

Gender Identity and the Sacredness of the Hijab: Value Conflicts in Contemporary Muslim Societies

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the meaning of *hijab* from traditional and modern perspectives, as well as analyze the controversy related to its use by transgender individuals in the context of religion and gender identity. This research employed a qualitative approach based on literature review and case study, as well as Durkheim's sacredness theory and queer theory as analytical frameworks. The results showed that the *hijab* undergoes a transformation of meaning from a mere religious obligation to a more inclusive social symbol, triggering debates between conservative and more inclusive groups in Muslim society. The case of Isa Zega, a transgender woman who wore the *hijab* during Umrah, became a critical point in the discussion about the limits of the sacredness of the *hijab* and individual rights in spiritual expression. While some consider the use of *hijab* by transgender people as a violation of religious norms, others see it as a form of spirituality that is not limited to gender categories. This debate reflects the tension between established religious understandings and the dynamics of gender identity in modern society. Therefore, a more open dialogue is needed between scholars, academics, and the wider community to find a balance between Islamic teachings and inclusivity values, so that the *hijab* remains a meaningful and relevant symbol in various social contexts.

Key Words: *Hijab*, Sacredness, Gender Identity, Transgender

Introduction

The *hijab* in Islam has long been a symbol of purity, obedience, and identity of Muslims (Zain et al., 2023). In the traditional context, *hijab* is seen as a religious obligation aimed at maintaining the honor and modesty of Muslim women (Alghafli et al., 2017). However, in the modern era, the meaning of *hijab* has shifted, not only as a form of spiritual compliance but also as part of a fashion trend that adapts to the times (Nasyah et al., 2024).

Gender identity and the use of *hijab* in contemporary Muslim societies has been a topic that has sparked intense debate in different parts of the world (Nasyah et al., 2024). The *hijab*, as a religious symbol, has a deep meaning in the Islamic tradition, symbolizing purity and spiritual commitment (Sa'dullah & Samau'al, 2023). However, in the modern context, the interpretation and practice of *hijab* has been transformed, especially when it is associated with issues of gender identity and individual expression (Dewi et al., 2022). This debate is not only happening in Muslim-majority countries, but also in Muslim communities in Western countries, where traditional values often clash with progressive views on gender and individual freedom.

Previous research has examined various aspects related to *hijab* and Muslim women's identity. Mahfudhoh (2024) in her research, highlighted the role of *hijab* as a symbol of women's identity in the public sphere, examining how *hijab* becomes a field of contestation of women's image in society. Furthermore, Nasyah et al. (2024) in their research asserted that the *hijab* has a dual role: as a spiritual symbol that reflects adherence to Islamic teachings and as a fashion element that allows Muslim women to express their identity in a broader social context. In addition, research by Kamaludin & Suheri (2021) discusses the phenomenon of "*cross hijab*" and its influence on shifting religious sacredness in society, particularly in relation to non-conventional gender identities. However, while these studies provide valuable insights, there is still an in-depth research gap regarding the value conflicts that arise from the interaction between non-binary gender identities and the sacredness of the *hijab* in contemporary Muslim societies.

The main problem to be investigated in this research is how the value conflict between non-binary gender identity and the sacredness of the *hijab* is manifested in contemporary Muslim society. The research questions formulated are: How are individuals with non-binary gender identities who choose to wear *hijab* perceived by Muslim communities such as the case of Isa Zega? What are the challenges and resistance they face? How do social and religious dynamics affect the acceptance or rejection of this practice?

This research aims to explore the meaning of *hijab* as a sacred symbol in a contemporary context, specifically in the case of Isa Zega. This research aims to understand the Muslim community's perception of non-binary individuals who wear the *hijab*, identify the challenges faced by such individuals, as well as explore the social and religious dynamics that influence acceptance or rejection of this practice.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus on the interaction between non-binary gender identity and *hijab* use, a topic that has not been widely explored in academic literature. By combining sociological and theological approaches, this research offers a holistic perspective that can enrich academic discourse related to gender and religion. The contribution of this research is expected to add to the understanding of the complexity of gender identity in the context of religious practice, as well as provide insights for the development of policies and programs that support inclusivity in Muslim communities.

Literature Review/Analytical Framework

Hijab and Globalization



Globalization has opened a space for Muslim women to reconstruct the meaning of *hijab* according to the context of their lives (Merlins, 2024). Social media plays an important role in this process, providing a platform for Muslim women to share their experiences of *hijab*. Through social media, *hijab* is often positioned as a statement of lifestyle and cultural identity, transcending religious boundaries (Karakavak & Özbölük, 2023; Simorangkir, 2024). For example, many Muslim influencers use *hijab* to combine traditional values with modern fashion trends, creating a new narrative of *hijab* as a symbol of empowerment and creativity (Beta, 2014; Nasyah et al., 2024).

The *hijab*, initially recognized as a religious symbol in Islam, has undergone a significant transformation into a complex representation of identity (Stannard & Islam, 2021). This change is influenced by globalization, individualization, and modern social and cultural dynamics (Merlins, 2024). In the contemporary context, *hijab* is not only interpreted as a religious obligation but also as a means of personal and communal expression.

Hijab as Identity Recognition

In modern societies, especially in Western countries, *hijab* is often a symbol of identity that transcends religion (Wagner et al., 2012). Muslim women use *hijab* to assert their existence as individuals who have the right to choose how they present themselves in public spaces (R. D. Putri, 2020; Siraj, 2011). In this case, *hijab* becomes a tool of identity negotiation between Islamic tradition and modernity values (Zwick & Chelariu, 2006).

Furthermore, *hijab* is also used as a way to overcome negative stereotypes against Muslim women (Shah, 2020). In some cases, wearing *hijab* can be a form of resistance to social pressures that require women to adhere to certain beauty standards (Kusumaningtyas et al., 2023). By wearing *hijab*, Muslim women often shift attention from their physical appearance to their intellectual and personality attributes (Hassan & Harun, 2016).

The Commodification of Hijab

The phenomenon of *hijab* commodification in the era of globalization is also an important issue in this discussion (Khadijah & Kamilah, 2024). The fashion industry has adopted *hijab* as part of their products, making it a lifestyle symbol that can be commercialized (Rahman & Indra, 2024; Shin et al., 2023). While this may increase the social acceptance of the *hijab* in various non-Muslim communities, there are concerns that the focus on its aesthetic aspects may diminish its spiritual and religious value (Zarkasi & Sahrandi, 2022).

In many Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Turkey, the *hijab* is now often associated with fashion trends rather than a religious obligation (Listyani et al., 2018). This has led to debates about whether such commodification strengthens or weakens the original meaning of the *hijab* as a symbol of piety.

Hijab as a Symbol of Resistance

Apart from being an expression of personal identity, *hijab* also functions as a symbol of resistance in political and social contexts (Shaikh, 2023; Sohail et al., 2023). In some countries such as Iran and Palestine, *hijab* is used as a tool to resist Western cultural domination or repressive government policies (Alayan & Shehadeh, 2021; Teimouri, 2024).

For example, in Iran after the 1979 Revolution, the government made the *hijab* mandatory as part of social control. However, Iranian women often used the *hijab* to convey political messages that contradicted the official government narrative.

In contrast, in Western countries such as the United States and Europe, wearing the *hijab* can be a form of solidarity against Islamophobia and religious-based discrimination (Adetry & Burhanuddin, 2024; Hasan, 2023). In this context, the *hijab* becomes a symbol of courage and resilience for Muslim communities who face great challenges in maintaining their identity (Gulamhussein & Eaton, 2015).

Research Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative type with a case study approach (Creswell, 2014) to examine the controversial case of the use of *hijab* by Isa Zega, a transgender individual, during Umrah. This study focuses on how the *hijab* is understood as a sacred symbol in Islam as well as how society responds to its use outside conventionally accepted binary gender norms.

To gain a comprehensive understanding, this research relied on two main sources of data: primary data and secondary data. Primary data was collected through documentation of online media reports, journal articles, and social media posts highlighting the case and the public response. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with religious leaders, academics who study gender and Islam, and gender rights activists to gain a broader perspective on the meaning of *hijab* in social and religious contexts. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from various relevant literatures, including Emile Durkheim's theory of sacredness and previous studies on the relationship between religion and gender.

To analyze the data, this study employed thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis approaches (Pesic, 2023) to identify the main patterns in the conversations about *hijab*, gender, and religious norms. Thematic analysis was used to highlight the main themes in the public response to Isa Zega's case, such as the violation of religious norms, the authenticity of gender identity, and the role of *hijab* in forming social solidarity. Meanwhile, critical discourse analysis is used to examine how the media, clerical fatwas, and public debates shape the discourse on *hijab* as a sacred symbol and how shifting gender norms are responded to in Muslim social spaces.

Analysis

Hijab as a Sacred Symbol: Between Tradition and Modern Interpretation

Hijab in Islam is not just a head covering, but a symbol full of meaning, including purity, obedience to God, and identity for Muslim women (Saefudin et al., 2023; Zarkasi & Sahrandi, 2022). *Hijab* becomes a visual representation of religious observance and personal identity of a Muslimah (F. S. Putri, 2021). However, the meaning and function of *hijab* has evolved over time, especially with the emergence of diverse modern interpretations (Millah, 2021).



In the traditional context, *hijab* is seen as a religious commandment that aims to protect women's honor and modesty (Zain et al., 2023). Verses of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's hadith provide the basis for the obligation to wear the *hijab*, although there are variations in interpretation regarding the form and extent of the aurat that must be covered (Nurfikri, 2023). In addition, the *hijab* is also an important part of the social unity and collective identity of the Muslim community (Gaya & Ahmad, 2024; Hermawati, 2018). *Hijab* is an important element that must be protected so that it remains meaningful in maintaining the harmony of shared values.

However, in the modern era, *hijab* has evolved to become part of a broader social, cultural, and even political identity (Ni'mah, 2021). The *hijab* serves not only as a symbol of religious observance, but also as a lifestyle statement, self-expression, and participation in fashion trends (Nasyah et al., 2024). On the one hand, the *hijab* is a symbol of Muslim faith, but in its development, the *hijab* has its own trend in the modern era (Hariyanti & Hapsari, 2024). This phenomenon gives rise to various *hijab* models and styles that reflect modernity and the times (Dewi et al., 2022).

The case of Isa Zega, a transgender woman who wore a *hijab* while performing Umrah, sparked a debate about the limits of the *hijab*'s sacredness and how it should be worn (CNN Indonesia, 2024). The mixed reactions of the public show that there are different views on who has the right to wear the *hijab* and in what context. Some argue that Isa Zega's actions are a form of blasphemy because they are considered incompatible with religious norms governing dress and worship (Detikcom, 2024). They assume that the *hijab* is a symbol of purity that should only be worn by Muslim women who meet certain requirements (MUI.OR.ID, 2024). Meanwhile, others may see Isa Zega's actions as a form of sincere spiritual expression and an attempt to get closer to God, regardless of gender identity as a barrier (Safi, 2008).

The debate over the Isa Zega case reflects the tension between traditional values and modern interpretations of the meaning of *hijab* (Detikcom, 2024). On the one hand, the use of *hijab* as a means to maintain the sanctity and sacredness of the *hijab* as a religious symbol deserves respect (Alghafli et al., 2017). On the other hand, there is a push for inclusivity and acceptance of diverse gender identities in religious spaces (Baksh & Khan, 2023). This case highlights the need for a more open and inclusive dialog to find common ground between the two views, so that the *hijab* remains a relevant and meaningful symbol for all Muslims, without exception.

Sacredness and the Limits of Gender Identity

In the framework of the theory of sacredness initiated by Émile Durkheim (2017), religious symbols have clear and firm boundaries, separating them from profane or worldly matters. Religious symbols are considered sacred and have transcendent meanings that must be respected and guarded (Falkowski & Kurek, 2024). Violation of these boundaries can be considered a form of desecration or pollution of the sanctity of religion (Zellman & Malji, 2023). In the context of *hijab*, Durkheim's sacredness theory emphasizes the importance of maintaining the meaning and function of *hijab* in accordance with Islamic teachings.

In Muslim societies, the *hijab* is often seen as a symbol of chastity, obedience, and Muslimah identity (Saefudin et al., 2023; Siraj, 2011). The use of *hijab* is governed by strict religious norms, including restrictions on who is entitled to wear it and how to wear it (Hamdan, 2007). In this view, the *hijab* must be guarded against any form of deviation or distortion of meaning, including use that does not conform to established gender norms (Lutfi Zarkasi & Sahrandi, 2022; Zulfikar & Mustaqim, 2024).

On the other hand, queer theory offers a different perspective on gender identity (Kamaludin & Suheri, 2021). It rejects the binary view that divides sexes into male and female, and emphasizes that gender identity is more spectral and fluid. According to queer theory, gender identity is not only based on biological sex, but also on social construction, personal experience and self-expression (Fadhila, 2022).

The tension between Durkheim's theory of sacredness and queer theory creates a debate in society over who has the right to use certain religious symbols, such as the *hijab*, and how those boundaries are determined. For some, the use of *hijab* by individuals who do not conform to established gender norms is considered a violation of religious sanctity and a desecration of a sacred symbol (Manu et al., 2024). However, for others, restrictions on the use of *hijab* based on gender identity are considered a form of discrimination and a violation of human rights to express and worship in accordance with their respective beliefs (Gunawan et al., 2024).

This debate reflects different views on the relationship between religion, gender identity and freedom of expression. On the one hand, there is a desire to maintain the sanctity and authority of religion in regulating social and personal life (Wijayanti, 2017). On the other hand, there is a demand for recognition and acceptance of diverse gender identities and the right to participate in religious spaces without discrimination (Kamaludin & Suheri, 2021). This tension shows that while many seek to bring religion closer to evolving social realities, the biggest challenge is to create a just and inclusive space for transgender individuals without compromising the sacred values upheld in Islam.

To bridge this tension, a more open and inclusive dialogue between various stakeholders is needed. This dialogue should be based on a deep understanding of religious teachings, human rights principles, and the lived experiences of individuals with diverse gender identities. Thus, it is hoped that a common ground can be found that allows the *hijab* to remain a meaningful and relevant symbol for all Muslims, without compromising the principles of justice, equality and inclusivity.

Contemporary Muslim Society's Response to the Use of *Hijab* by Transgender

The public response to the use of *hijab* by transgender individuals, particularly in the case of Isa Zega, showed a significant polarization between groups that adhere to traditional norms and groups that are more inclusive of gender diversity (Subari, 2024). Public reactions on social media and online news were dominated by negative sentiments, arguing that the *hijab*, as a sacred symbol in Islam, should only be used by gender-qualified individuals in accordance with religious requirements (Febriani, 2024). In the case of Isa Zega, the act of an individual wearing the *hijab* despite being transgender created a strong reaction from the



public and condemnation from various social media (Detikcom, 2024). This happened because the *hijab* is considered a sacred symbol in Islam, which functions to maintain social harmony based on religious values. This tension shows the shifting social norms that need to be understood in the context of changing times, as well as how Muslim communities try to maintain consistency with traditional teachings.

The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) emphasizes that a Muslim must dress according to his nature. In this context, MUI believes that men who look like women (mukhannats) are prohibited in Islam (MUI.OR.ID, 2024). Members of the Indonesian Parliament even denounced Isa Zega's actions as blasphemy and a violation of the Criminal (CNN Indonesia, 2024b). The argument underlying this view is that the *hijab* has a sacred value attached to the biological concept of women in Islam, so its use by transgender individuals is considered a deviation from established religious norms (Zulfikar & Mustaqim, 2024).

However, on the other hand, there is also a more inclusive view that states that *hijab* is the right of every individual who wants to express their closeness to God, regardless of gender identity (La Fornara, 2018). This view emphasizes that the essence of *hijab* is chastity and obedience to God, which can be realized by anyone without being limited to certain gender categories (Siraj, 2011). In addition, there is also an argument that prohibiting the use of *hijab* for transgender individuals is a form of discrimination and violation of human rights to express and worship in accordance with their respective beliefs (F. S. Putri, 2021).

As society faces increasing calls for inclusivity, particularly for transgender individuals, resistance to such change highlights the struggle between evolving social norms and preserving longstanding religious practices. While some scholars suggest recognizing gender fluidity in religious contexts, such as the studies conducted by Zahra (2020) and Mulki (2023) on Islamic interpretations of gender, mainstream resistance demonstrates a deep-rooted attachment to religious orthodoxy. This gap is particularly evident in communities that subscribe to traditional views on gender roles and religious symbolism, making it difficult to reconcile inclusivity with religious orthodoxy.

This disagreement reflects the tension between traditional interpretations of religious teachings and the demand for recognition and acceptance of diverse gender identities in modern society. The Isa Zega case has become a focal point for debates about the boundaries of the *hijab*'s sacredness and who has the right to interpret and practice it (Subari, 2024).

Furthermore, this phenomenon also highlights the complexity of transgender identity in a religious context. Some studies such as Arfanda & Anwar (2015) showed that waria (another term for transgender in Indonesia) also have the soul and taste of women, so they also deserve the same recognition and attention as other women. The experience of Muslim transgender people also shows a unique spiritual journey, where they seek ways to express their gender identity while adhering to religious values (F. S. Putri, 2021).

To bridge the tension between religious norms and the demand for inclusivity, an open and constructive dialogue between various stakeholders is needed (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). This dialogue should be based on a deep understanding of Islamic teachings, human rights principles, and the lived experiences of individuals with diverse gender identities. In

this case, the contextualization approach of Islamic law (contextual fiqh) can be a moderate solution (Mahmudah, 2019; Yuslem, 2020). This approach emphasizes that Islamic teachings must be understood in a dynamic social and cultural context, without eliminating the essence of Islamic values themselves (Azisi et al., 2023). Thus, a common ground can be found that allows the *hijab* to remain a meaningful symbol for all Muslims, without sacrificing the principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness.

Conclusions

This research revealed that the *hijab* is not just a religious obligation, but also a symbol of identity that changes meaning over time. In the traditional perspective, the *hijab* represents the chastity, obedience and honor of Muslim women, whose use is regulated by strict religious norms. However, in the modern era, the *hijab* has also become part of cultural expression and fashion trends, reflecting a blend of religious values and social identity. The controversy over the use of *hijab* by transgender individuals, as in the case of Isa Zega, shows the tension between the understanding of the sacredness of *hijab* and the dynamics of gender identity. From one side, conservative groups see the *hijab* as a symbol that must be kept pure and can only be worn in accordance with applicable religious provisions, while more inclusive groups argue that the *hijab* is an individual right as a form of spiritual expression, regardless of gender identity. This debate demonstrates the clash between established religious norms and demands for inclusivity in religious spaces. Contemporary Muslim societies are divided in their response to this phenomenon, with most still maintaining traditional views, while others are beginning to open up discussion on gender diversity in religious practice.

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