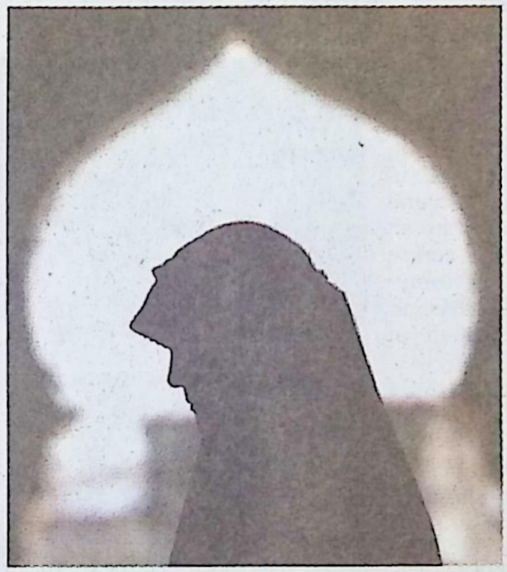
the motivation behind it is evolving: coerced modesty is being replaced with religiosity and community-adhesion.

There seems to be little understanding or acknowledgement of the fact that modern, educated women can choose to hold on to their faiths and their symbols. The Hijab has become the singular locus for judging the Muslimah. Her God, family, work, virtue, fun, entertainment or favourite YouTube channel – have been reduced to nothing. The veil is all everyone wants to save her from – not the Economy, not shouts of 'sister of Bin Laden', not hoodlums, not antidepressants and not abusive relationships. Only veils! Given the very limited inter-faith dialogue, the Hijab is often taken to represent strong political, instead of religious, standpoints. All this makes Lauren Shields' 'modesty experiment' fascinating.



Shields, an Atlanta-based author, went nine months in a headscarf, lose garments and without makeup to experience modesty and protest the Western beauty ideal. She says while it made her invisible to many in the workplace – she also discovered the pride in wanting to be noticed for things other than her hair. Of the Hijab, she wrote, "Women who make this choice are declining to endorse Western Imperialism and the sexualization of their bodies. It's a way of expressing modesty and resisting the pressure to be scrutinised against Western standards of beauty."

If security was the issue, they demanded to know why Western face-covering items such as baseball caps, sunglasses and hoodies weren't banned too.

It's true that Shields has been accused of 'Hijab-tourism' – a white non-Muslim trying to understand the condition and motivations of Muslim women by dressing up as one. But it may yet open more minds to the modesty aspect of the Hijab, which has been missing from media reporting and general narrative.

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The Hijab, often discussed in the light of women's right or right to religious freedom, fronts a darker side of xenophobia. In 2008, Alex Wiens, a stock controller, got into an altercation with a veiled Marwa el-Sherbini in a Dresden playground. He verbally abused Sherbini over several minutes, shouting 'Terrorist' and 'Islamist Whore' at the Egyptian woman. Wiens was eventually taken to court. In court, he suggested that that "people like her" were not really human beings and therefore incapable of being insulted. Note that he knew nothing more of Sherbini apart from the fact that she wore a Hijab.

After a guilty sentence, Wiens strode across the courtroom and attacked Sherbini with a kitchen-knife, stabbing her at least 16 times. As her 3-year-old son, also present at the courtroom, was being moved out – her husband tried to stop Wiens and was stabbed, shot by a policeman and ended up in a coma. Marwa el-Sherbini died in the courtroom. She was pregnant with her second child.

While Sherbini was dubbed 'Hijab Martyr' in Egypt, where she became a potent symbol of Islamophobia and persecution – the incident received lukewarm attention in international media. It would be wrong to take the grievous incident to be representative of broad anti-Islamic sentiments. But it illustrates, among other things, how the veil is perceived, not as a symbol of modesty, but as one of Muslim-ness.

September 4th was declared "World Hijab Day" in 2004, "a day meant to celebrate a woman's right to wear hijab". First created back in 2004 in response to the start of Sarkozy's war on headscarves, it has become a day to make a statement against bans on veiling. Meanwhile, Pakistan's Jamaat-e-IslamiIslamic party has been trying to use the occasion to further their demands that the hijab be made compulsory. The power-struggle over the Hijab spans across ultra-secular states to ultra-conservative radicals and clerics. Both parties forget that Muslim women, like everyone else, can – and do everyday - reason and choose where the Hijab belongs – on the head, in headlines or in the history-books.

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