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UNVEILING ROMANIAN MUSLIM WOMEN. AN INQUIRY INTO THE RELIGIOUS AND IDENTITY-BUILDING MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

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Abstract: Drawing on the existent literature in the field and on in-depth interviews, we aim to examine here the practice and the meaning of wearing hijab by Romanian-born Muslim women. In our attempt to show the particularities of veiling among young Romanian-born Muslim women, we take into account the social and cultural context, the meanings and the values that these women convey to wearing the hijab and the consequences that such a practice has for their lives in the community and in the Romanian society at large. We hope that the findings presented and discussed in this paper will enrich the research on this topic and will add a new perspective on the status of Muslim women in Eastern Europe.

Key Words: Romanian-born Muslim women, hijab, veiling, identity, Islam.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent war on terror launched by the Bush administration have put Islam in the spotlight. In addition to the widespread public perception that being a Muslim is equivalent to being an Islamic fundamentalist, there are other factors that have contributed to the heightened global awareness of Islam and interest in the Muslim population[1]. According to Read[2], such factors include growing immigration and the spread of Islamic teachings and ideas that are attractive to an increasing number of people and thus lead to conversion. Many scholars have inquired into the particularities of Muslim communities and populations, their beliefs and religion, their behavior in society, their values and interests. In the last decade, however, much Islamic scholarship has focused on the status of Muslim women and their representations in the Western world. It is widely acknowledged among both Muslims and non-Muslim researchers that the condition of women in Islam is largely misunderstood and, to a significant extent, misrepresented in the West[3]. Much research literature aims at correcting such misunderstandings. For instance, a great deal of studies examines the Islamic dress code, with a particular focus on the practice of veiling[4]. Nonetheless, the majority of research on veiling has been carried out in the U.S. or Western countries, both among Muslim-born women and converts, respectively. By comparison, studies on Muslim communities in Central and Eastern Europe are far more limited in number. With few notable exceptions[5], a Central and Eastern European perspective in the debate about Islam and Muslim women has not been explored enough.

Drawing on the existent literature in the field and on in-depth interviews, we aim to examine the practice of wearing *hijab* by Romanian-born Muslim women. In our attempt to show the particularities of veiling among young Romanian Muslim women, we take into account the context, the meanings and values that these women attach to wearing the *hijab* and the consequences that such a practice has for their lives in the community and in the Romanian society at large. We hope that the results of our work will enrich the research literature on this topic and will add a new perspective on the status of Muslim women in Eastern Europe.

The Meanings and Perceptions of Veiling: Evidence from Previous Studies

A visible marker of religious identity, the *hijab*[6] and the practice of veiling in general is an all-encompassing metaphor of Islam. In light of recent attempts of Muslim communities across the world to show successful integration, we witness renegotiations of their publicly assumed Islamic identity and reactions to Islamophobia, which are closely

connected to an ongoing "re-Islamization process"[7]. Being more visibility in the public sphere has led to debates, controversy and criticism over the Islamic values and practices, and the *hijab* has accentuated such visibility and, consequently, it has intensified reflection on the condition of Muslim women and Muslim integration.

There is a unanimously held view in the literature on womanhood in Islam that the phenomenon of veiling is associated with the oppression of women. In the West, Islam has been often portrayed as oppressive of women, which, by contrast to the Western liberated attitude, has led to a popular (mis)belief that Islam is less democratic, less civilized and even inferior[8]. As a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, *hijab* has been transformed by the Western perception into a powerful negative stereotype[9]. Furthermore, wearing a *hijab* is considered to be equivalent with religious fundamentalism and extremism[10]. Women who veil, and thus make visible their religious identity, have sometimes gained the sympathy of many non-Muslims who have pitied them for being subjects to patriarchal oppression and sexism from within their communities. Woman's inferiority to man in Islam is blatantly misunderstood by the West. Veiling is linked to the intensely disputed male-female relationship understood in terms of female biological, social and political inferiority, although in Islam head covering indicates women's acquiescence of male dominance as established in the Qur'an[11]. We are dealing with two paradigms, each with its own values and symbols attached to veiling. In attempting to explain the practice of veiling, the Western culture tries to decipher a religious and traditional symbol through the help of an evaluation grid of the pop culture. As Allievi remarked, "two dominant positions can be distinguished in the public discourse. For the West, the Muslim woman is by definition downtrodden and the symbol of her oppression is the *hijab*, the veil, which she is forced to wear. For some Muslim women – and for Muslim men – it is Western women who are slaves to their obligation to be beautiful and available, on pain of being rejected, and so it is they who are not free"[12]. In response to such obsessive narratives about women's oppression in Islam, young Muslim women have publicly reaffirmed their adhesion to the Islamic values and have underscored that adopting the Islamic dress code is a matter of choice and not coercion and that it expresses their religiosity, modesty and identity[13]. In their book about Muslim women in America, Haddad, Smith and Moore show that young college women had taken the initiative of printing T-shirts with the inscription "We cover our hair, not our brains"[14]. This is but one example of Muslim women's use of veiling as a statement against the uneducated understanding that Islam favors women's seclusion and restricts their freedom. Furthermore, the analysis of interviews conducted with Muslim women who cover themselves has shown that, contrary to the Western popular belief, veiling is actually an act of liberation, of identity formation

and of self-development[15].

For Muslim women, *hijab* and all the other forms of veiling are deeply rooted in the religion and represent an expression of the observance of God's will. Women who cover themselves affirm that their decision is connected to their devotion to God, and that their choice is motivated by modesty, dignity and spirituality[16]. The majority of women interviewed in previous research on the practice of veiling has underscored that the reasons for which they wore the *hijab* were different from the ones invoked by the West (i.e. submission to male-dominating society) and reinforced by the media[17]. The *hijab* is a 'symbolic curtain'[18] behind which women feel protected and private. The arguments that the interviewees gave for explaining their choice were very much centered on their personal experiences. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that religion has an important role in determining women's choice to cover, especially among converted Muslims, whose arguments tend to connect to an authentically religious discourse[19].

Additionally, research has shown that Muslim women refer to *hijab* differently according to their status, life expectations, personal experience and the social context in which they live. There are Muslim-born women who wear *hijab* in countries where Islam is the main religion, Muslim-born women who live in a country of adoption (usually they are descendant of ancient or recent immigrants) and converted veiled women who live in a non-Muslim country. Given different backgrounds and different contexts in which they live, each of these women will attribute different meanings to the wearing of the *hijab*. However, despite all the differences encountered, many of them admit that the main reason for wearing the *hijab* derives from religion. Certainly, veiling has a profound religious significance, but in addition to this, it is also "a powerful social symbol; women have come to use it to fulfill other needs"[20]. As reported by research based on interviews, many women choose to wear the headscarf in order to fulfill not only religious, but identity, cultural, social and political needs, too.

For many of the Muslim-born women who live in a non-Muslim country, the *hijab* is strongly connected both to their need to define themselves in a cultural space[21] and the urge to (re-)gain access to the public space. In their investigation of second-generation American Muslim women's decisions to wear *hijab*, Williams and Vashi discovered that veiling had offered them the possibility "to carve out some autonomous cultural space with a public symbol that [...] provides them with opportunities to become simultaneously public women, young Americans and good Muslims"[22]. To some extent, such recently observed developments among Muslim women living in non-Muslim countries are similar to the re-veiling movement following the Islamic Revolution that started in late 1970s in Iran. The re-introduction of compulsory veiling by Khomeini redefined the boundaries between the public and the private

spaces. In fact, this dichotomy has constituted the core of different views regarding the understanding of the practice of veiling[23]. The veil has contributed to Iranian women's liberation and "freedom of movement in the public space"[24], while at the same time it has ensured the "invisibility" that women needed to feel secure in the public sphere dominated by men. The re-emergence of veiling during the Iranian Revolution helps us understand how women used the veil "to loosen the bonds of patriarchy imposed on them"[25], despite the fact that the same institution (i.e. veiling) had been designed to regulate and control their lives. For some women, the veil has become a fashionable, innovative and trendy icon[26]. In addition to the powerful symbolism, an economic value is added to the veiling-fashion, which is viewed as an Islamic commodity in countries such as Iran and Turkey[27].

However, wearing a veil leads to the absence of Iranian women from the public and political spaces; the veil is used as "an object that is socially perceived as a boundary"[28] between the private and the public. The situation seems to be reversed in the case of veiled Muslim women living in non-Muslim countries; the veil makes them highly visible in the public sphere, which puts them under double pressure: on the one hand, they are subject to the community pressure since they are afraid to be rejected by their own group if they do not cover. On the other hand, they suffer from the pressure of popular stereotypes fostered in non-Muslim countries and according to which veiled Muslim women are oppressed, uneducated, and vulnerable. Such twofold pressure is manifested not only in the West[29], but also in the case of veiled Muslim women from Romania, as our study demonstrates.

In addition to being a complex and dynamic religious, cultural and social symbol, the *hijab* has also an essential role in shaping Muslim women's identity, especially in the case of converts. For them, the *hijab* involves an interesting duality, which simultaneously captures both their inner and outside world. McGinty argues that for a converted woman "the meaning of the veil lies in the biographical particularities of the convert and her experiences of interaction with the others. Hence, the *hijab* is psychologically meaningful"[30]. This is quite understandable as conversion generates important changes within the self and implies the development of a new relationship self-other. Very often conversion triggers a process of identity formation in which Muslim women acknowledge personal, religious and social transformations occurring in their lives. Wearing *hijab* is "communicating the change of identity to the surrounding world"[31]. Recent studies[32] have recognized that conversion is an ongoing process and that its consequences on the self-development of women who embrace it are still to be explored. Scholars have turned their attention to the analysis of particular stages that converted women go through, which have led them to insightful observations regarding not only the changes in

women's religious identity prompted by conversion, but also the transformations that their social, cultural and national identity undergo. Drawing on relevant research in the field and on the literature on social identity construction[33], we examine the meaning and the values of veiling for Romanian-born Muslim women. Furthermore, we seek to show how the women whom we have interviewed renegotiate their personal, social, cultural and religious identity by means of narrative inquiry into their personal experience with conversion and veiling. Although women's conversion to Islam is a starting premise in our research, the primary focus of our work is on the practice of wearing *hijab* and on its impact on the interviewees' self-development and identity formation while being Muslim veiled women in Romania.

Methodology

The goal of our study is to examine Romanian-born Muslim women's personal experiences with veiling, their reasons for wearing *hijab*, the meanings that they attribute to veiling and the impact that head covering has on their lives. To this end, we have interviewed seven Romanian-born Muslim women living in Bucharest. All of them affirmed their devotion to Islam (i.e. as followers of Muhammad), although they admitted that they were not necessarily actively practicing their faith. A combination of snowball and purposive sampling was used in order to recruit the seven participants. In-depth semi-structured interviews with these women were conducted by the authors in November and December 2012. Their ages range between 22 and 40 years and their professions include doctoral students, a primary school teacher, an online TV editor, a woman working in the family business. All of them willingly agreed to participate in the interviews and declared that they would not feel inhibited if the conversations were tape-recorded. Respondents were interviewed individually for between 30 and 40 minutes each. The responses were coded with letters from A to G, in order to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees.

There is an interesting particularity of our sampling that needs to be explained in order to better understand the methodological choices made during this study. Two respondents out of the total seven interviewed are members of the Turk and Tatar ethno-religious minorities. The presence of Muslims in Romania has deep historical roots. The south-eastern part of the country, known as Dobrudja (Dobrogea), was under the domination of the Ottoman Empire for almost five hundred years. The Muslim community in Dobrudja is composed of two major ethnic groups, the Turks and the Tatars, who have evolved through time in the same space as the Romanian Christian-Orthodox majority[34]. Recently, study reports show a decrease in number of the "autochthonous and traditional Muslim community" comprised of Turk and Tatar ethnics, while "a new dynamic

community consisting of immigrants of Muslim religion with diverse ethnic identity"[35] has risen after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989. It is, however, important to mention that the Muslim population living in Romania has undergone significant changes even before the 1989 Revolution. Between the '70s and the 80's, many Muslim students, especially from Arab countries, completed their graduate studies in Romanian universities, as a result of the efforts of the Romanian Communist regime to strengthen the economic collaborations with these countries[36]. A large proportion of these students did not return home after graduation and started a new life in Romania. Historical, social and political transformations in Romania have significantly impacted upon the development and the profile of the Muslim community in the country. Our interest in such evolutions goes as far as the family background of our respondents is relevant to their choices to wear *hijab*. We did not compare the social, economic and political backgrounds of converted and Muslim-born Romanian women, their life history or their belonging to a historical ethno-religious group (Turks or Tatars), as this endeavor would have gone beyond the purpose of our study. The Tatar respondent has highlighted that her parents were both "assimilated" Romanian-Tatar ethnics living in Dobrudja. The Turkish participant mentioned that she was born to a Turkish father and a Romanian mother, and that she was the sole member of her family to embrace Islam. Since the aim of our research was to inquire into Romanian-born Muslim women's experiences with veiling, we were equally interested in collecting the opinions of both converted Romanians and members of the Muslim historical ethno-religious community in Dobrudja. Furthermore, both the Tatar and the Turkish respondents mentioned on several occasions during the interview that they considered themselves Romanians belonging to an ethnic minority.

Findings and Discussion

During the interviews, we asked the respondents to describe their personal experiences related to veiling. Our questions addressed the reasons that motivated their decisions to veil and their opinion on how such a decision is perceived by their families, friends, colleagues and the Romanian society at large, the meanings they attach to wearing a *hijab*, and the impact of veiling on their everyday lives. We also briefly inquired about the reasons of their conversion to Islam. As for the two members of the Turkish-Tatar minorities whom we have interviewed, we asked them about the significance of religion in their families and about their backgrounds as members of a religious minority in Romania.

We have organized the consistent data collected from interviews into several sections that correspond to different meanings attributed to veiling by the respondents. Each interviewee invests *hijab* with far-reaching implications for both their personal and social life. All of them

have admitted that veiling has produced a crucial shift in their lives, as it has significantly contributed to their "personally and socially recognized transformation of the self"[37].

For the purpose of this paper, we have selected four meaning-categories associated with the *hijab* that we find to be closely related to the identity renegotiation process prompted by veiling. In what follows we present and discuss the *hijab* as marker of overlapping personal, religious, gender and collective identities as they are experienced by our respondents. In analyzing women's subjective experiences of wearing a *hijab,* we do not seek to depict either a negative or a positive image of veiling[38]. Rather, we intend to explore and understand the meaning of veiling in a particular context, that of Romanian-born Muslim women living in a non-Muslim, Christian orthodox country.

Hijab as a personal, not religious, duty

To many non-Muslims (Romanians included), a veiled woman automatically indicates her submission to Islam, to religious and moral values which seem very different to their own. Furthermore, to the non-Muslim eye, wearing a *hijab* is a public statement of embracing an Islamic identity and morality and, at the same time, of rejecting the Western consumerist and materialist values. Such views differ to a significant degree from those held by our respondents, which, to some extent, indicates a gap between the perceived meaning of veiling by non-Muslim people and the meaning that women who veil actually attach to this practice. Most of our interviewees mentioned that religious obligation is not a motivation for donning the *hijab*. While acknowledging the *hijab* as an important pillar of Islam, some of them also emphasized that there is no indication in the Qur'an that the veil is an obligatory condition for women's acceptance of the Islamic faith. The view is supported by other studies that mention the lack of clarity of religious texts with regard to the question of veiling[39]. Originally, the *hijab* was a breach in space, "a tangible curtain that the Prophet drew between himself and Anas Ibn Malik"[40]. According to Mernissi, the verse containing this reference to the Prophet's decision marks a separation between the public and the private, between the profane and the sacred, and its meaning later shifted to gender segregation.

Wearing the *hijab* is more of a "personal duty, not a religious obligation", says A. During their conversion, the five Romanian-born women had to rely on explanations and interpretations of the Qur'an by other people, especially because they did not speak Arabic. This has reflected upon their understanding of veiling, too.

> I asked if veiling is obligatory and I was been told that one can be Muslim without the veil, too. I said

> to myself that I shall never wear it. [...] In Qur'an it is mentioned that if you have reached a certain age and you are not attractive, it is not a sin to unveil. However, nobody does it. The cultural dimension is more powerful, since from a religious point of view I could unveil at 55, but women usually don't feel comfortable to unveil. Imams too do not encourage them, although divine verses should be more important than Imams' words. (C)

Interestingly, only one of the converted women said that her decision to wear the *hijab* was informed by "a religious duty" which is mentioned in Qur'an. In her opinion, veiling

> [...] is a duty for a Muslim women, it is not because X or Y tells you to do it, it is a duty for Muslim women, there is a verse in Qur'an, the women surrounding the Prophet wore the veil and then I thought seriously to don the hijab myself. (G)

She considers veiling a religious duty of the good Muslim women, for her the *hijab* provides a direct connection with God and shows her respect and commitment: "I see it as a religious duty and by this I show respect to my Creator".

Despite their acknowledgement that veiling is not a religious duty, for many of the respondents wearing the *hijab* has powerful religious and moral implications. In the case of converts, veiling seems to be a natural consequence of their choice to embrace Islam. With one exception, the Romanian-born women did not start to wear *hijab* when they converted. They decided to cover for several reasons, none of which was related to any kind of religious or external pressure (coming from their husbands, friends, family). Two of the respondents mentioned that they had decided to veil to "please God" (D) and, respectively, to "thank God" (A) for His help during a very difficult period in her life. For one of the converts, wearing the *hijab* has been the result of an experiment, in which religion and morality played a very limited role.

> I was intrigued by those who wore (the veil) and after one year I said I'll do the experiment, why should I wear it? I was against it because it seemed a formal issue, the moral justification. Morality is an inner issue, related to attitude, to manifestation, it has little to do with a cloth that you put on your head (C).

Irrespective of the reasons for which they had veiled, all women admitted that wearing the *hijab* "is not a trivial thing, it is a very serious matter. Once you put it on, it stays there!" (E). Veiling triggers huge

responsibility, both personal and religious. This was plainly underscored by the two women who come from the historical Turkish and Tatar ethno-religious minorities in Romania. Their family background has contributed to their religious identity in spite of the fact that both their families were "assimilated" Muslims who did not actively practice their religion. F highlights the importance of veiling for affirming the religious identity:

> To veil is to take greater responsibility for your actions, to be prepared to dynamically interact with the society. Veiling means that, to a certain extent, you are Islam for the others; you become a reference point to people when they think of Muslims and Islam. For me, to wear the hijab is to become more responsible, at least from a religious point of view. The image of Islam is reflected in your actions and then you become more aware of your actions. (F)

Whether they acknowledge or not the importance of religious rules in their decision to veil, our respondents attach a religious meaning to the *hijab*, as it is a significant part of their Islamic identity. With the exception of G, who said that veiling is a religious duty regulated by the Qur'an, the other six interviewees gave other reasons for which they veil, having to do with morality, showing respect to God, responsibility and even curiosity. Their reactions to this question might be influenced by the need to address the issue of assimilation of veiling with being a practicing Muslim by the majority of Romanians.

Hijab as a trigger of self-development

One frequently indicated meaning that the interviewees attributed to wearing the *hijab* is that of a marker of change in their personal identities, their self-images. There is little doubt that veiling plays an essential role in their self-development, both for converts and for members of the Turkish and Tatar communities. All of them have mentioned that the wearing the *hijab* by choice has led them to experience simultaneously continuity and change of self, which triggered a renegotiation of their personal identity in new contexts. For instance, E mentioned that while she has moved "to a different phase in her life", the defining features of her personality have not changed: "A friend has told me that she wouldn't have imagined that I would be the same person now that I wore the veil" (E).

One interviewee's account shows that veiling is a "personal aspect which depends on personal choice" (C) and she adds that wearing the *hijab* has a "spiritual significance" for her and it is a tool for empowerment. Veiling is a marker of her "inner force and detachment from other people's opinion". Throughout the interview, C underscored the

"individual evolution" that she had experienced during conversion. Before embracing Islam, she had critically weighed the arguments and the dogmatic and ideological stances of different Islamic schools of thought. She seems to have followed a rational (intellectual) trajectory to Islam as opposed to the relational (affective) path taken by the other women in our study[41].

Undoubtedly, the most powerful influence of veiling is evident in the identity construction process undergone by the two Turkish and Tatar Muslim-born women. How religion was perceived and embraced in their families had reflected upon their personal self-discovery and self-development. In both cases, their mothers had never covered and there was no interest for veiling or other religious matters in the family. As in many other cases of young women who embrace Islam and veiling, adolescence is a favorable age for religious revelations, when young people are in deep search for an identity. Both the Turkish and the Tatar women covered when they were in high school. Regardless of religion, culture, ethnicity or nationality, teenagers are struggling to define themselves, to find a root to help them develop their inner self. In some cases, this struggle involves religion and religious epiphanies that are essential to a meaningful life. Our Turkish respondent was fascinated by Islam prayers and customs that she had observed practiced by her paternal grandfather; her parents had no interest in religious duties. She mentioned that Islam had become a world in itself in which a connection with a mystic realm was revealed. Islam was a whole universe different from what family and society had meant to her. For her, veiling was a passport to a new identity, a path to an inner world in which she began discovering herself. "I was fascinated to see them going to pray for the rain to fall or going to the Mosque [...] Years had passed by and as I became adolescent interesting things happened". (B)

A smililar identity-making mechanism can be encountered in the case of our Tatar interviewee, whose decision to veil was motivated by maturity and liberation from family rules. Veiling was the core of a new identity, as she was struggling with the difficult position of being between cultures and between religions. The absence of religion practice and manifest traditional values in her family has impacted upon her identity construction. For instance, she frequently used the phrase "assimilated family" to emphasize the need of a return to the origins. "It was in fact the need to return to the origins of those who, in essence, are assimilated" (F). As a teenager she longed for a more powerful connection with the past. Having a Muslim origin and living in a Christian Orthodox Romanian society was confusing; therefore she had to find a way to find roots and values to build her own identity on.

For the Turkish woman, her Muslim grandfather has had a huge influence on her self-development. She is the only granddaughter who embraced Islam from all his grandchildren.

> I am the oldest of the grandchildren of the family and the only Muslim one. We were 23 grandchildren, but I am the only one who embraced Islam. Therefore, I was always in between and this had a great impact on me as a child, at least unconsciously. As I grew older, I went both to the Church and to the Mosque, but above all the most important was my relationship with my grandfather, who spoke Turkish. (B)

Later on, in high school, when she decided to veil, her mother was totally against it and even took personal offense; back then she stopped talking to her daughter for 3 months, which had had a great impact on B's development.

> For my mother it [B's veiling] was the greatest source of grief in her life. My mother did not want to talk to me for 3 months. For me, choosing this path was the shock of my life. Some mean voices said that I was in a sect and that I was fooled to join them, but I decided to learn Arabic. My grandfather died content that someone would carry on his name as it should. (B).

Adolescence and high school graduation brought significant identity changes to the Tatar respondent, too. She claimed her right to make her own decisions regarding her religious and personal identity after her high school graduation. Family ties were loosened and she has found the necessary strength to publicly affirm her Muslim identity and to accept its consequences on her self-development.

> My parents strongly disagreed and I actually didn't wear it, this was in adolescence. Then, after graduating from high school, you know how parents in Romania say: before 18 years old you are in my home, you do as I say, you don't break my rules. So I waited for graduation and then I chose to cover. (F).

For both Turkish and Tatar women, family opposition has had the opposite effect on their will to wear the *hijab*. By forcing them not to veil, their families actually contributed to the consolidation of their decision and helped them understand the veil as a personal symbol of finding and defining the self, as an identity marker of great importance for teenagers. *Hijab* was therefore augmented with the power to liberate the young women from family constrains and to facilitate the intricate process of identity construction.

Hijab as a marker of personal liberation

The idea that conversion to Islam and subsequent veiling are a symbol of women's oppression and, furthermore, a hindrance to women's liberation, has been invalidated both by scholarly analyses of the Qur'an and by interviews with Muslim women who veil. A lengthy investigation of the sacred texts has shown that, despite multiple interpretations that people hold of the Qur'an, neither does it support sexual inequality and oppression of women nor does it discourage liberation for women; on the contrary, the Qur'an might actually be a source of women's liberation[42]. Our respondents' account of the deep personal meanings that they attach to veiling is supportive of such findings. The interviewees have repeatedly mentioned that both conversion and discovery of their historical religious identities have contributed to their freedom and relief from previous gender and even sexual constraints. From their point of view, the transformation happened the other way around: they don't see conversion and voluntary veiling as giving up their rights by embracing Islam and thus committing to a patriarchal *modus vivendi*. On the contrary, to them, veiling is a liberating voluntary act.

Gender relationships have been redefined as result of donning the *hijab* and our interviewees have mentioned that they now feel relieved. They and the men they encountered had become more aware of the implications of wearing the *hijab*, whose visibility had contributed to a gradual cultural adaptation for both parties.

> The relationships with men have automatically become a bit distant. Before, it was very hard for me not to shake hands with men, not to kiss them on the cheek as they did not understand [the fact that she had converted to Islam]. Now that I wear the hijab, they have automatically taken the needed distance, I don't have to explain to everyone, you know, I am Muslim and women are not allowed to touch men who are not members of their close family, it has become easier for me. [...] If your reaction is moderate and adapted to the situation, everything goes well. (G).

Equally important, veiling has permitted women to fight against the widespread view according to which they are objects of sexual desire. Wearing the *hijab* has shielded them from sexual objectification. C highlights that before veiling her self-image depended greatly on the way in which others saw her. However, "when you put on the *hijab* and when the way you look really doesn't matter anymore, you feel liberated from the preconceived idea that women must be judged by their looks" (C). Veiling has also helped the respondents find a way to deal with their

sexuality. C also adds that because of the *hijab* she regained "possession of her own body" and, furthermore, she was able to "restrain access" that others may have to her body and soul.

By covering their visible body parts considered attractive to men, veiled women elegantly manage to control men's sexual drive and to avoid sexual temptation, which is "one of the major sins" (D). D further explains that her experience of veiling has been personally and womanly enriching: "because of covering, I don't get butt pinched anymore".

In some cases, the *hijab* appears as a marker of independence, a symbol of going against the wave in a consumerist society where people are being judged by their clothing. C mentions that because you wear the *hijab* "you have the feeling that you are going against the stream. And since then I started to wear it" (C). By becoming Muslims due to a rational conversion, C and F point out the major impact that their intellectual approach to Islam and to other religions has had in helping them see the *hijab* as a liberation from the mercantile and superficial contemporary society.

Hijab as a symbol of belonging

Perhaps the strongest tension felt by Romanian-born Muslim women during the process of identity formation prompted by veiling is that between 'difference' and 'similarity' in collective identification[43]. Wearing the *hijab* favors the deepening of community integration (be it family, friends, other Muslim women or the Muslim community at large). At the same time, the veil triggers these women's separation from the Romanian non-Muslim society; the visibility of the veil accentuates the public perception that Muslim women are different than the rest of the Romanian women. In this section, we discuss both 'similarity' and 'difference' as they are experienced by our respondents.

Certainly, wearing the *hijab* has contributed to the consolidation of the interviewees' status within the Muslim community. Sometimes, this community recognition was achieved at the expense of their own families' contentment. Veiling was challenging for G: on the one hand, her Muslim friends considered her decision as a "progress" she had made in her faith, while on the other hand, her family, already shaken by her conversion, thought that her covering "was way too much for them". The decision to veil came as a shock for C's family, too.

> In my view, my mother wasn't that bothered by my faith, as she was by the hijab. The problem is that I show a thing, that it is visible. I remember that she told me that if I went to B, do not come with this [the hijab]. And it took her one year in which she did not go out with me, then we went out in Bucharest and now she gave up. My relatives are

> very shocked, they don't understand this thing [veiling]; one of my uncles tries to say that 'you got married, therefore you are half Christian and half Muslim'. (C)

For D, veiling was very important and she has benefitted from the help of the Muslim community that issued a "Muslim certificate" for her "to justify the wearing of the *hijab*". She was required this by the Romanian police authorities when she applied for a new ID card and did not accept to unveil when asked to do this in order to be photographed by the police. Likewise, E is very fond of wearing the *hijab* and she does it for her family, too. Interestingly, for some respondents, veiling seems to favor the development of a sense of belonging to a community which extends beyond their own person to include their husbands, too. Some of the women interviewed feel responsible for their husbands' image within the Muslim community, image that they view as dependent to some degree on their decision to veil or not to veil. Although they admit that their husbands have never forced them to veil, their decision to do so was also motivated by their wish "not to trouble" their spouses. E is aware of the fact that the community's perception of her husband is influenced by her actions: "I know that he is seen differently in the community if I wear the *hijab*". The same holds for C who says "the first husband gave me total freedom, while the second was more detached when I was a Christian. Now he would make a scandal if I did not wear the veil anymore because his image in the community would be affected". (C).

Wearing the *hijab* is a necessary step in strengthening Romanian-born Muslim women's ties with a community which they feel religiously, ideologically and personally connected to. The sense of belonging is intrinsically linked to their moral, religious and social conduct. Not surprisingly, unveiling is not accepted within the Muslim community. By the time we conducted the interviews, one of the women had given up wearing the *hijab*. When we arranged the meeting, she had not mentioned this fact, which led to our shock when we saw her. However, we decided not to screen her since our main interest was to inquire into Romanian-born Muslim women personal experiences with veiling, and she did have a significant experience and was willing to share it with us. She decided to unveil after 24 years due to multiple reasons, mainly having to do with "religious" and "identity" crises that she had undergone, which were followed by a deterioration of her family situation. Although she unveiled, she did not give up Islam. Nevertheless, her decision impacted hugely on how she was perceived by other Muslims. She was banned from the community; no Muslim women from her group of friends spoke with her after she had taken off the veil. She said that she "had shaken" and "had broken" other Muslim women's "comfort".

While it ensures a sense of belonging within the Muslim community, veiling has the opposite effect upon the majority of Romanian non-Muslim

society. Basically, the difference prompted by veiling consists in making manifest a wide range of stereotypes that Muslim women are confronted with. Such stereotypes derive from new meaning categories prompted by the practice of veiling, which add to the existent "Romanian" vs. "Muslim", "Turkish/ Tatar" vs. "Romanian", "Muslim" vs. "Christian Orthodox". These new categories, "Veiled" vs. "Non-veiled", "Visible" vs. "Invisible", directly impact upon their everyday lives. A veiled woman has little chances if none at all to get a job in Romania. Those who have managed to get employed outside their family business or outside the Muslim community are very rare exceptions. Our respondents affirmed unanimously that they feel discriminated first and foremost by Romanian employers who are extremely reticent to hire veiled women, despite their outstanding educational background that matches perfectly the job requirements. A is a fervent fighter for equal access for women to the job market and thinks that "the Romanian society is not ready yet to accept veiled women" and thus the "debate over the discrimination of the Muslim women in Romania" is side-stepped. She also considers that Muslim women are "discriminated because of their *hijab* just as women who do not look like fashion models are discriminated, too". When they find a job, Muslim women who decide to wear the *hijab* suffer the consequences of their gesture. F mentions that she knows someone in a town near Bucharest who has a job and who decided to veil. When she came to work wearing the *hijab*, "they moved her desk in the back", which put a lot of pressure on this woman who eventually was forced to give up her job. How they are perceived on the job market and especially by their clients is crucial for Romanian employers, and they are aware of the rigidity of the Romanian society with respect to veiled women. G thinks that their reluctance in hiring Muslim women is also related to their fear of not being in conflict with the public mentality. "Some simply fear the public reaction" if they employ a woman who wears the *hijab*, says G.

Differences between the veiled women and the non-veiled women in the Romanian society are manifest not only in work relationships, but in a variety of other interactions. For instance, F highlights that a pervasive stereotype in Romania according to which many Romanian women marry Muslim men for money significantly reflects negatively upon social interactions. She says that Muslim women who veil do not receive equal treatment in hospital despite the fact that they are Romanian, entitled to the same social and medical assistance as any other citizen. "If you wear *hijab*, it is clear that you have money!" This means that the medical personnel (nurses and even physicians) expect some money as a bribe for their attendance of the patient.

Furthermore, G underscores that the physical visibility of the veil leads to moral and intellectual invisibility of the women who wear it in the Romanian society. Here is how she describes its perception by non-Muslim Romanians.

> I am perceived as a woman who does not think; on many occasions they spell everything to me, as if I didn't speak Romanian. But it is obvious that I am not Arab, I have no oriental traits. Their only question is: "Are you Turkish or Arab?" It doesn't matter that I became Muslim before marriage, they don't understand. Many think that I am mentally challenged and I am always asked if I got it. The authorities explain everything to me as if I am an 80 year old woman, very senile." (G).

The perceived intellectual inferiority of veiled women in Romania is acknowledged by A, too. She states that she feels this difference as "a wall" between herself and the audience. She adds: "but when I open my mouth, when I talk, the barrier disappears".

In spite of such perceived negative labeling of veiled Muslim women in the contemporary Romanian society, all our respondents say that they take pride in defining themselves as Romanians. Our interviewees acknowledge their national identity and tend to give it the same importance as they give their religious identity. Therefore, in order to avoid the denial of the self before conversion, these women enforce their national identity as an important element of their personal identity. The absence of what Jenkins calls 'shared belonging' to a national identity would lead to the dissolution of self. This would explain why our respondents chose to reaffirm their national identity: "I believe that I am a Romanian-Muslim and if I have to choose, I am Romanian." (G) In this case, elements that generate this shared belonging are the shared history ("My grandfather fought in World War II in the Romanian Army" – B), the Romanian language that is their mother tongue ("I express my Islam in the Romanian language" – G), the right to express their opinion through vote as any other Romanian citizen, the celebration of national holidays ("I shall not go to the church on Saint Andrew's Day, but I shall stay at home because it is a legal holiday" – F).

National history is relevant for our respondents and they use it to reinforce their belonging to a Romanian identity:

> I surely respect Romanian societal traditions. I went with my children to the 1st of December[44] parade and they enjoyed it a lot. I belong to the Tartar minority in Romania, but my grandfather went to war, and was seriously affected by it, he even sang Tartar songs about the Dniester battles. It is obviously a Romanian identity, our forefathers fought for the same cause which many Romanians fought and died for. (F)

It is the visibility of the veil that brings forward the religious identity, although, in reality, religious and national identities are overlapping. As E puts it, "when we go out, we are defined by the veil. It's Islam first, then Romanian".

Conclusions

Veiling is a complex phenomenon to which Muslim women attach different meanings according to their personal experiences and to the context in which they wear it. Our study sought to examine the practice of veiling among Romanian-born Muslim women and its impact on their status in a majority Christian Orthodox Romania. We focused our analysis on the process of identity formation and negotiation experienced by veiled women in Romania. We conducted interviews with seven Romanian-born women who wear the *hijab* and we collected and discussed their personal experiences with veiling as they had told during the interviews. In analyzing their subjective experiences of wearing a *hijab,* our goal was to describe the *hijab* as marker of overlapping personal, religious, gender and collective identities. We found that all respondents considered that *hijab* is part of a complex transformation of their selves. The triggers of such changes differ according to the personal experiences of each woman, ranging from personal liberation to community pressure. No doubt, the *hijab* constitutes a realm where religion intersects self-development, personal liberation and the need for a sense of belonging. All these are categories in themselves that re-join symbols and different cultural paths.

Our findings are in line with the research results discussed in the literature in the field and confirm the gap between the perceived meanings of veiling by non-Muslims and the actual significance of the practice as described by the veiled women themselves. Our interviewees' accounts indicate that they wear the *hijab* by personal choice and that it is not only a religious symbol, but also a marker of their gender and personal identity. But perhaps one of the most interesting results of our research is that of acknowledging the tension between visibility within the community and invisibility within the Romanian society of Muslim women who veil. Due to the small sample population, one limitation of this study lies in the fact that we cannot generalize our results to all veiled women in Romania, and we have to use caution when interpreting the findings. However, we are safe in saying that the identity meaning of veiling has a powerful influence on both the women who don the veil and the society in which they live. For the Romanian-born Muslim women in our study, wearing a *hijab* ensures a sense of belonging within the Muslim community, while having the opposite effect when they are among the majority of the Romanian non-Muslim society.

Notes

[1] *Acknowledgement*. Corina Buzoianu's contribution to this paper was supported from the Sectorial Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/134650 with the title "Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowships for young researchers in the fields of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences and Sociology".

[2] Jen'nan G. Read, "Introduction: The Politics of Veiling in Comparative Perspective", *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 3, (2007): 231–236.

[3] Of particular significance for are studies on Muslim women's status in the UK see Jawad, Haifaa and Tansin Benn eds., *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond. Experiences and Images*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003), in Sweeden see Anna Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim. Western Women's Conversions to Islam*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) or in the United States see Katherine Bullock, ed., *Muslim Women Activists in North America. Speaking for Ourselves*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); John P. Bartkowski, and Jen'nan G. Read, "Veiled Submission: Gender , Power , and Identity Among Evangelical and Muslim Women in the United States", *Qualitative Sociology* , Vol. 26, No.1 (2003): 71–92; Jen'nan G. Read and John P. Bartkowski, "To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation Among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas", *Gender & Society* , Vol. 14, No. 3 (2000): 395–417.

[4] See, for example, Bullock, *Muslim Women Activists in North America*; Kathleen M. Moore, "Visible Through the Veil: The Regulation of Islam in American Law", *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 68, No.3 (2007): 237–251; Marnia Lazreg, *Questioning the Veil. Open Letters to Muslim Women*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009); Y. Y. Haddad, "The Post-9/11 Hijab as Icon", *Sociology of Religion* Vol. 68, No.3 (2007): 253–267; Jasmin Zine, "Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of Veiling Among Muslim Girls in a Canadian Islamic School", *Equity & Excellence in Education*, Vol. 39, No.3 (2006): 239–252; D. S. Patel, "Concealing to Reveal: The Informational Role of Islamic Dress", *Rationality and Society*, Vol. 24, No.3 (2012): 295–323; S. Tissot, "Excluding Muslim Women: From Hijab to Niqab, from School to Public Space", *Public Culture*, Vol. 23, No.1 (2011): 39–46; Inger Furseth, "The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiations Among Immigrant Muslim Women in the Los Angeles Area", *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 52, No.4 (2011): 365–385; Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives", *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, Ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 95–119.

[5] Kristen Ghodsee, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe. Gender, Ethnicity and the Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Katarzyna Gorak-Sosnowska, ed, *Muslims in Poland and Eastern Europe. Widening the European Discourse on Islam*, (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2011).

[6] Non-Muslim societies and a great majority of researchers refer to it by using the word 'veil', which usually implies a transparent fabric that covers one's hair and face. Although the word is widespread it does not correctly indicate the well-

known Muslim women covering, *hijab*, which is not the Arabic word for veil (Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); 'curtain' seems to be a more accurate translation of *hijab*. In the Islamic world women cover themselves in different ways and accordingly we have different words that designate covering: *hijab/hidjab, niqab, burka, feregea* and *abaya* (see Bullock, 2002). Veiling has multiple equivalents in Arabic, but the most widespread way of covering implies only women's hair and neck and is called *hijab.* Stefano Allievi mentions "a kind of semantic war" on the issue of *hijab*, as there are misleading translations of the word ("The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier. Narratives on the Hijab and Other Issues", *Women Embracing Islam. Gender and Conversion in the West*, Ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 120. However, in this study, we will use 'veiling' and *hijab* interchangeably.

[7] Y.Y. Haddad, 253.

[8] Yvonne Y. Haddad, Jane I. Smith and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[9] Stefano Allievi, *Les Convertis a l'Islam. Les Nouveaux Musulmans d'Europe*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*, (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002); Rhys H. Williams, and Gira Vashi, "Hijab and American Muslim Women : Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves", *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2007): 269–287; Susie Hawkins, "The Essence of the Veil", *Voices Behind the Veil. The World of Islam Through the Eyes of Women*, Ed. Ergun Mehmet Caner, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009).

[10] Zine, 2006, 241.

[11] Bullock, 2002, XXVIII; Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite. A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, English tr., (Perseus Books, 1991).

[12] Allievi, 120.

[13] Haddad, Smith and Moore, 2006, 9.

[14] Haddad, Smith and Moore, 10.

[15] McGinty, 2006, 173; Lazreg, 2009, 11; Bullock, 2002, XXXIX; Wagner and Wagner et al, "The Veil and Muslim Women's Identity: Cultural Pressures and Resistance to Stereotyping", *Culture & Psychology*, Vol. 18, No.4 (2012): 521–541.

[16] Hawkins, 2009, 101.

[17] See McGinty, 2006, 71; Lazreg, 2009, 32-35; Bullock, 2002, XXIX.

[18] El Guindi, 1999, 6.

[19] Allievi, 1998, 49.

[20] May Seikaly, "Women and Religion in Bahrain. An Emerging Identity", *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, Ed. Yvonne Haddad & John Esposito, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 182.

[21] Rhys H. Williams, and Gira Vashi, "Hijab and American Muslim Women : Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves." *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 68, No.3 (2007): 269–287.

[22] Rhys H. Williams, and Gira Vashi, 286.

[23] El Guindi, 1999, 175.

[24] Alexandru Bălăsescu, *Paris Chic, Teheran Thrills: Aesthetic Bodies, Political Subjects*, Romanian transl., (Bucuresti: Curtea Veche Publishing, 2008): 157.

[25] Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women", *Resources for Feminist Research*, Vol. 22, No.3/4

(1992): 5–18.
[26] Garbi Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).
[27] Bălăsescu, 2008, 125; Banu Gökarıksel, and Anna Secor, "Islamic-ness in the Life of a Commodity: Veiling-fashion in Turkey", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2010): 313–333.
[28] Bălăsescu, 21.
[29] Haifaa Jawad, "Female Conversion to Islam. The Sufi Paradigm", *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, Ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 152–171; Haddad, Smith and Moore, 2006, 51.
[30] McGinty, 114.
[31] McGinty, 6.
[32] Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives", *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, Ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 95–119; Wagner et al., "The Veil and Muslim Women's Identity: Cultural Pressures and Resistance to Stereotyping", *Culture & Psychology*, Vol. 18, No.4 (2012): 521–541; Nicole Bourque, "How Deborah Beame Aisha. The Conversion Process and the Creation of Female Muslim Identity", *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, Ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 233–249.
[33] Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 3rd Edition, (New York: Routledge, 1996).
[34] George Grigore, "Muslims in Romania", *ISIM Newsletter*, (Mar. 1999): 34.
[35] Laurențiu D. Tănase, "Study Regarding the Muslim Community and the Islamic Education in Romania", *Islamic Education in Europe*, Ed. Ednan Aslan, (Wien: Bohlau Verlag, 2009), 367–402.
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[37] McGinty, 7.
[38] Bullock, 2002, VII.
[39] Lazreg, 2009, 8.
[40] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite. A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, English tr., (Abington: Perseus Books, 1991), 100.
[41] See Allievi, 1998, 73; 2006, 123.
[42] Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).
[43] Jenkins, 1996, 17.
[44] Romania's National Day.

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