

Women's Sartorial Freedom and Educational Rights in Shelina Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*

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Abstract

The position of Muslim women is much debated, as they are often perceived as oppressed, subjugated, and victims of patriarchal society. However, Islam ensures women's dignity as equal human beings. Nevertheless, cultural expectations and the multiplicity of interpretations of Islamic teachings lead to various conventions, practices, and beliefs that limit women's rights. Based on this observation, this paper explores Muslim women's sartorial liberty and right to education as depicted in Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*. It emphasises the distinction between the Islamic faith and Muslim cultural practices, and examines the ways in which the text supports and develops what Islam has given women.

Keywords: Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, *Love in a Headscarf*, British Muslim literature, British Muslim women's writing, women in Islam, sartorial freedom, educational rights

Introduction

Love in a Headscarf (2009) is a memoir about a British Muslim woman where its writer Shelina Zahra Janmohamed (1974–) searches for what she calls a perfect husband. Throughout her journey towards finding a potential spouse, she encounters a number of Muslim men with various personalities, beliefs, and interests. Some of them are practicing Muslims and some others are not. Janmohamed's main objective is to find a perfect husband and be happily married. She wants to fall in love and at the same time, she wants to find ways to practice the Islamic faith while being in a romantic relationship with her future husband in a modern Britain. She struggles to adhere to her own standpoints and adopt the rules of marriage offered by her "Buxom Aunties" who conform to

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their own Muslim culture derived from their South Asian roots whereas Janmohamed wants to find a new model that incorporates the Islamic faith in the context of modern British culture. Throughout her journey, Janmohamed encounters several obstacles which later lead to her discovery of both her potential spouse and a growing understanding of her religion. These involve among others questions of women's dress, education, societal expectations, and the nature of marriage. However, this paper will only explore the ways in which women's sartorial freedom and educational rights are reflected in *Love in a Headscarf*.

Love in a Headscarf was first published by Aurum Press in 2009 and was republished by Beacon Press in 2010. Both publishers are well-known independent publishing houses that publish non-fiction. This publishing context is relevant in reading *Love in a Headscarf* as it directly shows that this piece of writing is best considered as a non-fiction despite the fact that it may at times reads like a novel. Due to its life-writing nature, *Love in a Headscarf* allows the author to make statements that match her own experience as a second-generation British Muslim woman. However, it can also be problematic and ambiguous as it is hard to disagree with the author due to her usage of first-person narrative. It encourages readers to form a direct relationship with the narrator of the text. This usage of 'I' is potentially problematic and can lead to the text being seen as offering propaganda (Whitlock 10). Nevertheless, this usage of 'I' is also important as it contributes to making her story readily accessible, both to Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Furthermore, the title of *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One* foregrounds a definite aim of Janmohamed's journey, suggesting her main objective is to find love and faith. However, the word "One" is ambiguous; it can mean both a spouse and the divine, and her journey here can therefore be understood as a quest to find both a husband and God.

One of the distinctive narrative techniques of Janmohamed's text is that she includes historical stories of women in Islam and Quranic and Hadith literatures. She presents issues that are crucial for Muslim women in today's world and counteracts them by inserting references to stories of legendary Islamic female figures such as Khadija, Safura, Hagar, and Maryam. References to such women suggest that her text aligns with other Islamic feminist writers such as Miriam Cooke, Amina Wadud, and Saba Mahmood since all of them respond to the stories of historical women in Islam. These stories are used in making and supporting their standpoints on the concept of Islamic feminism. This stylistic feature is also in line with Margot Badran's definition of Islamic feminism as a "feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran (right and justice for women and men), in totality of their existence" (Badran 242). She also suggests that Islamic feminism involves a feminist discourse and action in

accordance with the Islamic framework referring to the Quran and Islamic jurisprudence to gain rights and justice for both women and men yet acknowledging their differences (Badran 242). Thus, Badran's concept of Islamic feminism strives for rights and equality for Muslim women and men using an Islamic framework. Similarly, Janmohamed employs the Islamic framework in asserting her standpoints in creating a platform for Muslim women living in Britain

Therefore, *Love in a Headscarf* can be considered a literary work that creates identity instead of revealing it due to its life-writing nature. One of the examples that can be observed is through Janmohamed's usage of the pronoun 'I'; it reveals how the memoir can be seen as creating identity instead of revealing it. The 'I' in many ways suggests a propaganda, or rather a narrative technique to attract readers to believe the author's standpoints. Janmohamed confidently writes what are and what are not the relevant criteria of an Islamic identity, this act indirectly shows how identity creation is done through the act of writing. In other words, she does not narrate or reveal an identity; she creates one. This idea of identity creation is almost parallel to Miriam Cooke's belief that "to call oneself an Islamic feminist is not to describe a fixed identity but to create new, contingent subject position" (Cooke 60).

Furthermore, Janmohamed directly expresses her Islamic feminist standpoints in a direct manner without having to use any euphemism or fiction-like narration. This is evident in her narration of the story of Hagar, the wife of Prophet Abraham, that refutes her Buxom Aunties' beliefs that women are secondary in Islam. As Janmohamed states:

How had the fact that it was in a woman's footsteps that Muslims had to follow been overlooked in giving Muslim women their rightful elevated status? The cultures of many Muslims chose to ignore the obvious facts and pretend that Muslim women should be weak, subservient and oppressed. Here, in front of our eyes, around the Kaba and walking between Safa and Marwa, it was most obvious that women were the highest ranking. What had gone wrong? (247)

This prompts the writer to consider that her journey of discovery to practice the Islamic faith in the twenty-first century may be possible since examples from stories of early women in Islam seem to support her position. By using the story of Hagar, Janmohamed emphasises that the position of women is highly elevated in Islam. During Hajj, it is an obligation to walk around the Ka'aba and between the mountains of Safa and Marwa. This action is an imitation of Hagar's act of running to and from Safa and Marwa in search of water for her son, Ishmael.

A second notable narrative technique of Janmohamed's text is the presence of a balanced portrayal of opposing female figures that strive for two opposing standpoints. The main character, Janmohamed, tries to integrate Islam

and at the same time create a platform that is relevant for Muslim women living in Britain. Meanwhile, Janmohamed's Buxom Aunties conform to their Muslim culture derived from their South Asian backgrounds, which they consider as Islamic and believe to be intrinsic to their belief, conflating culture with faith. They do not want Janmohamed to integrate Islamically agreeable aspects of British culture in her way of life. In fact, there is a vast number of Muslim cultures and there is no one (national) culture that can be considered as fully Islamic. In this paper, we will see how Janmohamed challenges the stereotypical beliefs of her Buxom Aunties through discussions of dress and education as she undertakes her journey in finding love and practising Islam.

Muslim Women's Dress

One of the prominent issues in *Love in a Headscarf* is Muslim women's dress. The Islamic dress code has been much debated over centuries since its interpretation varies from one individual to another and also from one culture to another. To fully understand this issue, the term *hijab*, also known as veiling, needs to be explored. The term *hijab* is in fact problematic, and there is much debate concerning its definition and the ways in which it is practiced. As a starting point it is best to see how the Quran speaks of *hijab*:

And tell believing women to lower their eyes, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what (it is acceptable) to reveal; they draw their coverings over their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper. (Quran 24:30-31; trans. Abdel Haleem 222)

The term *hijab* is not only limited to the act of wearing headscarves as it is often practiced, because it is mentioned that Muslim women are also required to lower their gaze, guard their private parts, and then, cover their heads to their chest. The phrase "not to display their charms beyond what is acceptable to reveal" has caused a number of interpretations as what is acceptable and relevant. There are no rules stating how a headscarf should be worn and no further details about the right fabric, colour, design, or fashion are mentioned. Furthermore, as Gilliat-Ray states: "[I]here is no such thing as 'Islamic dress' but, simply a set of basic standards and requirements.... Prophet Muhammad instructed women to cover their bodies except for their face and hands. The majority of Muslims interpret this to include covering of the hair" (229). The most common way Muslims practise this rule of covering their whole body except for the face and hands is

exemplified through the act of wearing *hijab*. We can observe that both the Quran and Hadith literatures only provide requirements of *hijab* instead of providing a clear definition of Islamic dress. Therefore, what is actually required by *hijab* is rather debatable. This, consequently, causes variations and multiple interpretations of *hijab*.

Fatima Mernissi attempts to define the term *hijab* though personally she is against the practice. She describes *hijab* as incorporating a three-dimensional concept where various ideas are interlinked:

The first dimension is (a) visual one: to hide something from sight. The root of the verb *hajaba* means to hide. The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. (93)

This definition of *hijab* is a useful addition to the one provided by the previously stated Quranic verse. Mernissi recognises three purposes of *hijab*: to hide, to mark a border, and to announce a form of prohibition. Crucially, this definition of *hijab* recognises it as a kind of protection for Muslim women rather than a form of oppression, and among Muslim women this is how *hijab* is often perceived. This definition, however, still allows for interpretations and variations as to how *hijab* should be practiced and offers no answer to the ambiguity in defining the ways in which *hijab* is supposed to be understood or worn.

Since there is no definite ruling as to how *hijab* should be practiced, Muslim women worldwide often dress in accordance with norms of their own cultures and nationalities. The term headscarf also has various names and styles in different countries. In the UK and America, a headscarf is known as *hijab* whilst in Indonesia it is called *jilbab*. On the other hand, in Europe and the Arab world, *jilbab* is a full-length coat whereas the same coat is known as *balto* in Yemen. In Iran and Pakistan, *chador* is an enveloping garment whilst in Indonesia *chador* is a whole-body dress including a face-veil. This is however known as *burqa*, an all-in-one dress from head to toe in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Moreover, in India and Pakistan, women wear *salwar kameez*, which is a long tunic worn with pants (Moors and Tarlo 136). These variations signify that it is very hard to define what is considered the right or wrong ways of practicing *hijab*. Furthermore, since fashion is ever-changing over time, Muslim women may dress differently in different times and across cultures.

These discussions when set alongside the Quranic and Hadith literatures are useful in providing a context to explore the issues of dress in *Love in a Headscarf*. Janmohamed strives to wear headscarves in Britain but she is surrounded by people who are discouraging this practice despite being Muslims themselves. To counteract this Janmohamed offers a discussion of the portrayal and misconceptions of *hijab* across cultures, time, and geographical settings, suggesting that they are mostly culturally driven. Of particular note is one of the

disagreements Janmohamed has with the Buxom Aunties. The Buxom Aunties do not agree with the act of veiling as they believe it will do more harm than good to Janmohamed. They believe that wearing headscarves will lower the chances of her finding a potential spouse and eventually getting married. On the other hand, Janmohamed wants to wear the headscarf as she believes that it is required for Muslim women and believes that practicing it will not be detrimental to her chances of finding love.

The portrayal of *hijab* in *Love in a Headscarf* therefore supports general ideas that *hijab* comes in various forms. Janmohamed contends that no Muslim woman dresses alike to another, and that one's form of dressing is very much culture specific. This variation in fashion is captured when she considers: "Muslim women elsewhere, and that consisted of the majority of Muslim women around the world, in countries like Indonesia, China, Malaysia, Nigeria, Turkey, and so many, many others, wore brightly coloured clothes, from greens to pinks to blues to whites and every colour in between" (Janmohamed 163). This illustrates that the Islamic dress code is definitely not a generic term as it comes in variations and multiplicity across cultures. These variations also suggest that Muslim women from different countries may have different beliefs to what *hijab* is and to what extent it may be considered Islamic. In *Love in a Headscarf*, the Buxom Aunties are of South Asian roots who migrated from Tanzania to Britain. Thus, they themselves have their own perception about *hijab* in comparison to Janmohamed's. Janmohamed thus strives to explicitly make a distinction between the Islamic faith and Muslim culture. As mentioned earlier, there are various Muslim cultures, and the Buxom Aunties' perception is only an example of norms of one Muslim culture. Muslims from other continents have their own Muslim culture and thus to put aside culture and Islam may be impossible but to extract aspects of the Islamic faith from Muslim cultures is perhaps possible.

Homi Bhabha defines cultural diversity and cultural difference thus:

Cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics, or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorise the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity. (155-157)

Cultural diversity and cultural difference may sound like similar concepts but when put side by side, they are entirely different. Cultural diversity is a positive way of seeing differences and variations and is accepting and accommodating. Conversely, cultural differences may at times suggest negativity as differences are discriminated against, compared, and critically discussed, leading people to judge which form of culture is better. Both of these concepts can be seen in *Love in a Headscarf*, especially when Janmohamed tries to distinguish her Islamic faith from her Buxom Aunties' culture.

In *Love in a Headscarf*, Janmohamed discusses different ways of dressing by Muslim women across continents. She explores the ways in which Muslim women's dress comes in various colours and styles. Some of them are popularly known as Islamic but in fact they are never taught as part of Islamic belief. This suggests that there is a form of dressing that is derived from a Muslim culture instead of Islamic teachings. For example, some Muslim women are covered from head to toe in all black. This popular fashion in the Arab world is known as Gulf culture or Saudi culture. It is the style of dressing that consists of a black *abaya*, black headscarf, and a *niqab* that covers roughly half of the face. However, this fashion may be interpreted in some Muslim cultures as unnecessary since Islam does not require one to dress in this way. Janmohamed discusses this issue, saying:

I wondered sometimes if people really did look at what was in front of their eyes. With pictures of Muslim women dressed in black used as shorthand for 'Muslim' or, worse still, 'Muslim terrorist', it was assumed that all Muslim women wore black all the time. This was the fashion from the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, which exported its opinions on Muslim behaviour and etiquette around the world. Just as women across the globe had adopted 'Western' clothing, it seemed that a certain segment of Muslim population was adopting 'Saudi' style to represent the rekindling of their Muslim renaissance. (163)

This illustrates that the dress of Muslim women across the globe is very much influenced by one's own cultural background rather than the normative teachings of Islam. Janmohamed's text implies that stereotypical images of Muslim women wearing all-black from head to toe are influenced by Gulf culture, and that they have nothing to do with the concept of *hijab* in Islam. This form of dressing is particularly influential because of the fact that the Arab world is the birthplace of Islam. Thus, there are many assumptions that the Arabs are the epitome of Islam.

This misconception has led to many Muslim women adopting this Gulf way of dressing. In *Love in a Headscarf*, Janmohamed points out that Westerners view Muslim women in this way: "[T]he headscarves were long, black, flowing pieces of fabric, draping over a long black cloak and sometimes with a *niqab*, a veil, over the faces too, also usually in black. The photographs were taken to make the women look eerie and inhuman, alien to the Western eyes" (Janmohamed 158). This portrayal of Islamic dress is a form of misapprehension because not all Muslim women dress in this way as this style is only limited to some women from the Arab world. Lamia Zayzafoon, for example, argues that the concept of exploiting women's physical being through seclusion and veiling does not apply to all Muslim countries (Zayzafoon). Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo further add that in many Muslim countries especially Egypt and Turkey, Islamic dress is a portrayal of their cultural politics whereas Muslim women from

Southeast Asia are prone to dress in accordance to their local styles (Moors and Tarlo 135). This can be observed in earlier examples of how Muslim women from other countries wear multiple styles and colours. This is also portrayed in the physical appearance of Janmohamed's Buxom Aunties who are "round matriarchal women in nylon *shalwar kameez* with their chiffon *dupattas* pulled deftly over their heads" (Janmohamed 46). This shows that despite the Buxom Aunties having migrated to the UK many years before, their style of dressing is strongly influenced by their South Asian roots. These multiplicities and complexities that Janmohamed's text portrays show how her account is used in representing cultural diversity and cultural differences within British Muslim communities of second and third generations.

In *Love in a Headscarf*, Janmohamed challenges these aspects of Muslim culture by creating a platform whereby Muslim women are capable of practicing Islam in a way that is appropriate for modern Britain. Since Islamic dress is open to interpretation, British Muslim women are prone to be more fashionable and incorporate some British influence into their dress such as wearing jeans, leather jackets, and even high-end designer clothes. Such dress is not Islamically wrong; but the only indicator that they are Muslims is, therefore, their headscarves (Tarlo 1). On a similar vein, Mahmudul Hasan asserts that "[h]ijab has become a signifier of cultural oppression and a powerful badge of identity and difference for Muslim women in the United Kingdom. Interestingly, September 11, 2001 event was a trigger for both anti-hijab propaganda and for widespread wave of re-hijabisation internationally" (148-149). This is indeed useful in exploring *Love in a Headscarf* due to the fact that there are two opposing female figures; Janmohamed strives to abide to Islamic teachings suggesting a form of women's agency and freedom while the Buxom Aunties are more cultural yet in many ways oppressed. In the aptly named *Love in a Headscarf*, Janmohamed argues that Islamic dress does not conform to being downtrodden, and it is possible to dress Islamically despite living in the cosmopolitan lifestyle of London. She distances herself from the stereotypical images of Muslim women:

I am quite different from the women you see in the newspapers or on television: I don't wear a black cloak or a veil. I don't live on a street with a mosque, but on a tree-lined road in suburbia. I'm not subdued or downtrodden. In fact, I think, some people find me just a bit too cheeky and sometimes they can be a little intimidated. I think that's funny. Isn't that funny? I want you to come into my world of being a British, Asian, Muslim woman. (1-2)

Janmohamed suggests that it is possible to practice Islam in a way that is still relevant to twenty-first century Britain. The phrase "I am quite different from the women you see.... I don't wear a black cloak or a veil" suggests that she is more interested in abiding by the Islamic faith rather than simply following certain rules

that are derived from specific Muslim cultures, that may or may not be Islamic. Furthermore, she states that “I wear pink headscarf,” I pointed out, ‘usually a shade of lilac or soft pink. It is my signature colour’” (Janmohamed 163). This motif of wearing a pink scarf is repeatedly foregrounded throughout Janmohamed’s text and subtly signifies that *Love in a Headscarf* promotes the ways in which Muslim women are given rights to practice their faith in ways that are pertinent to today’s world. This is also illustrated on the book cover of the 2009 edition of *Love in a Headscarf*: a pink background, a woman wearing a pink headscarf and sunglasses, and driving a sporty car in Central London. This suggests that Muslim women living in Britain are capable of integrating to the British lifestyles and at the same time observe their Islamic faith.

However, other questions related to the politics of dress are raised in *Love in a Headscarf*. Since the text is about a woman searching for a potential spouse, there are a number of male characters who contribute to this discussion of dress. There are several instances where some Muslim men are described as disliking the idea of *hijab*. In search of a husband, Janmohamed meets a number of Muslim men, and one of them is Hasan. Hasan is portrayed as well-mannered and intelligent, but he dislikes women who wear headscarves. In one of his conversations with Janmohamed, he elaborates:

‘I think girls who wear *hijab* are probably very religious and stay at home all day praying. They must be a bit dull. I like to go out a lot, so I wouldn’t have anyone to go with.’ I repeated his sentence back to him. ‘So a woman who wears *hijab* is someone who stays at home all day, prays all the time and doesn’t go out. And she is very dull.’ I looked at him smiling. (65)

This conversation between Hasan and Janmohamed offers some useful ways to the exploration of women’s dress. Despite the fact that the act of wearing *hijab* is an obligation in Islam, some Muslim men and Muslim women do not share a common understanding of this practice. Some, such as Hasan, disagree with this particular obligation. Hasan perceives that the personalities of Muslim women can be judged by their physical appearance and their choice of wearing headscarves. Tarlo argues that “too often debates about Muslim dress are so focused on the presence or absence of the headscarf that the rest of a woman’s appearance is somehow invisible, irrelevant and ignored. But scarves are never worn in isolation” (5). Indeed, a number of debates about the absence and presence of headscarves make people forget the initial intention of wearing it as an expression of faith. People like Hasan in *Love in a Headscarf* perceive *hijab* as a disadvantage to Muslim women rather than a practice arising out of faith. Although this assumption is common, Janmohamed exposes that it is a misconception. Janmohamed responds to Hasan: “Wearing modest clothing was described in the Quran as something that the believing men and women engaged in.... It was therefore quite simple: I believed in the concept of *hijab* and I wanted

to wear it" (168). Through this incident Janmohamed identifies the problem, and later, refutes Hasan's standpoints and arguments with the conception of *hijab*. She then demonstrates that the wearing of headscarves is her choice and not a compulsion. Therefore, this shows that Janmohamed is not bound to societal or cultural expectations. Instead she strives to uphold the Islamic faith. In Noemi Pereira-Ares' discussion of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, she makes a similar argument suggesting that Islamic feminism promotes adherence to the Islamic teachings and opposes any form of cultural tradition or personal interest of some Muslim men. Muslim women's freewill to return to the concept of veiling can thus be considered as a feminist act (Pereira-Ares 201-220). Furthermore, Hasan mentions that one of his reasons for disliking Muslim women who wear headscarves is that he would not be able to publicise or exhibit the beauty of his future wife. In other words, the act of exhibiting a woman's body can be considered as the act of objectification. This can be seen in Janmohamed's text: "Some boys had brazenly admitted to me that they wanted a pretty wife to show off to their friends so they could compete who had the most luscious partner. A woman in *hijab* would never meet that expectation. A woman in *hijab* would never want to" (Janmohamed 166). This act of wanting to show off women's physical attractiveness is unacceptable and degrading to their dignity as women are perceived as mere objects instead of individuals. This is entirely the opposite of the concept that Islam teaches men to protect women instead of degrading and objectifying them. Tarlo supports this idea as she states that "the Muslim woman" is held up as an icon of modesty and contentment, capable of thinking for herself, of being judged for who she is rather than what she looks like" (Tarlo 12). This suggests that Muslim women's status is highly elevated in Islam and no one individual should be judged on how she dresses herself rather than who she really is as a person. Janmohamed's conversation with Hasan shows the ways in which her Islamic feminist standpoint is expressed in front of someone who is sceptical about the headscarf, yet Janmohamed refutes his ideas by telling him that it is her right to adhere to the Islamic teachings regardless of what others might say about her decision.

The issue of dress in *Love in a Headscarf* is explored through the ways in which Janmohamed challenges the societal expectations of her Buxom Aunties and some Muslim men, and later tries to create a platform that successfully integrates both Islamic teachings and British lifestyle. She refutes the expectations of her Buxom Aunties and Hasan by countering them with her standpoints rather than blindly following their personal interests and culturally-driven beliefs.

Gender and Education

A second important issue explored in *Love in a Headscarf* revolves around women's quest for education. In Islam to seek knowledge is compulsory for all Muslims

(*fardu 'ain*). In fact, there are a large number of Quranic and Hadith literatures that speak of the importance of education and the obligation to gain knowledge. However, issues related to female education is often silenced, which, ironically, is not an uncommon phenomenon among Muslim societies despite the fact that Islam is a religion that puts a huge emphasis on the act of seeking knowledge. 'To read' is the first revelation which was sent to Prophet Muhammad. Surah Al-'Alaq is the chapter in the Quran that speaks of the importance of reading thoroughly. For example, it states "Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by the pen who taught man what he did not know" (Quran 96:1-4; trans. Abdel Haleem 428). This command does not end here as the Prophet emphasises the importance of knowledge thus: "When a man dies, his deeds come to an end except for three things: *sadaqah jariyah* (ceaseless charity); knowledge which is beneficial, or virtuous descendants who pray for him (for the deceased)."² These references to the Quranic and Hadith literatures clearly show that education is important, and is greatly emphasised in Islam.

However, despite the fact that education is encouraged in Islam, there is a misconception that women are meant to be uneducated and not supposed to be highly educated. Again, this misconception is a product of some Muslim cultures and is not based on Islamic teachings. In *Love in a Headscarf*, the Buxom Aunties believe that women should not pursue higher education as it may complicate the prospect of their marriage. Thus, Janmohamed's insistence on the value of education may be considered another form of feminism in her text. There are a number of instances where the Buxom Aunties discourage Janmohamed from pursuing higher education:

The Aunties have gone so far as to say that I must not study a Masters or – heaven forbid! – a PhD, because nobody will want to marry me. Then I will have only myself to blame. 'Nobody wants a girl who is educated,' they advise me.... 'What you need a Masters for to clean the kitchen I don't know!' guffawed the more buxom of the Buxom Aunties. 'Masters of making roti and biryani!' they both cackled with their gravel-laden, paan-tinted voices. (13-14)

This shows that the Buxom Aunties are against the act of seeking higher-level knowledge. They believe that Janmohamed has failed to find a husband and is unwanted due to the fact that she is highly educated. They further reiterate that no educational qualifications are needed to cook and clean the house. These aunties believe that women's roles are only limited to taking care of their households. However, Janmohamed challenges her Buxom Aunties' beliefs by graduating from Oxford and becoming a writer. She believes that education is

² Imam Abu Zakaruya Yahya Sharaf An-Nawawi, *Riyad us-Saliheen: The Paradise of the Pious*. (ed.). 'The Book of Knowledge.' Hadith 1383.

compatible with marriage because in the end she successfully does find love and gets married in spite of her education.

There are also other questions related to education in Janmohamed's text. Apart from the Buxom Aunties, some Muslim men portrayed in the text are also shown to dislike the idea of having an educated wife. Some of the Muslim men even dislike books in general. In the chapter "Groundhog Day," Janmohamed receives a visit from one of the possible suitors, Samir, who was a school dropout and is currently a businessman. Janmohamed describes Samir's first statement in their conversation on his entering the house: "Whose books are all those?" he asked, in what I thought wonderment and awe. I smiled conceitedly. "They are all mine," I boasted. He turned and looked at me witheringly and said, "I hate books, I hate all books. I never ever read, and I don't like people who like books" (Janmohamed 80). This shows a negative response by a Muslim man towards the culture of reading and education. This demotivating response is clearly culturally-driven because it is in total opposition to what Islam teaches. On the other hand, Janmohamed's grandfather's decision to prioritise Islamic teachings over cultural expectations shows that it is possible for men of all generations to behave otherwise. Sariya Contractor states that "Islam gives freedom to educate themselves and to work, but Muslims may not. Sometimes, it is this authorisation of Muslims which gives a wrong picture of Islam" (135). In other words, to restrict Muslim women from seeking higher education is an unrealistic cultural practice especially in this twenty-first century. Meanwhile, what Islam teaches Muslims, is that the obligation to seek knowledge is relevant and in fact encouraged in today's world. As Haifaa Jawad suggests, female education is restricted by social customs rather than guided by Islamic principles of knowledge (Jawad 3). This can be observed in both the incidents with the Buxom Aunties and Samir as their beliefs are products of cultural expectations rather than of the Islamic faith itself. However, Janmohamed challenges this misapprehension by basing her argument on one of the well-known Hadiths on education:

Education was part of religion, and one of the great Islamic sayings from Muhammad was 'Educate yourself, even if you travel to China.' Back then, China was a distant and mysterious empire on the other side of the world. My grandfather's insistence that religion took priority over cultural expectations had a strong impact on my mother's faith, because setting faith over tradition still informed her approach to life. (38)

Janmohamed counteracts the cultural expectations that women should not be educated in a very intelligent way. This can be seen as she inserts a relevant Hadith to support and promote female education. She also proves that her Islamic feminist standpoint of pursuing higher education is realistic as opposed to her Buxom Aunties' and Samir's perceptions.

These questions on education do not end here, as Janmohamed and her friend, Sara, then go travelling and are caught in a disagreement with a French girl, Anne, whilst crossing the Jordanian desert. The disagreement begins when Anne accuses Janmohamed and Sara of being uneducated because they are wearing headscarves:

The French girl, Anne, eventually spoke. ‘Aren’t you hot wearing those scarves on your heads? It’s better to wear them in this heat than not, you’ll get sunstroke without one,’ said Sara, pointing to the two boys whose baseball caps were covering their heads and casting shade over their faces. ‘Besides, it’s our choice.’... ‘You people are backward, living in the Middle Ages, with a religion of ignorant Arabs. You should get educated and learn some proper values like we have developed in Europe.’ (190)

Anne articulates many common misconceptions and overgeneralises that *hijab*-wearing Muslim women are uneducated as she seems to correlate the act of veiling with one’s educational level. This is, however, a misconception as one’s intellect is not linked to one’s physical appearance regardless of whether one wears a headscarf or not. Miriam Cooke also argues that the Islamic dress code has no connection to one’s intellect and should not be perceived as a failure in terms of educational and professional life. Instead, it should be a sign of integration of education and a sign of religious observance (*Zayzafoon*). This can be observed in *Love in a Headscarf* as both signs of integration and education and religious observance are portrayed through Janmohamed’s and Sara’s characters. They refute Anne’s remark:

‘Sara,’ I turned to face her, ‘did you not study “enlightened” European teachings whilst you were at Oxford? I thought you won a first for your essay on rationalist thinkers?’ Sara switched into perfect French to carry on the conversation and I followed her lead. ‘I’m not Arab, are you Shelina?’ she teased me. I switched back into posh English accent. ‘I’m European, aren’t you, Sara? I was born in London and have lived there all my life.’ I paused. ‘Apart from when I studied at Oxford.’ (190)

This response shows that Janmohamed does not only argue or merely state points about the importance of education as when she was arguing with her Buxom Aunties, but she lives up to her words by pursuing her studies at one of the top universities in the world. This suggests that Islamic feminism in *Love in a Headscarf* is also presented through the ways in which Janmohamed handles arguments and judgements by both Muslims and non-Muslims. Furthermore, Janmohamed challenges social expectations and Western perceptions by presenting that it is possible to integrate Muslimness (Islam) and Britishness. Janmohamed is portrayed surviving the Western education system and life in London, and at the same time, she is capable of observing and developing her Islamic faith along her journey. It is also worth noting that Janmohamed is a writer and books are

important in shaping her ideas as an Islamic feminist. *Love in a Headscarf* is a life-writing text, but the scenario between Janmohamed, Sara, and Anna might not be necessarily realistic. Rather, it is used to voice certain misconceptions and positions regarding Muslim women's education. *Love in a Headscarf* derives its power from its status as life-writing thus, in many ways, the text creates a form of identity that is very much influenced by faith and at the same time relevant to British Muslim women.

Conclusion

This paper has explored Muslim women's dress and education as described in Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*. The protagonist of the story prioritises the Islamic faith over cultural practices epitomised by Buxom Aunties. Janmohamed acknowledges that Islam and Muslim culture cannot be distinguished from one another entirely but nevertheless one needs to create a platform that is relevant to Muslim women living in Britain. The Buxom Aunties' Muslim culture is not considered all-wrong but must be challenged as not all of their beliefs are realistic nor in line with the teachings of Islam. For instance, their stance that women should not be (highly) educated, must be of lesser value to men, and behave a certain way are simply products of cultural and societal expectations, and have nothing to do with Islam. In place of these cultural models, the question of Muslim women's dress in *Love in Headscarf* represents cultural diversity and cultural differences on different levels, reinforcing the idea that Muslim cultures are plural and differ from one another.

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