



# BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

## New Middle Eastern Studies

Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:

<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/>

---

### **‘Strategies of Recognition’ and Palestinian Immigrant Women’s Dress: Forging Communities and Negotiating Power Relations**

Author(s): Enaya Othman

**To cite this article:** Othman, Enaya, “‘Strategies of Recognition’ and Palestinian Immigrant Women’s Dress: Forging Communities and Negotiating Power Relations”, *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 5 (2015), <<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1447>>.

**To link to this article:** <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1447>

Online Publication Date: 2 November 2015

---

#### **Disclaimer and Copyright**

The NMES editors and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information contained in the e-journal. However, the editors and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness or suitability for any purpose of the content and disclaim all such representations and warranties whether express or implied to the maximum extent permitted by law. Any views expressed in this publication are the views of the authors and not the views of the Editors or the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies.

Copyright New Middle Eastern Studies, 2015. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior written permission from New Middle Eastern Studies, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed, in writing.

#### **Terms and conditions:**

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# **‘Strategies of Recognition’ and Palestinian Immigrant Women’s Dress: Forging Communities and Negotiating Power Relations**

ENAYA OTHMAN\*

**Abstract** *This paper examines the narratives of twenty-two Palestinian immigrant women who settled in the Milwaukee area in order to demonstrate the particular ways in which they used their dress as a means to claim places of importance and exert influence in their communities. While women’s clothing conventions are the product of social and cultural powers that operate to ‘discipline the body,’ nevertheless, women subject to these forces deliberately choose to maneuver within their society’s standard code of dress for mobility. Because of this, the standards for dress do not simply discipline; they are a means by which women can reassign their roles within their communities. That is, the deliberate use of clothing within a defined temporal and spatial context allows women to position themselves in places of authority and power. This paper illuminates how Palestinian women identified themselves with their families, communities, regions, religion, and ethnicity during two distinctive periods between the 1960s and the 2000s. In each period, women attached different meanings to their dress, meanings that are directed towards recognition, social mobility, and expanding their roles both inside and outside of their homes.*

## **Introduction**

This study explores how the meaning of immigrant Palestinian Muslim women’s dress has changed in the greater Milwaukee area depending on generational, historical, social, and cultural conditions. Most studies on Muslim women’s dress focus on whether women have a choice in the way they dress. However, the importance of this study is in the approach of examining how women negotiate their identity by conceptualizing, utilizing, and exploiting the modes of dress in order to enlarge social role and claim places of importance outside of their homes (i.e. in mosques, workplaces, regional and national conventions) during two distinctive periods between the 1960s and the 2000s in which the politics of ethnicity, nationality, and religion changed noticeably depending on national and international factors.<sup>1</sup> This means that while many women assume that the

---

\* Dr. Enaya Othman is an Assistant Professor of Arabic at Marquette University and is President of the the Arab and Muslim Women’s Research and Resource Institute in Milwaukee.

<sup>1</sup> Portions of the twenty-two oral interviews used in this study were conducted as part of a large oral history project that has been taking place since 2010. The project is led by the Arab and Muslim Women’s Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRRI), a non-profit organization that focuses on collecting the narratives of women from the Arab and Muslim communities in greater Milwaukee region. Wisconsin

way they dress is their choice, their choices are in fact circumscribed by a system of power relations or an 'acquired system of schemes'.<sup>2</sup> This study focuses on the personal narratives of twenty-two Palestinian immigrant women, twelve of whom migrated to the United States between 1960 and 1980, and ten of whom migrated after 1989. I also draw my information from over eighty other interviews conducted among men and women from the Arab and Muslim communities in Milwaukee. Five of these interviews were conducted with the Muslim communities' leaders, three of whom are Palestinian and two of whom are Pakistani. In addition to scholarly research, community members' photographs, and focus group discussion, I use my observations as a member of the Arab and Muslim communities in Milwaukee for the past thirty years. My conclusions do shed light on the significant meaning of these personal stories and on the motives behind the utilization of cultural and religious clothes. Although this study confirms the pattern other studies highlight among Muslim women in different communities in the United States,<sup>3</sup> it also provides different reasons behind changing of dress behavior among Palestinian immigrant women. The reason for choosing the Palestinian community in Milwaukee is two-fold: first, this group is the largest in Milwaukee and began to immigrate in large numbers after WWII and therefore influenced the social, political, and cultural life of the Muslim immigrant communities living in Greater Milwaukee area; second, the changing meaning of dress among this community is overwhelmingly apparent and related to the modes of shifting identification of Muslim communities in general, as well as to the particular situation of Palestinians as displaced people living the diaspora and increasingly using cultural symbols, such as authentic clothing, that express unity and belonging among them as a group. The selection was based on the interviewees' time of migration and the use of snowball method sampling.<sup>4</sup> Most of these immigrants came from the Ramallah region and belonged to the middle class. I traced how modes of dress changed among these same women during the two historical periods under examination. Our sample is not representative of all women in the Arab community, but it does shed light on revealing personal stories and motives behind the utilization of cultural and religious clothes.

I employ Homi Bhabha's concept of 'strategies of recognition'<sup>5</sup> to examine how these Muslim women used ways of dress to demonstrate belonging, affiliation, and solidarity with a group. That is, I consider how dress is associated with ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, and class.<sup>6</sup> While it is true that Muslim women's bodies, dress, and

---

Humanities Council funded part of this research through a grant given to AMWRI. The author conducted the other part of the interviews in 1998. The selection was based on the interviewees' time of migration.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 95.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Leila Ahmad, *The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Hollie Kopp, "Dress and Diversity: Muslim Women and Islamic Dress in an Immigrant/Minority Context," *The Muslim World*, 92 (Spring 2002): 59-78.

<sup>4</sup> Snowball sampling is a method that is used in qualitative research and is based on referral from one person to another. In this research, members from the Palestinian community suggested names of possible participants based on the criteria the interviewer specified such as time and place of migration.

<sup>5</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), xviii.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, Vol. 10 (June 1992), 1-8; Susan Kaiser, "Minding Appearances: Style, Truth and Subjectivity," in *Body Dressing*, ed. J. Entwistle and E. Wilson. New York: Berg, 2001).

mobility are confined by their community's patriarchal 'relations of power'<sup>7</sup> and by the dominant modes of representation (i.e., colonial/orientalist/nationalist representation) of the time and space they inhabit, they nevertheless use their way of dress as a means of mobility. Women's clothing conventions are the product of social and cultural powers that operate to 'discipline the body'.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, women subject to these forces deliberately choose to maneuver within their society's standard code of dress for mobility. Thus the standards for dress do not simply discipline; they are a means by which women can reassign their roles within their communities. In other words, the deliberate use of clothing within a defined temporal and spatial context allows women to position themselves in places of authority and power. Thus while social, and cultural forces might restrict women's ways of dress, they have the power to give meaning to dress, which in turn allows them to expand their roles outside of their homes. In this case, Palestinian women during the first historical period responded to the orientalist discourses that linked women's liberation to appearance by advocating for unveiling and adopting 'modern western clothes'. In so doing, these same women intentionally and unintentionally defied neoliberal imperialism by returning to their cultural and religious clothes during the second historical period. The different forces that conditioned women's choice of dress obliged them to negotiate their identity in relation to the stronger force (nationality, ethnicity, or religion) during each historical period to reflect their participation in the community and their attachment to their group.

Theorists, especially those in the field of anthropology, understand dress as a language of communication.<sup>9</sup> Clothing and other types of ornamentation serve a crucial function in the 'expressive culture of the community'.<sup>10</sup> However, the language of dress can easily be misrepresented and misread, especially when it concerns the dress of a marginalized minority group. Not only does this group's attire come under scrutiny and act as set of signifiers that codify minority individuals' status as 'other', but their clothing is also deliberately misrepresented by dominant discourses for the purpose of solidifying and qualifying marginalized statuses. Indeed, this is the case for Palestinian women living in the diaspora, as their intentions behind their dress can only be understood by explaining the meaning they attach to their dress in different contexts.<sup>11</sup> Mostly, these women's appearances speak to their cultural identity; however, 'they cannot guarantee that their message will be understood in the way they intend'<sup>12</sup> until they are given the

---

<sup>7</sup> Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 39.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>9</sup> M Barnard, *Fashion and Communication*, London: Routledge, 1996); F Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992); a Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, (New York: Random House, 1981); T Polhemus and L. Proctor, *Fashion and Anti-Fashion: An Anthology of Clothing and Adornment*, (London: Cox and Wyman, 1978); E Rouse, *Understanding Fashion*, (London: BSP Professional Books. 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Entwistle, 66.

<sup>11</sup> C Campbell, "When the Meaning is not a Message: A Critique of the Consumption as Communication Thesis," in *Buy this Book: Studies in Advertising and Consumption*, Edited by Nava, M, A. Blake, I. MacRury, and B. Richards, (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18.

opportunity to articulate the factors that contribute to their choice of dress in relation to ethnicity, religion, and nationality.

My research has benefited from recent scholarship that intends to counter orientalist and colonialist discourses, including modern liberal feminist discourse that 'has hardly escaped orientalist influence' in associating certain forms of dress (including veiling) to women's oppression, and Arab nationalist discourse that connected women's form of clothing to modernization, therefore invalidating Muslim women's ability to negotiate identity in relation to their appearance.<sup>13</sup> The historiography on Muslim women's dress mainly focuses on the hijab and reveals that many approaches were taken in conceptualizing women's reasons for wearing the hijab. Katherine Bullock argues that wearing the hijab does not re 'posit essentialized male-female differences', nor does it indicate 'lack of choice' for Muslim women.<sup>14</sup> Leila Hessini agrees with Bullock that wearing the hijab can be a 'liberating force', but argues that it can also be disempowering because 'this choice was made within a patriarchal framework'.<sup>15</sup> Rather than simply orienting the hijab in relation to the patriarchy, Fadwa El Guindi argues that the hijab marks spaces of mobility familiar to the sacred cultural landscape.<sup>16</sup> However, after 11 September 2001, the hijab surpassed its religious meaning and became a cultural icon.<sup>17</sup>

Few studies, however, examine why Muslim women choose to wear cultural clothing for reasons not necessarily associated with religious practice, but as a means to self-identify as a member of a class, ethnicity, gender, or nationality. Andrea B. Rugh examines the meaning of 'folk' dress such as the *galabya* in Egypt, and how it 'reinforces social boundaries by distinguishing between those who attend to specified meanings and those who do not'.<sup>18</sup> Polhemus and Proctor emphasize that class association connected to dress in different cultures reflects social influences. As such, certain classes (mainly the upper classes) retain traditional dress as a 'lasting quality' and mark of their class identity.<sup>19</sup> However, in Palestinian culture, traditional clothing was first abandoned by the urbanized upper and middle classes. For Palestinian women from smaller towns and villages, dress and jewelry remained indicators of social class. The most significant type of jewelry is the *ewqa/saffa*, a headpiece decorated with silver or gold coins, and the *qlada*, a gold coin necklace traditionally worn with a *thob*.<sup>20</sup> Following World War I, cultural dress became primarily associated with generational distinctions, as the younger

---

<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Weber, "Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911-1950," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), 127; Talpade Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, Vol. 30 (1988), 61-88.

<sup>14</sup> Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*, (Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003), 183, 216.

<sup>15</sup> Leila Hussini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco: Choice and Identity," in *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power*, Edited by Fatima Muge Goccek and Shiva Balaghi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 42, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, (Berg: Oxford, New York, 1999), 95.

<sup>17</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "The Post-9/11 Hijab as Icon," *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2007), 253-267.

<sup>18</sup> Andrea B. Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal: Dress in Contemporary Egypt*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Entwistle, 49.

<sup>20</sup> The *thob* in Arabic is 'long dress', though the garment itself varies from one region to another.

generation increasingly abandoned it. Notably, since the late 1980s, the use of Palestinian cultural dress increased and was readopted by a growing number of women from all classes and generations in the diaspora including Milwaukee, as it became recognized as national symbol, as I discuss below.

### **Palestinian Immigrant Women's Dress during the First Historical Context**

For the Milwaukee immigrant community, the historical and political contexts determined Palestinian women's modes of dress and their understanding of their identities and group affiliation. There are two distinctive historical contexts that marked a change in the meanings of women's dress for Palestinian immigrants: the 1950s to the 1980s and the 1990s to the 2000s. The politics of ethnicity and nationalism in the first period of the diaspora took precedent over the politics of religion. In this period, Arab nationals immigrated from Egypt, Iraq, and Palestine, with Palestinians coming in the largest numbers because colonialist policies forced more than half of the population from their homeland. These immigrants held deeply ingrained nationalist ideologies, particularly with regard to Arab unity and Palestinian national cause.<sup>21</sup>

Palestinian women who migrated to the United States after the 1950s had witnessed a long period dominated by colonialist, orientalist, and nationalist discourses that linked women's liberation to their appearance.<sup>22</sup> Within these discourses, veiling and wearing the *thob* signified women's oppression, traditionalism, and backwardness. Perceptions of cultural clothing were colored by stereotypical and biased views of these societies; the Ramallah cross-stitch *thob*, for example, became romanticized, especially by American missionaries who enjoyed its aesthetic.<sup>23</sup> Yet, it was appreciated only as a static, traditional artifact exemplifying a beautiful old culture.<sup>24</sup> Arab Nationalists reacted to this discourse by advocating for women's education and removal of the veil.<sup>25</sup> Indubitably, women's appearances were politicized and adopting western dress was perceived as a sign of the development and secularization of Arab societies.

Palestinian women who migrated to the United States during this period negotiated their identity in accordance with Arab nationalist discourses, which also echoed the host society's expectations that immigrants assimilate into American society by adhering to secular cultural norms, including the adoption of modern western attire. In this way, they expressed their desire to become American citizens while maintaining a close relationship to their national and ethnic group. Photos from Arab American family albums and from various community events show that most of the women present wore

---

<sup>21</sup> Enaya Othman, "Arab-American in Milwaukee: History and Assimilation," (Master's thesis, University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> See Leila Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Enaya Othman, "Middle Ground in the Middle East: American Quakers & Palestinian Women at the Friends Girls School in Ramallah, 1889-1948," (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>25</sup> See Qasem Amin, *The Liberation of women and the New Woman*, (Cairo: The American University Cairo Press, 2000).

western styles of dress. Indeed, they did not cover their heads with the hijab and only used cultural clothing to represent their heritage and emphasize Arab unity at national and local conventions which supported the Palestinian national cause. Their strategy for recognition and expanding their roles in their communities involved participation in activities that reflected group solidarity, and in these groups, they wore western clothing so that they would be categorized as 'modern' and 'American'. Their appearance as such was the acceptable standard in their communities, and they understood that it was essential to the livelihood of their families and communities; they did not want to be stigmatized as 'un-American' due to noncompliance with American cultural norms. Simply put, they made the decision to limit the use of traditional clothing because they considered assimilation to be in their community's best interest.<sup>26</sup> Thus the amount of cultural clothing they owned was limited compared to the period after the 1980s. At this time, cultural clothing was mainly worn by older generations, and younger women believed that they might wear it more often 'when they got older'.

Prior to the 1970s, Palestinians constituted the majority of the Arab community in Milwaukee and therefore affected the political and cultural identity of the group as a whole. The politics of pluralism and multiculturalism emphasized both their Arabism and Americanism especially within the community's local, regional, and national organizations. Example of these organizations include the Arab Student Organization (1960s), the Arab American Association of Milwaukee (1960s), the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Student Chapter (1970s), and University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Muslim Student Association (1970s), the Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) (1967), the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) (1972), the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) (1980), and the Arab American Institute (1985). It is worth mentioning that these organizations exemplified the type of unity that Arabs from Muslim and Christian religious backgrounds intended to demonstrate.<sup>27</sup>

The twelve women in the study who migrated from Palestine to Milwaukee between 1960 and 1980 came from the Ramallah region and did not wear cultural dress or cover their heads in this era; only one of these women, Nazha (who immigrated in the 1960s), wore the traditional Palestinian dress, the *thob* and the traditional head cover called the *kherqa*, on a daily basis.<sup>28</sup> Nazha, who was from the town of al-Berieh, Ramallah, migrated with her children and was older than the rest of the informants upon immigration; most of the other immigrants migrated before marriage or as new brides. Nazha began wearing her *thob* immediately after marriage. Before migration, she usually wore her cultural dress outside of her house and modest, modern clothes at home. After immigration, Nazha initially continued to use her *thob*, but she decided to wear western-style clothes because she wanted to fit in with the other Muslim women in Milwaukee from the Ramallah region who did not wear cultural dress. She continued to wear her *thob* at weddings and community gatherings, however. The Arab and Palestinian communities during this period did not identify with their religion, Islam, but rather with their ethnicity and nationality (Othman, 1998). Among themselves, they would also use

---

<sup>26</sup> See Abdo Elkholy, *The Arab Muslims in the United States*, (New Haven: College and University Press, 1966); Othman, "Arab-American in Milwaukee."

<sup>27</sup> Othman, "Arab-American in Milwaukee," ix, 51.

<sup>28</sup> The *kherqa* is draped over the head and around the neck.

regional identification as well (e.g., Ramallah people, al-Berieh people). Throughout this time, many of these women worked with their husbands in their small businesses, drove, and freely communicated with non-Arabs while wearing western-style dress. Many of them also formed friendships with non-Muslim Americans, particularly their female neighbors and co-workers. For the most part, however, their basic socialization was with members of their Arab community, especially those who were originally from the same town or region in Palestine.

The women's narratives and the types of organizations formed by Arab-Americans confirm the findings of previous studies (e.g., Othman, 1998; GhaneaBassiri, 2010) that indicate that Arab communities in the United State during this period identified themselves on the grounds of ethnicity, nationality, and region. Ruba, who came from a village in the Ramallah region called Beteen, migrated in 1972 after finishing her degree at a teachers' college in Ramallah. After immigration she took a very active role in her community's national and regional organizations. She explained that some of these organizations were established and named after the immigrants' towns or cities in Palestine, such as the Beiteen, al-Berieh, and Ramallah organizations. These groups had social, cultural, and political functions for their members, and aimed to keep immigrants from these areas connected. They also served the social function of connecting immigrants to their homeland and encouraging the second-generation immigrant children to marry from within their own group. Moreover, these organizations promoted the Palestinian national cause among their members and provided a means by which immigrants could donate their time and money to the cause. At community conventions, the speakers typically addressed the treatment of Palestinians under Israeli occupation and how to support the struggle for Palestinian statehood.<sup>29</sup> Asma, who migrated from al-Berieh in 1966, is an example of a woman who was active in all of the Palestinian community's activities. In an interview, she commented on the function of the al-Berieh convention and her activities during this period, affirming 'That [the convention] was for Palestine, we used to raise money and so my daughters were involved, we were involved. I was involved [also] with the *Rabitat il mara*, (Federation of Palestinian Women). We used to own a club and that was long time ago on 27<sup>th</sup> north Northside St. Paul [North 27th street and St. Paul Street].'<sup>30</sup>

As Palestinian women during this period were active in their homeland national cause, their use of their cultural dress was minimal. Scholars who take the *zeitgeist* approach explain the cycle of abandoning cultural clothes and how manners of dress respond to social, political, and cultural changes.<sup>31</sup> For example, because of the social and political changes in the west during and after WWI, more women joined the work force and abandoned long skirts and corsets because they were impractical.<sup>32</sup> Most of this

---

<sup>29</sup> Othman, "Arab-American in Milwaukee," 50, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Both Ruba and Asma were involved in these organizations. Asma commented that she opened her house for college students to practice *debka*. Ruba was a speaker in the tenth convention of the Federation of Palestinian Women in 1990. They felt the need for such organizations to represent them as an ethnic group. These organizations sent money to people in the homeland, especially the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

<sup>31</sup> See E Ditcher, "Why we Dress and Way we Do," in *The Psychology of Fashion*, ed. M. R. Soloman, (New York: Lexington Books, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Entwistle, 63.



study's informants originally came from emerging urban centers such as Ramallah and al-Berieh. Women there began to abandon the *thob* and wear modern dress in order to join schools or work. Silk-embroidered *thobs* made from high-quality materials were still considered quality clothing, but they became more heavily associated with the older generation. For Palestinian women who immigrated between the 1950s and the early 1980s, wearing the *thob* indicated that they were married, 'traditional', from villages or towns, and/or of old age. However, women wearing western-style skirts and dresses were recognized as modern, educated 'city women'. This means that during this period, social class and modernity were linked to appearance and choice of dress. After the 1980s, however, the meanings associated with cultural dress altered in response to social and political changes, as we will see below.

### **Palestinian Immigrant Women's Dress during the Second Historical Context**

The political and economic climate in the Arab world after the 1980s changed the way Arab-Muslim communities in the United States (including Milwaukee) perceived themselves in relation to their ethnicity and religion. The Arab-Israeli War in 1967 and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory resulted in feelings of despair, disappointment, and betrayal among people in Arab countries, which caused them to question the legitimacy of their national governments. Other events, such as the civil war in Lebanon between 1976-1990, the Israeli invasions of Southern Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Palestinian uprising (the *Intifada*) in the occupied territories of West Bank and Gaza Strip in December 1987, and the Gulf War 1990, strengthened the Islamic movements in the Arab world (most notably the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt).<sup>33</sup> These organizations emerged as possible replacements for the national secularist movement that failed to solve the myriad of political, social, and economic problems faced by people throughout the Arab world. These events also led to an increase in Arab immigration to the United States, as people sought to escape violence and political turmoil.

In the United States, events in the Middle East and the attacks of 11 September, 2001 contributed significantly to the way Arab immigrants located themselves in relation to their ethnicity and religion. The Muslim women in this study shaped their lives, including their way of dress, in diverse ways and gave new meanings to their choices, particularly in light of what they saw as misrepresentations of Islam in the media. Their strategy in this later period was to show solidarity in response to these misrepresentations and stereotypes as well as to gain recognition for themselves as active contributors to their families and communities. Moreover, many of them believed that Arab culture and their regional traditions could still have a role in a growing community defined by religion. They wanted to continue to take part, regardless of the fact that the site of their community activities changed from secular (e.g., a hall in a university or a hotel) to religious (mosque). Women who played an important role in enforcing the national and ethnic identity of their groups during the first period played the same role in enforcing

---

<sup>33</sup> See Leila Ahmad, *The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

religious identity in the second period. In this later era, they wanted to assume a role that gave them access to functions associated with the community's religious institutions. From the twelve women who immigrated during the first period (1960-1980), eleven decided to veil. Their reasons for wearing the *hijab* vary. Some mentioned that they wanted to fit in with the other women in their communities, and others took the veil after coming to a better understanding of their religious requirements, meaning they came to believe that veiling was following God's command. Interestingly, some of the respondents decided to wear the *hijab* in the aftermath of 11 September only after their daughters decided to wear it first. These younger women chose to wear the *hijab* as a political statement and to emphasize their religious identity during a time when Islam and Muslims were stereotyped and attacked in the media. Some of the respondents wore the veil because they were embarrassed that their daughters were veiled and they were not. Another informant, Fatima, explained that it was not her daughter who pressured her; rather, the other women in the community thought it was improper that her daughter was veiled and she was not.

The majority of immigrants who journeyed to America during the second period strongly self-identified as Muslims. Most of the interviews confirm the findings of other studies which identify this trend as beginning around 1990.<sup>34</sup> For example, Reema, who migrated to the United States in 1993, declared that she is 'proud to be a Muslim', but she still identifies with her culture and considers herself Arab-Palestinian. Tellingly, she stated, 'I will never be Americanized.' This statement is a clear indication of the 'new sense' of importance for 'keeping the differences' between her culture and the American culture alive. Her position also indicates her fear of losing her cultural distinctiveness in a globalized world where boundaries between cultures are hard to maintain in diaspora locations. In this way, she is able to develop a sense of agency that questions 'receptivity and openness to others'.<sup>35</sup> Unlike women who immigrated during the first historical context, women like Reema did not think that assimilation into mainstream American society was best for their communities, and they used their clothing as markers of their Muslim and Arab-Palestinian culture. That is, these markers were the primary 'strategy of recognition' that women used to identify themselves first and foremost as Muslims to their communities and to American society.

These more recent immigrants strongly influenced the beliefs of earlier Arab American communities and how these beliefs should be exercised. Significantly, many Muslim women used the veil to resist the orientalist and imperialist discourses that codified veiling as oppressive, degrading, and backward because they understood how the power of these discourses attacked their choice and politicized women's dress in ways that undermined and distorted Islam. Therefore, the return to *hijab* became a strategy with which women could actively oppose imperialist/orientalist discourse and the flawed meaning that orientalist onlookers erroneously attached to the veil. The meaning of re-veiling can be seen mainly among young women in the Arab world who decided to wear the *hijab* and also among women from second-generation Muslim families living in the United States. However, most of the informants from the first group

---

<sup>34</sup> For example, see Othman's first study on the Arab American communities in Milwaukee, "Arab American in Milwaukee."

<sup>35</sup> Yegenoglu, 9.

who made the decision to wear the *hijab* did so not for political reasons, but because of renewed religious awareness. In Milwaukee before the 1980s, the Arab community's social and cultural activities were infrequent, and the community had neither an ethnic center nor a mosque for an entire generation. By the 1980s, the community felt the urgent need to establish a mosque for the growing population of Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds. Asian Muslims (mainly Pakistani and Indian) and Muslim students on college campuses played a major role in instructing the established Arab-American community about the need to establish Muslim institutions in order to preserve their Islamic faith. These efforts led to the establishment of the Islamic Society of Milwaukee (ISM), which now functions as a religious and cultural center for the community.<sup>36</sup>

All but one of the informants who migrated in late 1980s and early 1990s came wearing the head cover (including Reema). This stands in stark contrast to those who migrated during the first period (1960-1980) and who started wearing the *hijab* only after the 1990s. Among our informants, only Ruba still did not wear the *hijab*.<sup>37</sup> Nazha continued to wear her cultural dress more often, and she gradually abandoned the *kherqa* and adopted the Islamic *hijab*. Sara and Asma made a joint decision to wear the Islamic head cover. For these informants (except Reema), ethnic clothes are linked to religious attire; the only difference is the way in which the head cover is worn. Asma explained, 'you separate them [*hijab* and cultural dress], but both of them are modest, so either one you wear it's the same thing because it's [the hair] covered.' She wears cultural dress because she does not 'want to lose the culture' and she 'does not want her [my] kids to even lose it or not to remember it'. She says that she feels 'proud and honored' when she wears Palestinian cultural dress. When she was asked about what swayed her to start wearing cultural clothing, she explained that modest clothing is important to her because of its religious implications, and that cultural attire does adhere to the Islamic code of dress if worn with a *hijab*. Before she decided to wear the *hijab*, she seldom attended the Islamic Center, and she did not perform the five Islamic daily prayers. Like most of the women who migrated during the first period and who wore the *hijab* only during the second period, Asma now regularly attends ISM functions, including Friday prayer. Though it required a great deal of serious thought, the decision to wear the *hijab* greatly helped all of the respondents connect to the Muslim community and its religious institutions and functions. Though the ISM community is more diverse than it was during the earlier period, the respondents said that they identify first as Muslims, then as Arab, and then as Palestinian.

The cases of Naeemah and Ruba were different. Naeemah decided to wear the *hijab* in 2010 because she 'felt ashamed' for not wearing it during her last visit to Palestine. When she walked in the streets, most of the females there were wearing the *hijab*, and she expressed that she wanted to be recognized as belonging to the community there. Unlike the other women, she still identifies herself as Arab American and not Muslim. She wears cultural clothing not because it adheres to the Islamic code, but

---

<sup>36</sup> Dr. Waheed al-Deen Ahmed, a Pakistani immigrant who settled in Milwaukee in 1977, was an instrumental figure in establishing the Islamic Society of Milwaukee, ISM. He said that the Muslim student organizations and the Doctors Association, which was called 'The Islamic Foundation of Greater Milwaukee' got together and purchased this center on the South 13th Street and Layton.

<sup>37</sup> Reema came with a high school diploma and took college courses in computers and nursing.

because it makes her feel connected to Arab-Palestinian culture. She owns a great deal of cultural clothing, which she wears on different occasions including weddings and *henna* parties. She sentimentalizes wearing the *thob*, emphasizing that she feels beautiful, elegant, and as if she ‘just came from that country (Palestine)’. Ruba also identifies herself as Arab and Palestinian American and, like Naeemah, does not visit the Islamic Center.

Some studies on Muslim communities in United States emphasize that group pressure plays a major role in women’s adoption of the *hijab*. In her study on the small multi-ethnic Muslim community in Fort Collins, Colorado, Hollie Kopp stresses that religion became the uniting factor, and thus women began to wear the *hijab* as a result of increased religious observance and the ensuing group pressure and increased male authority.<sup>38</sup> This also means that in religious institutions, women’s bodies and mobility become confined, yet women find ways to maneuver through this male-controlled environment. This confinement and maneuvering demonstrates that ‘women play an important role in both reproducing the boundaries of veiling regimes and, as transgressors, in opening them up for debate’.<sup>39</sup> Our respondents who do not regularly cover their heads, like Ruba and Najah, tend to either avoid going to places such as the ISM where women are expected to cover their heads, or they wear the *hijab* temporarily. On certain social occasions, such as weddings or graduation parties at the ISM, Ruba and Najah usually do not cover their heads, but choose to wear Palestinian cultural dress. Another example of this is the veiling practiced by teachers at the Salam School, a community school connected to the ISM. Some teachers only wear the *hijab* during the working hours. For them, wearing the *hijab* as a requirement for work means that they have a job, contribute to their community, and have a larger degree of personal autonomy outside of their homes. However, it also means that they must decide whether or not to wear the *hijab* outside of the school on a daily basis. Some women do choose to wear the *hijab* on daily basis because it gives them freer access to the community institutions that make up their basic daily interactions (i.e., work and social life). Because of this, women who wear the *hijab* often choose not to work outside of their community’s institutions for many reasons, such as their (or their families’) refusal to work in a non-segregated place, their unwillingness to be exposed to potential discrimination because of their dress, their lack of proficiency in English, or their educational qualifications.<sup>40</sup> For them, working at the community’s institutions is a way to expand their private sphere in a comfortable space where they can gain work experience and claim a place of importance, even though they are still coded as male-dominated spaces. Most of our respondents limited their socialization with non-Muslim Americans during the second period.

As seen above, wearing the *hijab* can mean that women minimize their interactions with the larger American society. Other women choose to wear the *hijab* only when they attend Friday prayer or a lecture in a mixed-gender setting at the mosque, and they behave and dress differently than when they attend functions solely for women outside of the ISM. Likewise, a woman who wears the *hijab* on a daily basis might

---

<sup>38</sup> Kopp, 76.

<sup>39</sup> Secor, Anna J, “The Veil and Urban Space in Istanbul: Women’s Dress Mobility and Islamic Knowledge,” *Gender, Space, and Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 1 ( 2002), 5.

choose to take it off at women-only gatherings. Also, a woman who does not wear the *hijab* on a daily basis can limit or avoid going to community functions that are taking place at the ISM. Her decision reflects her unwillingness to consent to group pressure even though she might occasionally choose to wear the *hijab* when she attends the mosque or while working at a community school.

While Muslim-Palestinian women might take different stances toward and ascribe varied meaning to their choice to wear the *hijab* during this second period, they nevertheless agree on the meaning of their cultural clothing. For them, the Palestinian cultural clothes, especially the cross-stitch *thob*, became the symbol of national identity and the preservation of a traditional way of life that was disrupted and lost with the displacement of Palestinians since 1948. In the diaspora, cultural clothing has become symbolic of recovering and preserving what has been lost. It functions to assist the imagination of collective national identity and community solidarity.<sup>41</sup> Palestinian women from different classes and educational backgrounds wear cultural clothing as a way to connect to their national ethnic group. These are the same cultural clothes that women were required to wear more than a century ago and that many struggled to liberate themselves from in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. These also are the same clothes that were seen by missionaries and orientalist as static, backward, and pre-modern in late-nineteenth-century and that were then romanticized after World War I.<sup>42</sup> Recently, however, Arab cultural clothes have proven to be anything but static and pre-modern. Globalization and commercialization, along with technological advancements (such as sewing machines and new fabrics) allow Arab cultural clothing to be hybridized, altered, and worn by non-Arab Muslims. Different styles from different Arab cultures can also be incorporated. For example, many Muslim women in Milwaukee wear an *abaya*, which originated in the Gulf, with Palestinian cross-stitching or *nowel/nooel* designs. Other forms of cultural clothes, such as the *mallaka thob*, have been revived in a pronounced way in the diaspora. This dress is historically identified with the Bethlehem region, and it maintained its specific cultural value and high quality workmanship. However, since the 1990s, it has been worn increasingly by brides and family members celebrating weddings, and it is constantly altered and adapted by many Palestinian women in Milwaukee. In the Ramallah region, the *malaka* has not only been revived and frequently used by brides and their relatives on wedding days, but an examination of wedding photos reveals that it also appeals to younger generations of Palestinian immigrants, including those in the greater Milwaukee area.<sup>43</sup>

Cultural dress itself extends beyond its association with any given locality and continuously reinvents its aesthetic features, thereby forging new emotional, social, cultural, and political (i.e., national) connections. Recently among Palestinian Americans, cultural clothing has undergone changes that reflect its cross-regional and trans-

---

<sup>41</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London; New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> See Othman, "Middle Ground in the Middle East".

<sup>43</sup> *Abaya*: A common Islamic dress originating in the Arabian Peninsula this black, long-sleeved robe-like dress that comes down to the floor can be plain or display designs made of embroidery, beads, etc. *Annole*: A form of embroidery most prominent in Palestine in which the thread is looped and stitched into specific shapes and patterns either through hand needlework or machine using torus.

*Mallaka*: A long dress made of striped velvet and embroidered in the couching stitch.

generational use. First-generation immigrants, as most of the informants are, explain that they transfer their cultural dress to the second generation and encourage them to modify these dresses according to their tastes and contemporary fashions. Sara and Asma's daughters and daughters-in-law own different kinds of cultural clothing that they purchased from Palestine and from ethnic shops on Chicago's Harlem and Devon streets. Their cultural clothing has the same basic design as their mothers'; however, they incorporated other modern designs including the more fitted skirt and colors other than the traditional blue and red. Now, as their parents did, second-generation individuals are undertaking the role of preserving their cultural dress in a way that makes sense to them. By modifying and modernizing cultural clothing, they are preventing traditional ways of dress from becoming mere folk traditions.

Second-generation Palestinian women play a significant role in affirming identities that connect them to their communities and forge ties of ethnic and religious solidarity by altering and defining new modes of fashion for regional and religious clothes. In doing this, women use clothing to change what might otherwise be seen as traditional and static. Reimagined systems of fashion still allow women to identify according to their ethnicity and religion, yet reflect choice and creativity of design within the power relations of the specific context.<sup>44</sup>

A great deal of commitment is invested in wearing, designing, and passing on regional cultural clothes in the Palestinian community in Milwaukee. Adopting the *hijab* for these women reflects their connection to their regional heritage, which in turn increased their use of their regional clothes. This is understandable, as these ethnic clothes are modest, can be worn with the *hijab*, and can be modified for a variety of uses, including community gatherings and religious holidays. The fashion is also flexible enough to be worn daily if the designs are adapted into a modest blouse with a cross-stitch design that can be worn with jeans.

All of the Palestinian informants wear their cultural clothing more often than they did in the first period. Their collection of cultural clothing items increased significantly, with variation in colors and designs. For these Palestinian women, cultural clothes can be adapted to be worn with religious dress. This is why Nazha has been wearing her cultural dress since she came to Milwaukee in the 1960s, despite the fact that religion is now a more significant identity marker than ethnicity. Her way of dress allows her to connect with the Muslim community as strongly as she had with the Arab community in the earlier period. Nazha's generational position plays a role in her non-compliance with wearing the *hijab*. She only recently abandoned the *kherqa* after she was influenced by her daughter (who migrated with Nazha at a very young age) to wear the *hijab*. However, all of the informants except Ruba and Najah, wear Palestinian cultural dress when they wear the Islamic *hijab*, not the *kherqa*. In this way, they can be recognized as part of the Muslim community and at the same time as Palestinians and Arabs.

---

<sup>44</sup> The examination of second-generation American Muslim women is beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, first-generation women's influence on the second generation generated interest in the revival of cultural clothes.

## Conclusion

The meaning of immigrant women's dress has changed in relation to the social context of community gatherings. From the 1960s to 1980s, immigrant women wore western dress and identified themselves as Arabs and Palestinians. At the time, the national discourse focused on the necessity of unveiling as a condition for women's liberation and for 'progress' in Arab societies. Women owned cultural clothing, but only wore it occasionally, particularly during yearly conventions such as those held by al-Berieh and Beteen regional organizations. They did this as a way to locate their group affiliation to their town and region in the homeland and as a way to represent their Arab-Palestinian nationality. Ramallah regional cultural clothes have special significance, which resulted in their increased use over time in the diaspora, as they have been used as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism both inside and outside of the homeland. Palestinian writers, artists, and photojournalists use the *thob* in paintings, logos, postcards, and national publications to stress the Palestinians' connectedness to the land. Moreover, because of the special status of Palestinians as a displaced population in the diaspora, the continued use of cultural clothing as a strategy of recognition creates unity among them.

The narratives from the Milwaukee respondents reveal that women have used clothing as a way to construct a comfortable and dynamic zone from which they negotiate and affirm their identity in relation to their community. This process of identification was generated from within the regional culture and became a productive strategy for Muslim women to get recognition from their communities. However, these narratives do not suggest that Muslim women are acting in solidarity as part of a systematic movement. Rather, they reveal that dress as a strategy of recognition is an individual endeavor that may have varied meanings and degrees of success depending on time, place, and generation. Muslim women's reasons for wearing the hijab as a religious symbol vary, and the motives for wearing other kinds of cultural clothing associated with region or country vary as well. However, in both cases, the *hijab* and other forms of cultural dress including *thob*, *abaya*, and *dishdasha*<sup>45</sup> reflect these women's desire to be part of one group and at the same time to be set apart from 'others.' In many cases, this desire reflects a cultural pride, sentimental association to family's older generation, and a discovery of the dress' aesthetic value.

The increased use of cultural clothing is in many ways a reaction to increased racism and a way to contesting stereotypes and marginalization, especially after 11 September. Additionally, in a globalized world, women have greater access to their cultural attire. They are able to adapt it to their own tastes and to globalized Muslim fashion trends, while at the same time maintaining the standards of modesty required by the Islamic dress codes. Wearing regional or religious dress makes women more visible and thus associates their choice with their desire to stand out as a noticeable minority. This is in stark contrast to the previous period where their choice of dress helped them to assimilate with their host country's population. Of course, historical contexts in both periods shaped discourses regarding women's choice to wear the *hijab* and increased their use of cultural clothing.

---

<sup>45</sup> The *abaya* and the *disdasha* are long-sleeved robe-like garments touch the floor. They can be plain or decorated.

In sum, clothing choices among Palestinian women immigrants played an important social role in expressing their self-identification and belonging to a group, thereby creating a comfort zone in which they felt secure about assuming more important public roles. The way these women dressed changed depending on the historical political context and social spaces in which they gathered to maintain their connection to a group. For the women who decided to use the Islamic head cover after the 1980s, wearing the scarf is ‘neither liberating nor oppressive’ because ‘the power relations with which it is associated are situated not only in the meaning with which it is invested but also in the circumstances under which it is worn’.<sup>46</sup> These particular circumstances made women apply a ‘strategy of recognition’, wearing the *hijab* was a way to be recognized as part of a group and formed the basis for communal bonding and cooperation. In doing this, women were able to take advantage to use the community’s religious institutions as an extension of their private space. Thus the increased use of cultural clothes reflects women’s eagerness to preserve the aspect of their culture that they saw as unique while negotiating the complicated power networks involved in their lives.

---

<sup>46</sup> Michael Humphreys and Andrew D. Brown, “Dress and Identity: A Turkish Case Study,” *Journal of Management Studies* 39, no. 7 (Nov. 2002), 93.