrangements that women make for themselves to emerge as, in Macleod's (1992) definition, wielders of powerful influence? It is in this context that I make the case that veiling can not only be conscious, deep and instrumental, or even simple and uneventful in case of many women but also authoritative, and the findings for my research below, following an analogy with Arlene Elowe Macleod's (1992) evaluation of new veiling among Cairene women, are committed to determine that.

3.2 New Veiling in Cairo: An Analogy

In her study done on new veiling in Cairo, Arlene Elowe Macleod (1992) contends how the idea that Middle Eastern women are oppressed by Islam through enforced veiling cannot be corroborated by the "assertive behavior and influential position of women in many Middle Eastern settings". Women's roles in power relations are way more complex because they are

“both active subjects and subjects of domination”. Thus, Macleod (1992) suggests depicting such power relations as “an ongoing relationship of struggle” rather than the simple domination/passive subordination image. In her view, this struggle is made more strenuous by “women’s own contradictory subjectivity and ambiguous purposes”. Therefore, she is not only nullifying the Islam-oppresses-its-women argument, but further implying that women themselves have a significant role to play in the power relations in which they are situated. She discusses this in relation to the veiling upsurge in Cairo, which she defines as not a “remnant of traditional culture or a reactionary return to traditional patterns, but as a form of hegemonic politics in a modernizing environment, making its meaning relevant to women in other such settings as well” (Macleod, 1992).

In Cairo, Macleod (1992) defines veiling as “a subtle and evocative symbol with multiple meanings that cultural participants articulate, read, and manipulate”. Some instances of veiling are as follows: where it is used to state which interactions are appropriate and to establish differences in kin relationships; where it signals class standing; where it is used to make underlying political statements about ‘cultural authenticity’ or political and religious associations; and where it functions as a ‘two-way mode of communication’ between the “wearer and the viewer”, regarding the wearer’s social and economic standing. Furthermore, moderations made to the veil also show how it is not simply an imposition on women, but how it creates a portal for communication between the woman who wears it and the person she interacts with. (Macleod, 1992). Drawing on Gramsci’s ideas of hegemony, Macleod (1992) characterizes new veiling in Cairo as something women have taken up consciously, demonstrating how ‘consent’ is in reality a “blanket term that can cover a range of possible consciousness and political activity”, and so veiling Cairene women are up against political and ideological struggle, rather than “top-down domination” (Macleod, 1992). Deciding to cover is a personal decision for these women, and they do so of their own accord, with a wide

range of reasons. Women whom Macleod (1992) interviewed had the following reasons to take up veiling: an informed return to religious and cultural values, beauty, dignity, fashion, etc. Macleod (1992) says that some of the more sophisticated answers included: “economic hard times and a sense of cultural crisis create a need to return to cultural roots in the face of an onslaught of Western consumer goods and television values” (Macleod, 1992). She was surprised by how much the answers of these women lacked religious sentiment, except for some of them. Veiling was also not considered a requirement, but a flexible mode of dress which women took up whenever they wanted to in life. Furthermore, one crucial aspect of veiling was making the declaration of being a mother and a wife. In fact, with an increasing number of working women in Cairo, for them, veiling “compensates for and even alleviates the dilemma they experience”, when they try to juggle family and work life. For these women, veiling makes a statement about being a good woman and mother while at the same time working outside of home. The new veiling thus seemed to be pivotal to Cairene women’s identities within a transforming Cairo.

Macleod (1992) conversely says, even though the new veiling movement is exerted as a kind of protest, there are “more ambivalent” intentions behind it, where women “accommodate as well as resist”, a manner of protest she defines as “accommodating protest”. This is because according to her, veiling Cairene women fight for the retention of their identities and statuses, while at the same time, they accept the perception of women as “sexually suspect and naturally bound to the home” (Macleod, 1992). This is because women are part of both the dominant and the subordinate cultures, where they occupy an extraordinary and ambiguous position, and “selectively attempt to revitalize and emphasize some of the old ideals” (Macleod, 1992).

As outlined below, Bangladeshi women also maintain such an extraordinary and ambiguous position and apart from using the mathar orna for many different functions and negotiations, one which to me is most remarkable is the way they use the mathar orna to establish an authoritative position over certain groups of people in society.

Chapter-4: Findings

Most of my interlocutors talked ostensibly about faith being an important part of their veiling act. However, this was neither the sole nor the main reason for veiling. In fact, the women were not fully conscious of any serious religious implications attached to wearing the mathar orna. They did say that it was only proper for a Muslim woman to cover her head, whether she did it partially or fully, that it was a marker of Muslimness, but they did not dwell too much on that idea. This was usually when they were interviewed in groups. However, when I interviewed them individually, interesting reasons came up as I dug deeper into their personal lives and conduct. For instance, a big reason for veiling was the extent of practicality and ease of dress it offered. Jannatul Prema, aged 35, recently started wearing a mathar orna whenever she goes out of the house for menial chores and emergencies. She feels like the mathar orna enables her to not worry about getting dressed and gives her a good alternative to looking good: i.e. looking moderately decent. She feels like covering her hair, her neck and her chest is enough for such emergencies and little chores and makes what she is wearing underneath the mathar orna less noticeable. Another one of my interlocutors said: “I have been wearing a niqab and a burqa for most of my life. Recently, I have discovered that this is not required by our religion, because God does not want to put us into difficulty. I still did not stop wearing these, because of many reasons. Firstly, it would feel strange to suddenly give it up because I would suddenly feel naked. This isn’t about piety or shame for me anymore. It’s about being at ease. It also saves me a lot of money that I would otherwise have had to spend on clothes because I go to the office almost every day and worrying too much about what to wear seems like a nuisance. Even if I wear pajamas under my burqa, nobody would know. It’s exciting that I can feel comfortable underneath the burqa and never worry about dressing up.” Sumaiya Anwar, aged 37, wears the mathar orna whenever she goes out of the house, and additionally wears a burqa so she does

not have to worry about getting ready separately. Also, the mathar orna protects her hair from heat and dust, and she believes this has helped with her hair fall as well.

Reasons such as these point out how, besides being a marker of piety, veiling offers practicality and ease in everyday life. In an article titled 'Behind the hijab' by Rahad Abir (Dhaka Tribune, 2019), he shares the discussions he had with his wife and his mother about the hijab. He was curious about why more and more women are adopting the hijab, and so asked his wife whether women were all of a sudden concerned about becoming "excessively religious?" His wife dismissed his idea and said to him: "There's nothing to do with religion here", and informed him that out of the fifteen female staff in her office, 8 wore the hijab. But none of them do it because they have any strong beliefs about covering and Islam. She said that there was a lot of other benefits to wearing the hijab: Hijab-wearing women "need not worry about doing their hair before going out. If they have bad hair or dandruff, it doesn't matter at all, they just don the hijab." Also, because Dhaka is such a polluted city and has such bad weather, "the hijab protects their hair from dust and pollution." His wife further added that women wearing a hijab "never strain themselves over what to wear inside, and they don't take the trouble of ironing their clothes" This saves them time, and also earns them "extra respect". About "ultra-modern hijabis", who wear "heavy make-up, eye-catching deep lipstick, and showy fashionable trendy hijabs", his wife said that these women caught more attention than women who do not wear a hijab. Abir (2019) was shocked to discover the unusual actual feeling his wife and her colleagues had about wearing the hijab. He also refers to how it reminded him of his mom who visited him often wearing a loose outer garment to visit him because she felt lazy and did not think it a requirement to dress up to visit her son.

Veiling also acts to create a safe space for women who encounter stranger men. Fakera Zaman, aged 32, has three other sisters and all of them have worn the mathar orna all their lives. She says it was their own little comfort zone because it made them feel safe and pious at the same time. Juthi Rahman, aged 33, wears the mathar orna whenever she meets strangers at home and when she goes out. She believes it makes her feel safe, and gives her a great sense of comfort whenever she has to interact with people she does not know. The best thing about the mathar orna is, she says, the fact that it does not draw too much attention towards her and that makes her feel more confident about speaking her mind and exchanging ideas. Some of the most noteworthy reasons that came out of the study were that veiling facilitated the movement, marital state and interaction of women in public spaces and with males, helping them feel closer to people they respect, upholding family honor, and, most amusing of all, it helped them maintain a certain level of authority on certain groups of people in society. For instance, Asha Zaman, aged 42, wears a mathar orna because, oddly enough, it makes her feel closer to her male relatives and elders. She feels like she is loved more because she wears the mathar orna, as she has more access to them and is taken seriously when she has something to say. She is also adored by her in-laws who endearingly call her 'bou', and she believes that wearing the mathar orna has enabled her to achieve all this. Rokhsana Minu, aged 34, wears the mathar orna as a signifier of her marital status. Many Bangladeshi Muslim women who have not worn the mathar orna all their lives somehow feel obligated to put it on after they get married. It is true that some conservative families do require their newly wed daughters-in-law to wear the mathar orna as a symbol of respect and honor of being a bride. However, after a woman has settled down at her in-laws' for some time, in some cases, it is up to her if she wants to continue wearing it. For Minu, after 9 years of marriage, it still is important to keep wearing it outside of home and in front of strangers. It is what sets her apart from other young women. Many married women feel this way and are very comfortable with continuing the mathar orna,

as they feel they are carrying out an important responsibility. It is here that I discuss in detail what I mean when I say authority with respect to veiling. When I asked my mother why she wears the mathar orna despite the fact that my father has taught us something totally different, she told me it had absolutely nothing to do with piety or modesty. She said that when she wears it, people know her to be different and other women, especially those who are younger than her, look up to her and consider her wise and are always looking for words of advice from her whenever they run into problems. People respect her very much and fear her, especially kids. Whenever they are around my mother, they know they can't do something wrong. My mother says that if it were not for the mathar orna, people would think she is open-minded and welcoming, which she absolutely does not want them to think. She wants them to be afraid of her and admire her at the same time. She adds that she never had to cover her head before getting married and even when she lived with my father in Saudi Arabia for a couple of years. However, "in Bangladesh", she says, "you have to put more weight into your words, especially if you are a woman, and there is no harm in covering your head a little if it makes people listen to you and take you more seriously. Nobody asked me to veil or wear a full proof burqa so why not a mathar orna instead?" Many of my interlocutors said that they have felt this surge of authority within them because of wearing the mathar orna, and this is because people don't know what to make of the mathar orna: is she a Muslim? Or isn't she? She wears a mathar orna so she must be important. Or, she must be a regular elder in the neighborhood, or, among younger women, she must belong to one of the most prominent families in the neighborhood. This is disconcerting for many people, especially younger males and men from the lower classes. Women who wear the mathar orna in order to maintain this authority know the position they hold well, and they use it to their full advantage. For example, my mother's side of the family is more open-minded and hasn't had any veiling practices ever. However, recently, they have taken up the mathar orna. I asked them why. They said that whenever they step outside,

people recognize them immediately and treat them with utmost respect, and shopkeepers and other men and women refer to them lovingly as ‘bhabee’ (a term usually used endearingly to refer to a married woman by younger men and women and outsiders who know them closely). They said: “Wherever we go, shopkeepers serve us first. Unruly boys and girls are scared of us. All this would not happen if we didn’t wear the mathar orna. We don’t want to seem too friendly or too open to just anybody. We choose to wear the mathar orna in front of who we think is appropriate. It’s not like we do it in front of everybody.” Women in my paternal family made arguments for the mathar orna being a status marker and a symbol that differentiates us from ‘women who don’t know any better’; it is also something that apparently makes us look more beautiful, and so more desirable and disconcerting at the same time-- people know us and so admire and fear us because of the fact that we wear either the hijab or the mathar orna; girls of this family are to be cherished and protected from the outside world and so it is a requirement to wear the mathar orna or the hijab so that everybody knows who we are and are to stay away. Most of my aunts had this to say when I asked them why it is so important to cover your head: “Because it’s just common sense. Why would you even ask something like that? We are not ordinary women. People fear us and so we are much better than other women. You don’t want to be walking around with your head uncovered like a hooligan.” When I urged that the Quran doesn’t directly talk about covering the head when it came to the manner of women’s dress, they said: “This has nothing to do with the Quran. You should mark yourself different from the rest of the world. All the other girls roaming around with their heads uncovered and not wearing any proper clothes to ‘hide’ themselves are not doing what is proper”. When I asked why they thought it was only proper to wear a mathar orna or a hijab to distinguish oneself, they said “it is our tradition”. None of them liked the fact that I was trying to point out that the Quran does not advocate the specific covering of the head. When met with counter-questions like that, they only gave vague answers and were set on the

fact that it was only proper to cover one's head if one is to be taken seriously and considered a proper Muslim. It was clear that what my aunts wanted most was for people to fear them.

Chapter-5: Counter-Arguments

All this is not to say that the mathar orna cannot be a marker of piety and modesty, or that veiling does not signify to some extent the oppression that the West points to. In a country where there is a good mixture of people belonging to various different religions, the mathar orna and other forms of veiling do separate Muslim women from other women. There are also grave religious and social implications for many women who wear it, and this factor should always be kept in mind. For instance, among my interlocutors, there are a few women who wear the mathar orna because they face a significant amount of pressure because of either their husbands' and families' extremist religious beliefs or because of the kind of neighborhoods they live in. In fact, some of my cousins who are of my age or older face this latter problem immensely. There is a significant amount of pressure regarding the covering of the head for the girls and women in this family. Evidently, this is not something all the girls and women of the family enjoy doing. One or two of my female cousins admitted to feeling quite coerced and restricted in a lot of things due to this family rule. Others even feel they are 'unlucky' to have been born in this family, because they are not allowed to do the many 'normal' things that girls of their age do. For them, the mathar orna is a major impediment in this regard. One of the older women I interviewed thinks that my idea of authority with regard to the mathar orna is kind of an overstatement. She said: "How much authority does a woman in Bangladesh really have? And why would people think that the mathar orna has something to do with the little authority that women here have in their lives? I had to wear a mathar orna all my life, both before and after my marriage. The truth is that I was forced to do it, first by my parents and now by my husband and in-laws. They all think it makes me look more respectable. I can't say I feel like I have gained anything much from it. In fact, it is not only uncomfortable to wear it, but it is also something that other people want for me and I don't. But I don't really have an option. I think I may have to keep wearing it all my life. How sad is that?" Another woman

said: “I know that many women feel like the mathar orna is multifunctional and helps them achieve many things that they would otherwise not have been able to achieve had they remained ‘open’ to society, but the truth is that the mathar orna should just be taken as what it truly stands for: i.e., whether you are pious or not. I see no point in obscuring its main purpose and mixing it all up with other things. Frankly women should stop doing such things so that people understand that Bangladeshi women are very serious about their traditions and their religion.”

Another thing that a lot of Bangladeshi women suffer from is a kind of psychologically enforced veiling. This happens when peers wear a mathr orna and a girl or a woman who does not wear it feels obligated to draw her own scarf over her head just to avoid feeling out of place. This is most apparent during family occasions such as dinner or lunch parties that involve an overwhelming number of veiling women, or funerals and *duas* (prayers in gathering), or even something as simple as during the *azaan* or the Muslim call to prayer. Ever since I was a young girl, I have witnessed this tendency among my female cousins and friends to reach for a scarf or orna whenever they felt like it was only proper to cover their heads when they were in the presence of other veiling women or during azaan. I myself have suffered from such inclinations until I turned 22. What is really surprising is that during the whole time that I had felt such inclinations to reach for my stole, it was because I wanted to fit in and did not want to seem like I lacked religious etiquette and modesty. These inclinations did not seem to spring from the want to be pious. Even though I am a practicing Muslim, I do not feel like my piety and modesty are necessarily tied to whether I veil or not. While I am now exempt from such inclinations, many women remain bound to these all their lives. In this sense, then, veiling does act as a medium of oppression to a certain degree, adding to already misunderstood ideas of the veil.

Despite these difficulties, more and more Bangladeshi women, even younger women, have taken up some form of veiling, especially the mathar orna, once they have realized the level of mobility, flexibility and convenience it provides, besides being a marker and even a cultivator of modesty and piety. For most of them, it is empowering and reassuring of the fact that they are in perfect control of their own lives and veil because they themselves want to, and not because somebody else wants it for them.

Chapter-6: Limitations of the Study

The biggest limitation to this study was that my analysis of the mathar orna did not extend to the two extreme classes of women in this society, i.e., the upper-class and lower-class women. However, this was intentional, because I have had the opportunity to witness the intricacies of the lives of middle-class women, and these very complexities were the main reason why I ventured into studying the lives of these particular women.

Another big limitation was that there was a lack of any systemic textual analysis on the mathar orna, which is why analogies had to be drawn from discussions that were available on other forms of veiling, which were nevertheless extremely helpful in grounding my explanations. This study was just a small attempt at contributing to a start on a discussion on the mathar orna, which is very much needed, as it is such a crucial social and cultural symbol in discussions surrounding the lives of women, and because it is such an underrated form of veiling.

Chapter-7: Conclusion

Keeping in mind that the mathar orna can still fall into the mainstream veiling narrative in Bangladesh, where veiling is eventually considered an expression of piety and modesty on one hand, or oppression in some cases on the other, this study demonstrates how there can be an alternative perception of veiling, one that allows for a more comprehensive understanding of women's subjectivities and significant roles in society, where the mathar orna can be an expression of authority and enable a partial reversal in power relations. It shows how women can in reality be wielders of powerful influence in case of the very thing that is regarded as an ultimate symbol of religious and/or patriarchal subservience and an inability to exercise true agency. Like the hijab and the burqa, the mathar orna not only restores women's individuality of voices and statuses as owners of unmitigated agency, but also stresses the importance of understanding that women can exercise authority within rigid patriarchal structures once we take a much closer look at their personal lives and try and understand how they can manipulate cultural symbols over traditional perceptions.

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Appendix A.

The Mathar Orna and Authority Among Middle Class Bangladeshi Women: Personal Reflections on a Collective Phenomenon

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Questionnaire

1. Do you wear the mathar orna? Why do you wear it? Do you wear it on a regular basis, or are there any specific circumstances under which you wear it?
2. Are you fully comfortable wearing it, or do you feel like there is some kind of pressure about wearing it?
3. How does your family feel about you wearing the mathar orna? Do they know why you actually wear it?
5. Do many of your fellow women wear it? What do they say are their reasons for wearing it? Do many women share your idea of what the veil means to you? How different is your perspective from their perspectives?
6. Do you feel like the mathar orna makes you feel oppressed in any way? How?
7. Many people think wearing the mathar orna is deeply connected to Islamic spirituality and piety. Do you feel the same way? Because you're a Muslim, do you believe it is your duty to wear the mathar orna?
8. Did your mother and grandmother veil? What kind of veiling did they practice? Did they wear the mathar orna too? Does your daughter wear it? How would you characterize the manner in which veiling in your family has changed over the course of these four generations?

9. Is there anything you'd like to change about the way in which the mathar orna is perceived in our society? If you were given an opportunity to do so, would you take it off? Why or why not?

10. Do you see any fundamental differences between veiling, and wearing something like the mathar orna? Does it matter to you if the mathar orna and veiling in other forms like the headscarf or the hijab are categorized as one and the same? Why or why not?

11. Do you feel very different from women who do not wear the mathar orna? Does it hinder your agency and your freedom in any way? Do you think people who think that veiling in general inhibits a woman's freedom is wrong? Why or why not?