

Hijabed like Me
A Non-Muslim Woman Experiments with *Hijab*

محجبة مثلي

تجربة امرأة غير مسلمة مع الحجاب

{English - انجليزي}

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{باللغة الإنجليزية}

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I walked down the street in my long white dress and inch-long, black hair one afternoon, and truck drivers whistled and shouted obscenities at me. I felt defeated. I had just stepped out of a hair salon. I had cut my hair short, telling the hairdresser to trim it as she would a guy's. I sat numbly as my hairdresser skillfully sheared into my shoulder-length hair with her scissors, asking me with every inch she cut off if I was freaking out yet. I wasn't freaking out, but I felt self-mutilated.

I was obliterating my femininity:

It wasn't just another haircut. It meant so much more. I was trying to appear androgynous by cutting my hair. I wanted to obliterate my femininity. Yet that did not prevent some men from treating me as a sex object. I was mistaken. It was not my femininity that was problematic, but my sexuality, or rather the sexuality that some men had ascribed to me based on my biological sex. They reacted to me as they saw me and not as I truly am. Why should it even matter how they see me, as long as I know who I am? But it does. I believe that men who see women as only sexual beings often commit violence against them, such as rape and battery. Sexual abuse and assault are not only my fears, but my reality.

I was molested and raped. My experiences with men who violated me have made me angry and frustrated. How do I stop the violence? How do I prevent men from seeing me as an object rather than a female? How do I stop them from equating the two? How do I proceed with life after experiencing what others only dread? The experiences have left me with questions about my identity. Am I just another Chinese-American female? I used to think that I have to arrive at a conclusion about who I am, but now I realize that my identity is constantly evolving.

My experience of being "hijabed":

One experience that was particularly educational was when I "dressed up" as a Muslim woman for a drive along Crenshaw Boulevard with three Muslim men as part of a news magazine project. I wore a white, long-sleeved cotton shirt, jeans, tennis shoes, and a flowery silk scarf that covered my head, which I borrowed from a Muslim woman.¹ Not only did I look the part, I believed I felt the part. Of course, I wouldn't really know what it feels like to be hijabed. I coined this word for the lack of a better term everyday, because I was not raised with Islamic teachings. However, people perceived me as a Muslim woman and did not treat me as a sexual being by making cruel remarks. I noticed that men's eyes did not glide over my body as has happened when I wasn't hijabed. I was fully clothed, exposing only my face.

¹ This does not mean that it is the Islamic *hijab*.

I remembered walking into an Islamic center and an African-American gentleman inside addressed me as "sister," and asked where I came from. I told him I was originally from China. That didn't seem to matter. There was a sense of closeness between us because he assumed I was Muslim. I didn't know how to break the news to him because I wasn't sure if I was or not. I walked into the store that sold African jewelry and furniture and another gentleman asked me as I was walking out if I was Muslim. I looked at him and smiled, not knowing how to respond. I chose not to answer.

Being *hijabed* changed others' perception of me:

Outside the store, I asked one of the Muslim men I was with, "Am I Muslim?" He explained that everything that breathes and submits is. I have concluded that I may be and just don't know it. I haven't labeled myself as such yet. I don't know enough about Islam to assert that I am Muslim. Though I don't pray five times a day, go to a mosque, fast, nor cover my head with a scarf daily, this does not mean that I am not Muslim.² These seem to be the natural manifestations of what is within. How I am inside does not directly change whether I am *hijabed* or not. It is others' perception of me that was changed. Repeated experiences with others in turn create a self-image.

Hijab as oppression: a superficial and misguided view:

I consciously chose to be hijabed because I was searching for respect from men.³ Initially, as both Women's Studies major and a thinking female, I bought into the Western view that the wearing of a scarf is oppressive. After this experience and much reflection, I have arrived at the conclusion that such a view is superficial and misguided.

The most liberating experience of my life:

I covered up that day out of choice, and it was the most liberating experience of my life. I now see alternatives to being a woman. I discovered that the way I dress dictated others' reaction towards me. It saddens me that this is a reality. It is a reality that I have accepted, and chose to conquer rather than be conquered by it. It was my sexuality that I covered, not my femininity. The covering of the former allowed the liberation of the latter.

This article was originally published in *Al-Talib*, the newsmagazine of the Muslim Students' Association of the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) in October 1994. At the time of its publication, Kathy Chin was a senior at UCLA majoring in Psychobiology and Women's Studies.

² To be a Muslim, you must testify that "There is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." (Reviewer)

³ If you choose to be a Muslim, it should be because you want the right way of Allah regardless any other intention. (Reviewer)