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## Working Paper 127

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War, Migration and Modernity:

The Micro-politics of the Hijab in Northeastern Sri Lanka



Cover photo: Day-trippers at the Sri Lankan Air Force-owned Marble Beach Resort in China Bay, Sri Lanka (photo: R. Siriwardane 2013)

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# **War, Migration and Modernity:**

## **The Micro-politics of the Hijab in Northeastern Sri Lanka**

Rapti Siriwardane

## Abstract

Since 2009, Sri Lanka's formative post-war years have increasingly been coloured by the intensification of militant Sinhala-Buddhist movements. In particular, the popularisation of costumes such as the *abaya* and variants of the *hijab* were often instrumentalised as a discursive battlefield, in agitating against what was framed as constituting a rising tide in Middle Eastern Islamic radicalism. This paper reveals how majoritarian ethno-nationalist discourses have served to erase or flatten nuances with respect to ongoing "veiling" practices. In particular, it explores how diverse women articulate motivations governing their more recent adoption of the *abaya* in the context of radicalised social othering. With its focus on the conflict-affected northeast that is home to a significant number of Sri Lanka's "east coast Muslims", the study draws upon diverse costuming practices as a lens to interrogate the gendered politics of ethno-religious difference and post-war nationhood. It reveals how socio-economic and political transformations during wartime, coupled with experiences of transnational labour migration and the democratisation of women's formal education, lent the *abaya* a multiplicity of symbolic meanings and quotidian practices, which at times were seen to transcend faith-based sensibilities. It is argued that while meanings around spiritual piety and socio-moral propriety are often presented as a false dichotomy in expressing motivations around veiling, their conceptual distinctions remain compellingly real and are often tactically invoked by diverse women in negotiating the intensely militarised, class and gender-stratified spaces of the northeast. The paper draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the District of Trincomalee, Sri Lanka during the first quarter of 2013.

Keywords: Everyday costume culture; nationalism; social identities; post-war Sri Lanka

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### Acronyms:

ACJU	All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama
BBS	Bodu Bala Sena (The Buddhist Brigade/Buddhist Force)
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
IPKF	Indian Peacekeeping Forces
JHU	Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
SDQS	Standardisation and District Quota System
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress

'When they first noticed how many of us were wearing headscarves, they sent us a woman from Ankara to try to talk us out of it. This "agent of persuasion" sat in the room for hours on end, talking to each of us alone...Even though some of her questions made us cry, we liked her... We even hoped that the muddy streets of Kars weren't causing her too much trouble. Afterwards I began to see her in my dreams...Whenever I try to imagine myself walking through the crowds with my hair flying all around me, I see myself as the "agent of persuasion."

Orhan Pamuk, *Snow/Kar* (trans. Maureen Freely)

## 1. Introduction

Among proponents of secular liberalism, the veil, despite its diversity has become one of the most symbolic and embattled leitmotifs of the Islamic world. The United States' twin project of de-terrorising and de-veiling "women of cover" in the resource-rich spaces of Afghanistan and Iraq could be taken as one among many of its most pervasive and enduring narratives (Abu-Lughod, 2003: McLarney, 2009; 784; Rasheed, 2012: 1). Yet, the politicisation of the *hijab*<sup>1</sup> in the context of "racialised" identities, and its concomitant geopolitical anxieties hardly constitutes a new phenomenon. During the French-Algerian War (1954-1962) for example, the symbolic veil was stridently invoked as a direct threat to colonial power, resulting in social projects of public unveiling that signified the "emancipation" of Algerian women (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2013: 98).

A number of interrelated themes underpin the contested nature of the *hijab* or practices of modest Islamic dress. Among these include the inter-subjective agency of women and their political power in contesting the *hijab* as a symbol of oppression (Abu Odeh, 1993; Al-Qasimi, 2010; Hammami, 2013); issues of local pluralism and syncretism in contexts where changing forms of religiosity can be witnessed (Brenner, 1996; Haniffa, 2008), together with questions of national integration, segregation and the everyday expression of religious difference in public life (Ruby, 2005; Shavit & Wiesenbach, 2012). Moreover, antagonisms associated with the *hijab* are more often than not seen to hinge upon the essentialist and dichotomous idioms of traditionalism and modernity, by which the lives of the exotic "other" are often reinterpreted (El Guindi, 1999; 2007; Shirazi, 2003).

Post-war Sri Lanka offers a curious addition to the vast corpus of literature on the politics of contemporary veiling practices among women. Firstly, its ethnicised Sinhala-Buddhist anti-veiling sentiments differ significantly from the more "secularist" anxieties innate to particular western contexts such as France, Switzerland and Canada. Yet these discourses are all similar in ways that they all reflect a sense of defensive nationalism. Secondly, there exists much political debate and ambiguity around rather ill-defined processes that are loosely catch-phrased as the "Arabisation" of Islam, particularly in the context of Africa and Asia. Such narratives have often uncritically typecast and conflated transnational cultural flows with religious-piety movements (and funding), that have often been associated with terms such as "revivalism", "doctrinal purism", "orthodoxy," and "reformism" (Osella and Osella, 2007: 1-2). Often enough, many of these discourses have found legitimation by invoking dualisms between transnational political Islam(s) that are seen to be "traditional, ritualistic and exclusive" on one hand (i.e. *purist*), against seemingly more localised

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<sup>1</sup> Here, the term *hijab* is referred to as more than just a form of "veiling." Both terms elicit some degree of unease with which I deploy these terms, given the symbolic haziness attributed to the concept of "veiling" on one hand, and the *hijab*'s heavy religious signification on the other. More broadly taken to mean embodied practices of modest dress (and conduct), I use the terms *hijab* and veiling alternatively in order to illustrate that particular forms of dress may simultaneously exist both within and outside the religious domain.

forms of religious practice, simplistically at times framed as being relatively more plural and inclusive (i.e. *syncretic*) on the other (see Ghoshal, 2008: 1).

Narratives of Arabisation have often strategically been deployed in ethno-nationalist projects in order to tame expressions of collective identity among ethno-religious minorities, and the contemporary Sri Lankan context appears as no exception. Presently, Sri Lanka's ethnic "Muslims"<sup>2</sup> constitute approximately eight per cent of the national population, and have often been referred to as a second or forgotten minority in the context of the island's dominant Tamil-Sinhalese "bi-polar ethnic imagination" (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 1999: 101). Since May 2009, in the wake of the state-proclaimed defeat of the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE/Tamil Tigers), political agitation largely among hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist factions have increasingly been embracing the expedient (transnational) trope of "Islamic radicalism." These narratives have often sought to re-politicise spaces of everyday life, recast as posing a challenge to the post-war status quo; a status quo that is legitimated by a virulent resurgence of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalisms (Bastian, 2013: 9). Hence, the apparent ubiquity of the "Islamic" veil among Sri Lankan ethnic-Muslims was one among many motifs that were instrumentally mobilised for mass protest.

The paper is chiefly concerned with the meanings and motivations around diverse veiling practices in Sri Lanka's rural northeast, a space that constituted a war frontier during the island's 28 year protracted armed conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government (GoSL). The Eastern Province which holds the largest concentration of Muslims within the local population (McGilvray and Raheem, 2007: 6), is also home to relatively heterogeneous groups broadly referred to as "east coast Muslims", many of who speak Tamil as their first language, and share a long history of social connectedness with the island's ethnic Tamils. Their rules of kinship are distinct from other Sri Lankan Muslim groups, and have historically been characterised by matrilineal social structures, incorporating matrilineal marriage and household patterns (McGilvray, 1998: 458; Ruwanpura, 2006: 52). Furthermore, they often represent markedly different socio-political interests from "southern Muslims" who have disproportionately been represented in formal parliamentary politics until the 1980s (Ismail, 1995: 57).<sup>3</sup>

This analysis endeavours to question the seemingly straightforward association between the popularisation of veiling as a social practice, alongside the burgeoning of contemporary "reformist" and piety movements. Indubitably, these travelling discourses largely from Arabian and Persian Gulf states (via northern India and Pakistan) hardly constitute a new phenomenon, for some of its early

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<sup>2</sup> I use inverted commas interchangeably with the term ethnic Muslims in order to illustrate its properties as a social category, as being inherently unstable and socially constructed. *Unstable* in the sense of that all social identities remain dynamic, evolve over time, and often presuppose a sense of sameness or unity against an over determined veneer of difference from their gendered, classed, religious or ethnic "others." They are socio-politically *constructed* in the sense that identities invariably constitute a hegemonic formation. *Hegemonic* in the sense that not only do they emerge from elite articulations, but are also co-constituted by seemingly subordinate collectives, given moments at which diverse interests may align or may perceivably be under threat. In this light, Ismail (1995) charts the formation of a deeply unstable and paradoxical identity of "Muslimness" (largely elite-centered). The narrative begins with formations that were shaped during nineteenth and twentieth century colonial Ceylon, describing how identity discourses shifted their use from more racialised and ethnicised references to more religious connotations in the wake of postcolonial nationalist state-building, alongside wartime encounters.

<sup>3</sup> Ismail's (1995) distinction between Eastern and Southern Muslims are arguably as problematic as his contention with the elite formation of "Muslim" identity. While he warns against drawing distinctions along geographic boundaries, this categorisation omits the possibilities that political interdependencies and social networks or configurations among diverse Muslim groups may have existed - an area of research that has largely gone unexplored in Sri Lankanist academic scholarship, with the exception of a few studies (see McGilvray and Raheem, 2007).



variants were seen to have taken root in colonial Ceylon since the 1950s (Nuhman, 2004). Moreover, I argue that the growing popularity of veiling practices particularly in the northeast needs to be understood against a broader set of political and socio-economic transformations. These changes are intertwined in Sri Lanka's wartime and post-war trajectories, as much as they are in gendered educational opportunities, experiences of transient migration to the Arabian Gulf, and in women's perceptions of their own agency in interpreting not only their religious faith, but in also reshaping their everyday lifeworlds.

The paper is divided into seven parts. Having laid down the methodological and conceptual foundations of the study, the third section briefly explores contemporary ethno-nationalist politics in post-war Sri Lanka by foregrounding this research in the context of recent anti-veiling discourses. The fourth section focuses on wartime and post-war insecurities among rural fishing communities in the northeast, and questions how far veiling practices have played a role in staging a sense of ethno-religious difference in an otherwise militarised environment. The fifth part engages with the collective experiences of domestic workers who temporarily migrated to the Arabian Gulf, and explores the role that the *hijab* has played in processes of social adjustment upon returning home. The sixth section engages with the spiritual and extra-religious meanings that lower middle and upper middle-class university students attribute to costumes such as the *abaya* and *niqab*. It questions how symbolic meanings and embodied practices around costuming styles reflect identities of progressive modernity and non-elitism in ethno-religiously plural spaces, which often tend to "other" or emphasise the alterity of so-called Arabised attire. The conclusion finally weaves in all three situational contexts, outlining some of the inherent implications in politicising forms of dress.

Therefore, in tying together these seemingly disparate strands, this study explores how diverse motivations around veiling simultaneously encircle spheres of the "personal, religious and political" (Brenner, 1996: 676). I do so by asking how these remarkably diverse women embody practices that not only attend to their self-perception as Muslims, but also on how veiling practices have come to encompass a wider set of sensibilities in negotiating gendered, ethnicised, class-based and occupational identities<sup>4</sup> in an immensely militarised and socially stratified region such as Sri Lanka's northeast.

## 2. Methodology and conceptual underpinnings

In capturing a diversity of veiling practices, this study seeks to explore everyday ethnographies of dress among ethnic-Muslim women who, at least during one stage in their lives, embraced the *abaya*,<sup>5</sup> *niqab*<sup>6</sup> or concomitant variants of the headscarf. This research constitutes a spin-off of a longer doctoral study among small-scale fishing collectives along Sri Lanka's northeastern coastline between June 2012 and April 2013.

The study was sparked by a series of discussions I had in the mixed Muslim-Tamil hamlets that I worked in, following the politicisation of the *abaya* by militant Sinhalese-Buddhist groups towards the end of 2012.<sup>7</sup> The methodology was guided by a life-course approach with an emphasis placed

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<sup>4</sup> At times, I have expressly referred to caste as a category of differentiation. Although the prevalence of caste and its meanings differ considerably between Sri Lankan Muslims, in comparison to the Sinhalese and Tamil, what Ruwanpura (2006: 52) expresses as vestiges of caste-hierarchy, do exist. Here, caste is conflated with a particular set of subaltern occupational categories that my participants often referred to, such as fisherwomen, traveling tradeswomen, washerwomen and barbers for example.

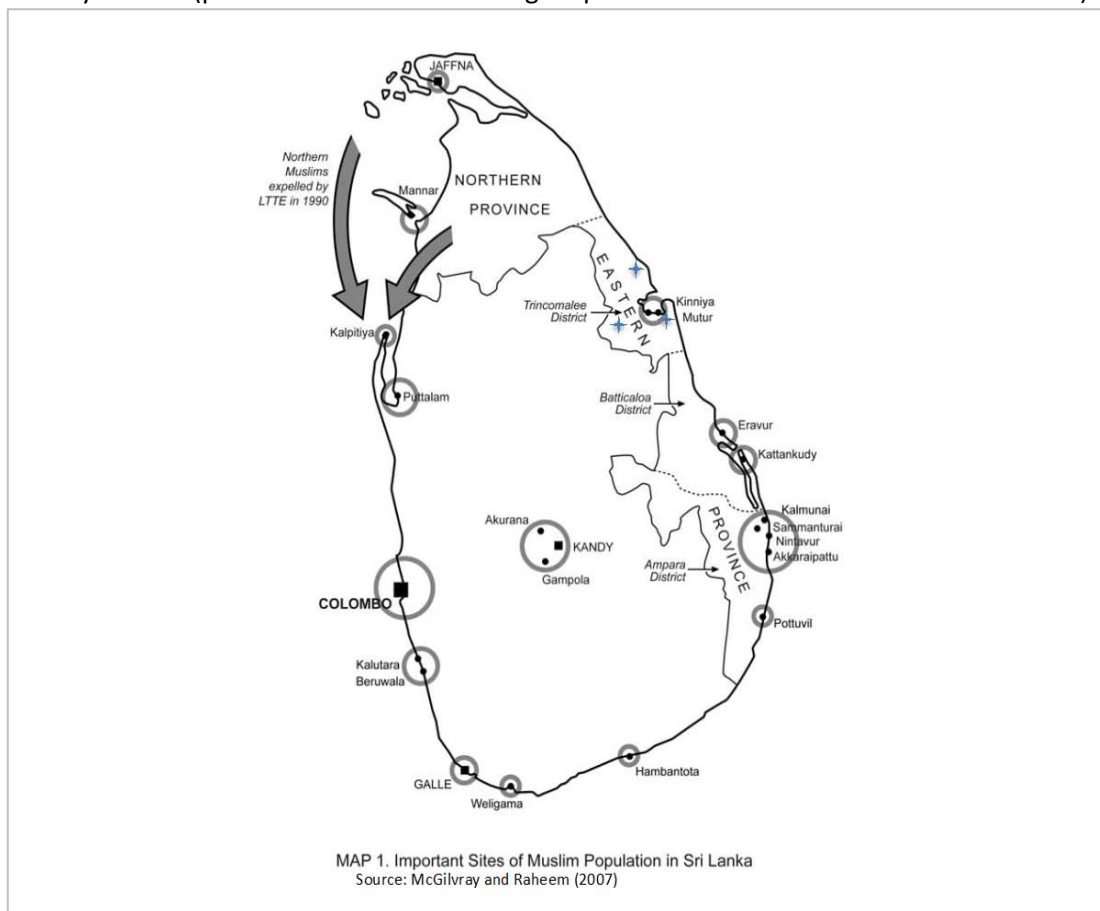
<sup>5</sup> A long robe that is worn out and usually leaves the face and hands exposed.

<sup>6</sup> A face-veil.

<sup>7</sup> While the thematic focus of my own doctoral work differed markedly from this study, I continued to work closely with a friend and colleague, Azhar J. Abdeen, in whose community-based organisation (RECD) I

upon the concept of social time, that not only combines socio-biological events (birth, menarche, parenthood etc.), but also combines significant intersections with historic markers and political transitions (LeBlanc, 2000: 443). Three overarching questions were used as a point of entry to facilitate discussions with participants. These comprised: (a) what was perceived as constituting desirable forms of dress; (b) how and why certain modes of dress, particularly among ethnic-Muslim communities in the Eastern Province changed over the course of three generations and; (c) how practices in dress were believed to change in the future, if so, and why.

The first stage of ethnographic fieldwork (between January and May 2013), focused on two small-scale coastal fishing hamlets in the District of Trincomalee, Sri Lanka. The second stage comprised more focus group discussions and in-depth life history interviews with two socially distinct groups of women entailing labour migrants, and students of Arabic colleges and tertiary institutions, who arguably were said to have played a significant role in popularising the *abaya* in the northeast. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling via regional school networks and community-based organisations. To ensure anonymity, the names of participants and field sites have been significantly altered (please refer to the following map with the research sites indicated in blue).



This study follows in the wake of more recent postcolonial feminist scholarship that recasts practices of veiling as an articulation of (an alternative) modernity (see Al Qasimi, 2010; Secor, 2002). It is a

volunteered with during my fieldwork in Trincomalee. The focus group discussions that were convened towards the end of my fieldwork – with labour migrants and university undergraduates – were co-facilitated by Azhar. Indeed, broaching the subject of clothing practices proved to be rather tricky (both conceptually as well as ethically), given the ubiquity of anti-veiling discourses in the media, for example. On one hand, we started by clearly acknowledging the context of this study (or the recent political developments in which it was situated). On the other, we had to be equally wary of fetishising the *hijab* as an anomalistic or divergent practice. As critiques would rightly point, changes in clothing practices among Tamil and Sinhalese groups are just as salient in understanding constructions of ethno-nationalist political identities.

modernity that not only engages with a particular “politics of piety” but also serves in reconfiguring broader questions of (ethno)national selfhood and collective identity (Mahmood, 2005). As Abu Odeh (1993) and others have argued, the symbolic ambivalence of the veil has often polarised early scholarship that narrowly conceives the *hijab* has either a subjugating or disciplinary device (in the Foucauldian sense), or as an enabling or empowering practice in the context of political resistance and in re-shaping a socio-moral way of life. However, the relational dynamics of power are neither stable nor absolute. They are seen to be derivative of neither this nor that: producing an unbounded agency on one hand, or a set of totalising structural constraints on the other. Therefore, clothing practices and “choices” over what is considered individually desirable are seen to simultaneously occupy overlapping spaces of both “resistance and accommodation”<sup>8</sup> (Weitz, 2001: 683).

Meanwhile, feminist geographies that have combined embodied approaches to studying clothing practices have been relatively more successful in revealing the instability of the veil as a *singularly* religious signifier (see Gökarıksel and Secor, 2013; Mansson McGinty, 2013; Secor, 2002). While distinctions between the sacred and the profane in the context of religious practices and belief-systems remain at best artificial, I revisit Gökarıksel and Secor’s (2013: 99) assertion of whether the *hijab* can exist in spaces that are seen to transcend the “officially sacred?” The term “official” is of primary importance, for as much as religion embodies spheres of the corporeal and quotidian, their spaces, belief-systems and practices are assigned values and hierarchies that are socio-politically mediated. Feminist geographies have inevitably been concerned with more spatialised “regimes of veiling,” in which both the production of space and the performativity of dress (its meanings and enactments) come together (Secor, 2002: 6). However, there exists some degree of fuzziness with which spaces confer a multiplicity of often divergent meanings and vice versa, particularly in the context of veiling and its extra-religious practices. Put differently, do diverse veiling practices merely presuppose a performance of piety, as Gökarıksel and Secor (2013: 11) seem to express towards the end of their study on contemporary Turkey?

In this light, I interrogate whether *piety* (as devotion in religious life), and *propriety* can be conceptually separated, and whether this distinction may at times be consciously invoked by diverse women who embrace the *hijab*? While their semantic meanings may overlap and serve to reinforce one another (Siraj, 2011), the notion of propriety arguably engages with broader (extra-religious) practices of social conformity and contestation, whether it is in the context of muting expressions of one’s political beliefs, adapting to, or in simultaneously contesting gendered norms. My contention here rests in the fact that the few pieces of scholarship that deal with veiling practices in Sri Lanka have often recast its subjects in primarily *religious* terms. Indeed, broader questions of ethno-nationalist politics and collective identities have often been woven into these analyses (see Haniffa 2003 & 2008, Thangarajah, 2003, Klem, 2011, Ismail, 2013). Yet, such studies remain limiting in ways that diverse counter-narratives in response to constructions of difference and alterity often remain partial or concealed. In other words, how are social projects of othering made sense of by those who are subjected to its gaze? Furthermore, I maintain that this is not in any way an effort at wedging an artificial separation between religious and other forms of collective life. However, it can be argued that in some contexts, deepening forms of religious piety do not always constitute the only explanatory force in understanding changes in veiling practices.

In countering the conceptual privileging of religious existence, Schielke (2010: 1-2) provocatively asserts, “...there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam”, in the way that “religious commitment does not embody every aspect of a life lived, be it a “Muslim’s”, for such lives are

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<sup>8</sup> This dichotomous categorisation, in the context of power dynamics and their fluid outcomes prove to be conceptually problematic, as intentional strategies of accommodation themselves (and vice versa), may constitute forms of resistance that are imbued with lives of their own.

perhaps a little less about “traditions, discourses and powers and a little more about existential and pragmatic sensibilities of living a life in a complex and troubling world.” Yet on the other hand, Boulanouar (2006: 150) among others may argue that the very act of disembedding religious or spiritual consciousness from a sense of being in the world, strips us of our ability to understand the agency of women: agency in terms of their presentation of self, the choices that confront them, and the multi-stranded meanings around everyday notions of sexuality, privacy, propriety and piety that are discursively mediated by power, language and everyday practice. While these two ontological perspectives can hardly be reconciled, meanings around piety and propriety are conceived in this study, as existing along a continuum in which the sacred and the profane are tightly coupled. Yet one set of meanings may shift or assume primacy over the other depending on the specific socio-spatial setting that is encountered - in the spaces of public transport, at a family wedding, a military checkpoint, or within the halls of a university for example. This perspective not only attends to the intersecting subjectivities of women - in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, caste, nationalist discourses, and the fluid spaces between them. It also assists in understanding how diverse women strive to make sense of, and counter discourses of “otherness” in the context of the *hijab*. As the narratives in this study reveal, these discourses often portend very real material implications and tactical choices over identity formations.

### 3. Anti-veiling politics in post-war Sri Lanka

As research within ethnology and folklore, cultural studies, social psychology, marketing and fashion studies among others have amply illustrated, clothing practices are never a deeply ingrained phenomenon in any social space (see Hansen, 2004: 372). Therefore, attempts at exploring the cultural embeddedness of veiling in eastern Sri Lanka would seem an almost hollow endeavour. Given the immense socio-cultural diversity of its ethnicised “Muslim” community, vastly different styles of dress have historically been worn, mixing colonial European, West Asian, Malay-Javanese, southern and northern Indian forms, and perhaps to a lesser degree, East African. Muslim women in the Eastern Province at least, are commonly seen to wear the *sari/saree*<sup>9</sup> and the *shalwar kameez/qameez*<sup>10</sup> particularly when outdoors, together with the “housecoat” or *kaftan/qaftân*<sup>11</sup> when indoors. In the 1930s and 1940s older women were sometimes reputed to have worn blouses along with ankle-length skirts. Presently, a majority of Muslim women in the northeast are seen to loosely cover their hair with a shawl, and sometimes wear their saris in what is locally referred to as the *makkadu*-style, in which the colourful border or “headpiece” of the *sari* would be drawn over the head.

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<sup>9</sup> A female garment worn in some parts of South Asia. It usually entails at least two and a half yards of cloth (for example cotton or silk), that is draped around the body in varying styles.

<sup>10</sup> A dress worn by both men and women in parts of South and Central Asia, and comprises usually of a two-part suit: a long tunic-like garb worn on top, and a pair of loose drawstring-type pants.

<sup>11</sup> A long loose overdress or robe reaching the ankles, either long or short-sleeved.

Figure 2: Lagoon shell-gleaners working in the *makkadu*-sari, Kinniya, Trincomalee.



Source: R. Siriwardane (2012)

Meanwhile, it remains equally futile to refer to the recent popularisation of “Arabised” attire such as the *abaya* and *niqab* (since the 1980s), as a relatively “new” adoption in the Eastern Province.<sup>12</sup> What is referred to and politically reified today as Sri Lanka’s ethnic Muslims historically and culturally constitute immensely diverse groups, with smaller clusters of Malays together with Borahs, Khojas and Memons largely concentrated in the more metropolitan spaces of the south and southwest (see McGilvray and Raheem, 2007: 6, Gugler, 2013: 168-170). Some hark back to pre-Islamic origins associated with migratory flows and maritime trade spanning over 2,000 years,<sup>13</sup> with ancestries being traced back to settlers of Indian, Arab, Malay-Javanese and Abyssinian origin, among others (Ameer Ali, 2006: 373). Therefore, it remains deeply problematic to allude to “traditional” veiling practices and by extension, to discuss the *origin* of certain forms of dress. Instead, the study draws primarily upon collective memory and participants’ individual interpretations over clothing practices and choices, which have been progressively changed over the decades. For example, a number of women who were born before or during the 1950s often referred to the *abaya* and *niqab* as a relatively more recent form of attire in the Eastern Province, that gained popularity over a span of two to three decades at most. Similarly, what was referred to as the schoolgirls’ “purdah” (taking the form of a white stitched headscarf), the Pakistani *jubba*,<sup>14</sup> and the male *thwab/thobe*,<sup>15</sup> were all categorised as more recent additions to an otherwise varied costume culture.

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<sup>12</sup> There exists some degree of ambiguity concerning the recentness of certain dress codes such as the *abaya*. Some may perceive it as a relatively new introduction to costume culture, since the 1980s. Others may argue that such dress codes may have pre-dated colonialism long before the 1600s (Haniffa, 2003: 2), and may have declined over time given subsequent political shifts and cultural influences.

<sup>13</sup> Here I would assert that pre-colonial Ceylon as we know it comprises almost entirely of migrant, geographically diverse communities.

<sup>14</sup> Similar to a *shalwar*, but with a longer tunic, differing in style from other regions in South Asia and the Arabian Gulf.

<sup>15</sup> A long white robe worn by men. Participants often referred to it as garment that was worn during *Juma’ah* (congregational Friday afternoon prayers).’

Figure 3: Caregivers attending a school-based workshop on interfaith relations, Kantale, Trincomalee.



Source: A.J Abdeen (2011)

Figure 4: A pre-school performance with children wearing what is locally referred to as the *Pakistani jubba*, Kantale, Trincomalee.



Source: A.J Abdeen (2012)

Meanwhile Sri Lanka's troubled post-war years, have predictably witnessed the mushrooming of more ethno-nationalist militant Sinhala-Buddhist movements across the island that have selectively targeted Muslim as well as Christian entities and spaces.<sup>16</sup> The most prominent of these factions remain the Buddhist-clergy led *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) or the Buddhist Brigade/Force. The movement,

<sup>16</sup> Such political movements have not been uncommon in the more recent history of Sinhala nationalism. A similar example, combining leadership and support from the Buddhist clergy would include the *Jatika Hela Urumaya* or the JHU (see Deegalle, 2004).

which took upon the task of agitating against and ultimately interdicting the local sale of halal-certified retail goods in the first quarter of 2013, concurrently focused on mobilising public or lay support in an attempt to ban veiling in public life (Schubert, 2013). In one respect, organisations such as the BBS were seen to re-articulate early economic grievances of colonial Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalists and the petty bourgeoisie, in countering what they perceived as the monopolisation of commercial activity among predominantly urban-dwelling Muslim collectives.<sup>17</sup> In particular, the more recent sporadic, yet highly organised attacks on Muslim-owned retail businesses and smaller local mosques and prayer halls, bear echoes of the infamous anti-Muslim riots of 1915 in colonial Ceylon (see Jayawardena, 1970: 228). It must be borne in mind that much of this anti-Muslim agitation and violence was mainly confined to the urban and peri-urban spaces of the southwest, central and north-central regions of the country. Unsurprisingly perhaps, there was relatively little heard from Muslim-Sinhala districts such as Ampara, although particular sites in the Eastern Province, such as the Mosque Federation building of Kattankudy, was damaged by arson. Often, its “lay” perpetrators have never made themselves publically known. Between 2012 and 2013, anti-Muslim violence - in the form of attacks on religious sites, retail shops or women in *hijab* – were seen to occur with an almost explosive force, at times simultaneously across multiple sites. My participants often argued that it was difficult to draw clear associational links between a singular event, and a tightly mobilised group such as the BBS or a more localised temple network.<sup>18</sup> Residents frequently complained that police cases were often abandoned due to a combination of political pressure, apathy, and a barely concealed repertoire of pro-agitator sentiments.

It can be argued however, that these post-war articulations are becoming increasingly more complex than the forms of anti-Muslim agitation witnessed in the past. Firstly, everyday cultural and religious symbols (taken as markers of social difference), have never been as virulently politicised as they are today. These discourses have conflated older anti-Muslim rhetoric with newer anti-Islamic strands, the former expressing particular grievances with respect to ethnicised communalism, the latter focusing on religious-doctrinal elements characterised as being “inherently dangerous” (Anon, 2013: 1).<sup>19</sup> Secondly, anti-Muslim movements in the past have arguably not possessed the same degree of political patronage that groups such as the BBS and *Sinhala Ravaya*, are seen to enjoy at present. Indeed, it was the very hegemony of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism that legitimated the final stages of the armed conflict, and the manner in which it was brought to a close. More tellingly perhaps, these narratives of “patriotism” continued well into the next decade. To date, the more extremist Sinhala nationalist parties that were mobilised during the final military offensive, remains a powerful force in determining statist post-war political discourse (see Bastian, 2013: 9).

In a number of instances, anti-veiling narratives were bound up in matters of national security. Costumes such as the *abaya* and *niqab* were borrowed as potent ciphers in order to legitimise what ethno-nationalist factions framed as constituting a rising tide in fundamentalist Islamic orthodoxy and political radicalism, originating chiefly from Saudi Arabia. Similarly, secular liberalist and gendered “emancipatory” discourses continued playing their part in demonising the *hijab*, though with much less tenacity and public visibility.

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<sup>17</sup> For a critique on the imaginary/formation of the mercantilist “Muslim” identity, refer to Ismail (1995). In brief, this construction was very much a consequence of elite urbanite Muslim self-presentations, as much as it was co-constituted in British colonial imagination. Indeed, Muslim communities in the rural war-torn spaces of the north, east and far northwest predominately constitute farming, fishing and herding communities; some remain landless following cycles of displacement, wartime and post-war dispossession.

<sup>18</sup> Associations have often been drawn with very similar anti-Muslim attacks and social movements recently witnessed in Myanmar. While their associational links remain relatively hazy, the state-driven curtailment of the distribution of a *Time Magazine* issue featuring U Wirathu, arguably had more to reveal on the extent to which ethno-nationalist factions enjoy some degree of political impunity.

<sup>19</sup> As Klem (2011: 736) and others may assert, this conflation draws attention to paradoxes of analysing post-war politics through distinctly three, nevertheless interrelated lenses: the political, the ethnic and the religious.

Figure 5: A Sinhala-language BBS propaganda poster/flyer portraying a seemingly partisan Defence Secretary, alongside its anti-halal campaign logo.



Source: DBSjeyaraj.com (accessed in April 2014)

Concurrently, there has been some internal debate among diverse Sri Lankan Muslim factions concerning the normalising currents of religio-cultural practices, and not in the least among doctrinal influences from perceivably *Salafist* and *Wahhabi* schools of thought. These concerns have problematised the seemingly erroneous conflation of Islam with “Middle Eastern” cultural traditions, and have at times sought to counter purist interpretations of doctrinal beliefs and practices in everyday life. Such discursive struggles were not limited to dress codes alone, and have often encompassed diverse aspects of life ranging from mosque architectural forms, home décor styles and general aesthetics, to dietary habits and social etiquette for example (*Ceylon Today*, 2013; McGilvray 2011). Furthermore, these currents have often been associated with increasing expressions of inter-denominational intolerance over the last three decades, exemplified by local mob violence culminating in the destruction of *ziyarams*,<sup>20</sup> and the open persecution of Sufi sheikhs and leaders (McGilvray and Raheem, 2007: 12). More recently, transnational movements such as the *Tablighi Jama'at* have been facing increasing opposition from local Muslim activists, who have at times been successful in lobbying for the expulsion of foreign preachers (Gugler, 2013: 171).

However, an in-depth analysis on Sri Lanka’s diverse strands of anti-veiling discourse goes beyond the scope of this paper. Equally, by no means do I attempt to reconstruct a *coherent* counter-narrative as a rejoinder to the nationalist anxieties in relation to “Islamic” attire and its perceived radicalism. Instead, by exploring a diversity of narratives from a cross-section of women in northeastern Sri Lanka, this paper draws attention to some of the nuances that have often been underplayed or silenced in such debates. This requires an equal degree of caution against the tendency to objectify dress and outward appearance as a totalising expression of self and social identity, or in Dwyer’s words, as an “over determined marker of difference” (1995: 5). Therefore, while the quandaries of representational and authorial authority continue to haunt ethnographic research of this kind, analyses gleaned from the narratives were again discussed with participants who enabled this study. This exercise was hardly treated as a project in capturing a series of static realities, but was undertaken to reflect upon the congruities as well as dissonances between diverse storylines and individual experiences. In alluding to Georg Simmel, the narratives explored here are

<sup>20</sup> Tomb-shrines of Islamic saints. In the Sri Lankan context, they may also draw worshippers from other faiths.



but “momentary images” and “fragments of social reality” (in Göle, 2002: 173), by which the meaning of the whole could be barely glimpsed only in passing, but never in its entirety.

#### **4. Wartime insecurities and the staging of collective identities in rural Trincomalee**

This first empirical section is concerned with diverse realities faced by rural Muslim communities in the northeast, during the course of Sri Lanka’s protracted armed conflict. Since the late seventies, Muslim communities particularly in the war-torn spaces of the north and east found themselves situated between two militant Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalisms. Yet, as McGilvray and Raheem (2007: viii-ix) posit, these Muslim collectives continued to “have historic linguistic affinities and pragmatic political and economic concerns in common with their Tamil neighbours, including anxieties over the steadily encroaching state-sponsored Sinhala-Buddhist colonisation project.” Moreover, they offer a reminder that despite the formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), that sought to unite ethnic Muslims and to their safeguard collective interests in the eighties, prevailing intraparty factionalism questioned whose interests were being represented, and at what cost (ibid.:ix).

While there is much focus on the congealing of a seemingly homogenous ethno-religious Muslim identity in the Eastern Province which was by no means internally cohesive nor coherent (Nuhman, 2004: 5), everyday strategies of survival remained diverse, depending on the constellation of political actors and forces at work in a given spatio-temporal context. Shifts in power dynamics alongside geographic areas of control (between the state and the secessionist LTTE) affected the degree to which diverse Muslim groups engaged in an uncertain politics of accommodation, neutrality or resistance. The late eighties however marked a dramatic shift in inter-ethnic relations between Muslims and Tamils in the east, followed by the “decisive Muslim break with the Tamil secessionist movements” (McGilvray, 2011: 60). While a processual trajectory flagging key points of rupture and alliance-shifting remains difficult to establish, the unequal access that certain Muslim collectives may have enjoyed to state-legitimated political power, patronage networks and other resources undoubtedly played a significant role in widening the schism (Klem, 2011: 740). Among the most significant events implicating this rift was the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from de-facto LTTE spaces of the Northern Province, together with the escalation of violence, most notably witnessed in the infamous mosque massacres of Kattankudy, Akkaraipattu and Eravur in the east (Haniffa, 2008: 350; Imtiyaz, 2012: 55).

Arguably however, one would seem less inclined to situate these political transformations within the narrow frame of everyday inter-ethnic antagonisms. Communal schisms at the same time are reflective of broader state-societal relations, particularly given the context in which ethnicity has often been politicised as a mobilising force, together with a culture of militarisation that was progressively taking shape in post-colonial Ceylon/Sri Lanka. Therefore, the polarisation of ethnic relations in the east should likewise be analysed in the light of external elements, such as the presence of the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) in the eighties, or the subsequent arming of civilian home-guard brigades by the Sri Lankan state. These invariably constituted factors that were “all instrumental in manipulating ethnic differences and in exacerbating enmity between the *two communities*”<sup>21</sup> (Haniffa, 2009: 91, italics my own).

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<sup>21</sup> This quote aptly points towards the conceptual and semantic limitations of referring to “communities” within the context of the armed conflict. Firstly, it generally presupposes a degree of internal homogeneity between these social formations. Secondly, it reveals the challenges of conceiving an alternative vocabulary in describing these formations as ethnicised structural constructs, in which possibilities of social hybridity may remain largely invisible or remarkably difficult to articulate.

Secondly, it can be argued that wartime encounters did not forge a seemingly unified set of ethno-political meanings and collectives around a singularised Muslim identity. As Klem (2011: 745) posits, the formation of new *intra*-communal faultlines can be witnessed, and at times, contradictory religio-political meanings that are attributed “Muslimness,” some privileging ethnic genealogy and territorial belonging, others doctrinal purism for example. This first section therefore engages with selective expressions of collective identity, against the backdrop of thwarted state-society relations characterised by political cultures of secessionist and state militarisation. It begins by asking how far everyday forms of dress were tactically or intuitively manipulated as a way of staging ethno-religious difference, or in conveying a sense of neutrality or anti-politics (both constituting inherently political acts), among Muslim communities in the rural spaces of Trincomalee.

Misgar and Urali are coastal fishing villages, each comprising approximately 300 households. At first glance, these villages differ markedly from each other. Misgar is located in southern Trincomalee, closer to the border of the Batticaloa District. Two impressive mosques festooned with multiple minarets (a more recent architectural adaptation inspired by the Arab world), flank the ward in which Misgar is located. Its houses are closer to one another, with low boundary fences and at times household compounds were seen to be indivisible. Many of Misgar’s female inhabitants were seen wearing the *shalwar* and *makkadu* sari as they set about their daily routines, at the marketplace, when attending village-level meetings, or in bringing children back and forth from school for example.

Urali on the other hand, can be described as one of the few ethnically heterogeneous fishing hamlets in northern Trincomalee. It has been a mixed Muslim-Tamil space in its 150 year span of recorded village history. Urali also has a sizeable community of Sinhalese-Catholic fishing families, who refer to themselves as seasonal migrants from the west coast before having settled in Urali in the late 1960s. Indeed, Urali’s diverse spaces of worship mark its religious plurality – the prevalence of a mosque, a modest Hindu Pillayar *kovil*,<sup>22</sup> and a number of small shrines dotting stretches of beach land housing effigies of Saint Francis and the Virgin Mary. It is also one of the few villages that have retained a mixed-sex bilingual school, in which parallel classes are held in both Tamil and Sinhala. Despite its internal diversity, Urali’s social ordering of ethnic difference remains carefully managed. Its housing spaces are ethnically quartered, and there have been a few inter-religious/ethnic marriages, primarily between Tamil-Hindu/Catholics and Sinhalese-Buddhist/Catholics. While inter-ethnic interaction remains part-and-parcel of everyday village life (in the schoolroom, during religious feasts, or at the celebration of an adolescent’s menarche for example), markers of ethno-religious difference remain relatively more visible in Urali. These articulations of difference are more telling within the confines of its “Muslim quarter”<sup>23</sup> in which a significantly higher number of women, in comparison to Misgar, are seen to have adopted the *abaya*.

Diverse costume cultures, in spaces like Misgar and Urali cannot simply be explained away by the degree to which contemporary piety movements and doctrinal influences have taken root. Notwithstanding, Islamic “reformist” missionising teams (the *Tablighi Jama’at*, for example), are said to frequent both villages, and the influence they have among local clerics, mosque trustees and members of the community at large, cannot be discounted. The residents of Misgar and Urali would broadly identify themselves as *Shafites* (within the *Sunni* sect), as a significant majority of Sri Lankan Muslims are (Ameer Ali, 2006: 372). In the meantime, *Sufi*-like ritualistic practices such as saint worship, particularly among elderly men within both communities are not uncommon. However, younger members may at times turn a discerning eye towards such practices, broadly conceived as being non-Islamic. However, the differences in women’s everyday attire are as much a product of the

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<sup>22</sup> Hindu temple, and in this context of the diety Ganesha (Sri Vinayagar).

<sup>23</sup> In some respects, the geography of Urali’s residential quarters are embryonic of the mosaic-like ethnic settlements or enclaves that characterise large swathes of the east coast.

local political economy, as of their ethnicised and subaltern identities with respect to their village sites.

Unlike Urali, Misgar contains a more diversified range of fishing-related livelihoods. Given Misgar's close proximity to a number of brackish water bodies, the village also relies heavily on clam and other forms of shell gleaning, alongside more mainstream capture-fishery activities. These gleaning operations are largely organised and run by Muslim women - both old and young - who, in their brightly coloured saris can be seen immersed waist-deep in water during a regular afternoon, sometimes with baskets strapped to their backs (see Figure 2). In the past, some of these gleaning activities also took place in the evening. During wartime when curfews became a mainstay, these operations were relegated to daylight hours. The shells are often brought back to the compounds of homes where teams of younger women would sit for hours sorting them. The "shell-sorters" were usually dressed practically, befitting the hot outdoor environment in which they toiled. Many were attired in loose-fitting *shalwar kameez* or long cotton housecoats and seldom wore headscarves. A number of younger women however stated they possessed at least one *abaya*, which was often worn during religious festivals. Younger girls who attended *madrassas*<sup>24</sup> and Arabic colleges wore white scarves or *abayas* to class, but veiling was never perceived as a daily fixity in the lives of Misgar's fisherwomen:

"... the *abaya* is graceful, but it is not for women who need to work like us. We are constantly covered in silt when we fish, so there is a reason why our grandmothers wore *sari*. During my daughter's time more women wore *shalwars*. It is a garment that is easier to wash and move around in. But the *abaya*...is for women who stay at home and do not have to do hard work like us. My granddaughter, who is four years old, now has an *abaya* she wears to the *madrassa*. My daughter had it stitched for her... though it was very recently that a few women in our village started dressing like the *Arabi*, and they were people who returned as housemaids from Saudi."  
(Rasheeda, 62 years, shell-gleaner from Misgar)

Within postcolonial feminist scholarship, the *hijab* at times was perceived as an enabling practice, facilitating women's entry and participation in the formal public domain. In this context, veiling was seen as a marker of modesty, respectability and privacy, when negotiating everyday life and in ensuring mobility in public spaces (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 785). Yet, these meanings are more relevant to cultures that draw clear demarcations between gendered spheres of life, and in the context of rural Sri Lanka, labouring outdoors shoulder-to-shoulder with men is hardly considered anomalous. Therefore, in the context of Misgar, these symbolic meanings do not bear much relevance, as distinctions between public and private domains are hardly drawn occupationally in everyday life worlds.

On the contrary, Misgar's fisherwomen recast the *abaya* as an article of privilege or luxury to be worn within the confines of the domestic sphere. As a costume, it symbolises the power of differentiating women of leisure from "working women" like Rasheeda. Arguably, Rasheeda's conceptual location of the *sari* and *shalwar* in opposition to the *abaya*, embodies her caste-bound, marginalised occupational identity as a fisherwoman, a sub-cultural identity that she herself reifies. Although working-*saris* and *shalwars* may not measure up to the "grace" of an *abaya*, they are taken as far more practical forms of attire. Interestingly, Rasheeda's narrative is bereft of any meanings attributed to religious piety, social respectability or modesty of dress. In the meantime, the appropriateness of the *makkaadu-sari* was validated by Misgar's fisherwomen in terms of its ability to serve as a distinct marker of Muslim identity, for Tamil women were traditionally seen to wear their saris differently.

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<sup>24</sup> Schools of religious instruction for girls and boys.

Yet, Rasheeda's daughter's choice in having an *abaya* stitched for her four-year old girl reveals that internal changes in everyday costume culture are progressively taking shape in spaces like Misgar. The normalisation of what these women identify as Arab-styled veiling practices, particularly within the confines of *madrasas* and other religious educational institutions, cannot be discounted given the influence of local revivalist and piety movements. What is important however is that women like Rasheeda do not necessarily perceive an internal contradiction between her everyday choice of dress and her granddaughter's schooling attire. When she comes of age to help her family in their fishing enterprise, the granddaughter will most likely exchange her school-worn *abaya* for a *shalwar*.

Urali, in comparison to Misgar, is relatively more affluent. Fishing operations are organised in accordance with more formalised labour contracts. Fishing itself is perceived as a predominantly *male* occupation, and labour is usually sourced from outside the village. This dynamic in no way disregards the participation of Urali's women in the domain of fishing livelihoods, where they have been active as members of village cooperative societies and local networks of trade. However, among the Muslim households of Urali, it would seem uncommon to witness Muslim women who engaged in manual labour outside their homes, unlike in the case of Misgar. A small number of women among Urali's Muslim households had, at least once in their lives, returned from the Middle East as domestic workers, and much of their earnings were converted into capital for fishing operations, or went into developing housing infrastructure. However, village narratives placed lesser emphasis on trends set by domestic workers returning from the Arab world. In its place, Urali's history of the *abaya* was very much enmeshed in its unique wartime experiences. Urali often prides itself as an ethnically plural space that, unlike other villages in the northeast, was hardly affected by as much inter-communal discord during heightened phases of the armed conflict. What remained striking about Urali was its unique socio-spatial geography, in that it "belonged to neither side", as a Tamil dry-fish maker once remarked. By this, she was referring to the eighties and nineties, when residents literally found themselves located between the LTTE who often moved through the backwaters of the lagoon behind Urali, and the Sri Lankan military forces that occupied spaces closer to the main roadways.

Night-time raids were a common occurrence, when the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE were said to have alternately staged "round-ups." Many a time, an outward show of detachment and non-involvement seemed to have been a less problematic way out during these arbitrary arrests and inquisitions.<sup>25</sup> However, a commonsensical position of neutrality itself seems thorny, particularly when communities find themselves literally sandwiched between two militaries that pressure civilians for intelligence information, money and other resources on a daily basis. Acquiescence, inaction or outright refusal may all amount to some form of reprisal. It was within this socio-political context that the *abaya* gained salience, and by the mid-nineties both younger and older women in Urali were seen to be veiling more often. As Tabina asserts:

"...there were moments the military found it hard to differentiate between Muslim and Tamil fishermen when out at sea. While a lot of Tamil women would wear dresses, they would also wear the *shalwar* and the *sari*...so did my mother and grandmother, and in the marketplace it would sometimes be different to tell us apart... if there was an outbreak of violence. When my daughters and nieces were in their early teens, I would encourage them to wear a headscarf at least, when they were out and about. An *abaya* and *niqab* were even better. Not only did it show that we were Muslims, but it also concealed our girls from the prying eyes of the army and the police when they asked questions... it was the Tamil girls who were usually harassed, especially at checkpoints."

(Tabina, 57 years, member of the fisheries cooperative society in Urali)

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<sup>25</sup> Unlike other neighbouring villages in the Kuchchaveli area, hardly anyone in Urali was reported to have been abducted or gone missing.

Tabina's narrative is clearly evocative of how costumes were tactically adopted to stage social difference - either through accentuating particular facets of religiosity (the modesty and piety of women), or through the outward affirmation of ethno-religious difference. In a more quotidian sense, it also served as a protective shield in many respects, and not in the least in enabling women to face everyday vulnerabilities when living in an intensely militarised environment. Nevertheless, it would also be wrong to assert that there was any conscious strategy to instrumentalise the *abaya* in order to stage socio-political difference. Such transformations in dress should be studied in tandem with broader processes of ethnicisation during wartime. Muslims who lived in the semi state-controlled spaces of the east were geographically more mobile over land and sea than their Tamil peers, whilst trading and other commercial activities continued with much less military interference (see Klem, 2011: 740, Haltiner, 2013: 69). Rural fishing communities such as Urali, were very much aware of the versatility of the *abaya* in different political contexts. A Sinhalese-Catholic boat-owner who moved to the western coastal town of Negombo during the war, remarked that it was not uncommon for her Muslim neighbours to lend their *abayas* and *niqabs* to Tamil and Sinhalese youth, when they were compelled to flee the village. Meanwhile, the surge in transnational forms of religiosity coupled by the heightened awareness of appropriate forms of dress, may have served as a convenient trope to embrace in such a context. This adoption of a *seemingly* homogenous collective identity helped maintain what could be termed as a form of "defensive neutrality" (de Munck, 2005: 403), but could hardly be taken as a stable identity, or at the very least, a conscious strategy.

In contemporary Urali, the *abaya* was perceived as a mainstay in everyday local costume culture. Its enduring appeal can be attributed to meanings that lie well within and outside Urali's conflict narrative. While public veiling maintained a sense of collective identity, it could also be seen as a self-initiated practice of "othering" or social differentiation as a second minority situated an ethnically bipolarised warzone. Today the *abaya*, at least among younger women in Urali, signifies a sense of belonging to the transnational *ummah* or a global Islamic community. Moreover, many of the older women in Misgar and Urali openly acknowledged the foreignness or novelty of the *abaya*, and at times referred to it as an importation from the Arab world.

Explanations of why veiling gained popularity was seldom situated within a morally normative frame, for at times it was seen to assume an extra-religious habitus of its own. In other words, explanations given around the emergence of costumes such as the *abaya* hardly embodied a singular narrative that was either this or that. A significant number of elderly women stated that it originated just as spontaneously or "came into being." At times, it seemed remarkably bereft of a conscious and singularly religious signification. The more traditional *makkadu*-styled sari and the *shalwar*, at least among Misgar's and Urali's fisherwomen, were often worn interchangeably with the *abaya*. Veiling therefore hardly gained much status as a fixed "regime" in particular spaces of the northeast. Moreover, it would not seem uncommon to find a rural Muslim household where grandmothers were seen wearing *saris*, their middle-aged daughters *shalwars*, and younger women in their twenties adopting the *abaya*. Older women in particular, perceived the *abaya* and other variations of the *hijab* as yet another historic transformation, similar to the changes they had witnessed in their youth, when the *sari* was increasingly being exchanged for the *shalwar*.

## 5. Performing respectability: Domestic workers returning from the Arabian Gulf

As the narratives of Misgar and Urali reveal, one of the earliest groups of women to embrace the *hijab* in the northeast were female labour migrants returning from the Middle East. This section explores subjective experiences with veiling during their stay in the Arabian Gulf as domestic workers, together with how women sought to re-assimilate upon returning to their villages of origin. The first focus group comprised six women, ranging between the ages of 22 to 30. All except one affirmed that they had migrated only once, namely to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Dubai. All six stated that they had never owned an *abaya* before they left Sri Lanka as domestic workers. Furthermore, many articulated the fact that a significant number of Muslim women who had worked in the Middle East, continued to veil upon returning home. However, while the participants articulated a *preference* for wearing the *abaya* outside their homes, they also established the fact that they often alternated between the *shalwar*, *abaya* and the *sari* in accordance to diverse social conventions and contexts.

Female domestic workers encompass the largest share of Sri Lanka's labour migrants, and a vast majority are employed in the Arabian Gulf and Southeast Asia. Labour migration, at least among women seeking domestic employment, arguably began from the 1970s, with Sri Lanka's transition to the free market economy that coincided with the oil boom in the Arabian Gulf (Ameer Ali, 2010: 191). Remittances from migrant labour contributed significantly to foreign exchange earnings, and from the Middle East constituted as much as 60 per cent of the total share (Thangarajah, 2003: 145). A significant proportion of these remittances came from the earnings of foreign domestic labour, and from as early as 1991, "housemaids" were seen to have comprised between 75 per cent and 80 per cent of all female migrants, numbering at 113, 000 in 1995 (ibid: 145). By 2010, approximately 1.5 million Sri Lankans were working in the Middle East, and between 60 and 65 per cent were said to be of Islamic faith (Ameer Ali, 2010: 191).

Predictably perhaps, the demand for domestic workers to the Arabian Gulf privileged women who were deemed to be practicing Muslims. While a significant number of non-Muslim women were recruited through labour agencies, the religious faith of domestic workers at times, directly translated into a host of material advantages. In some households, Muslim domestic helpers were tasked with food preparation, which by extension enhanced their versatility and employability (Thangarajah, 2003: 150). Thus, it was not uncommon among Sinhalese women in particular, to falsify their identities when obtaining passports and registering with job agencies (Gamburd, 2000: 150). Arguably however, there is never a time that so acutely reflects internal cultural differences within an imagined Pan-Islamic identity, than when a foreign Muslim domestic worker first moves in with her Arab employers. In regions of the northeast, the "Arabisation" of a young Sri Lankan-Muslim domestic worker often begins on home turf. Her initiation into the decorum of an Arab household starts in the village, when older veteran women who have been employed as domestic workers in the past, often proffer advice on appropriate codes of conduct when abroad. Among these instructions, is the practicality of arriving at the airport with a packed *abaya*, or at best donning one.

According to the participants, the *abaya* (and *niqab* when outdoors), was in many respects, the putative mode of dress:

"...it did not cross our minds to wear anything else. The women in the household - the mistress, daughters and sometimes their aunts - would usually donate old clothes and these were always abayas. The abaya was worn at all times, when I worked in the house."

Raihana, 24 years, a former domestic worker in Kuwait

While her narrative partially reveals her perception of the *abaya* as a garment of imposition, it also contains strong sensitivities of veiling as a normalised practice (through her subordinate role in the hierarchy of the Arab household). Similar kinds of ambivalence were revealed during the focus group discussion. On one hand, some referred to the “freedom” that Arab women had in exchanging their *hijabs* for clothing such as pants and t-shirts when indoors. On the other hand, the same participants conferred that they hardly perceived the hijab as an enforced practice during their time abroad. A few stated that they would not have exchanged their *abayas* for any other type of clothing, and stories were shared among non-Muslim women in more “liberal” Arab households who in some instances, had been sexually exploited by men in the family. Yet, these narratives lay bare more questions about numerous women who wore the *hijab* and were sexually abused in relatively more “conservative” households. Similar to the narratives of Urali, the *abaya* seemed to serve as a protective skin, however in this context, within the sphere of paid domesticity. What is important is that the *hijab* was perceived as more than just an article of clothing that protected, enabled mobility and suggested one’s religious piety *vis-à-vis* a sense of moral propriety. The *abaya* itself arguably possessed an agency of its own; an agency that women hoped they could sustain or replicate upon returning home. As Amina asserts:

“In *Arabi* countries, there is a special place for women.... they are entirely respected. When I step on the streets there, I feel worthy as a woman unlike here [in Sri Lanka] even if I wear a scarf. That is the difference between here and there. This kind of dressing [the *hijab*] was what we first need; those countries too would have been morally corrupt, and when women invented this dress, it tamed the world to behave appropriately towards us, with deference, even fear...”

Amina, 30 years, a former domestic worker in Saudi Arabia

Intriguingly, veiled costumes are recast as necessary feminine inventions. Amina’s narrative captures what she believes to be the agency of the veil - its power to contain the moral degeneration of men - and by extension the world at large. Public veiling in this context is more than just an embodied practice. While it is imbued in meanings of inner spirituality and religious piety, its agency is seen to transcend the personal sphere, through its capacity to re-order collective practice.

Earlier work on eastern Sri Lanka has shown how the veil often signified the affluence of the Arab world, together with a labour migrant’s sense of renewed religious piety (see Thangarajah, 2003: 141-162). However, this reading barely captures the complexities inherent in everyday *choices* in dress, particularly with reference to how women re-negotiate multiple subjectivities in the social worlds that they inhabit. In other words, it presupposes that costumes such as the *abaya* are worn during most, if not all occasions in public life, “enabling more, and not less, mobility” (ibid: 157). Meanwhile, Silvey’s (2007: 222) study explores the emotion-laden vocabularies of Indonesian labour migrants to Saudi Arabia. Her discussion of “gendered piety” however still remains within the realm of religious reasoning and of “religiously inflected discourses.”

As mentioned earlier, among most Gulf-state returnees, veiled costumes were *not* worn out during all times. In other words, one questions the degree to which the *hijab* could be seen as a disciplinary device, given practices of selection. Four of our six respondents stated that they alternated between the *abaya* and the *shalwar*, and all of them indicated that they wore the *shalwar* as an undergarment along with their *abaya*. In the confines of a relative’s house for example, the *abaya* would be removed, and the *shalwar* would remain a permissible form of attire even as they meandered through local neighbourhoods that were not their own. More interestingly, was the privileged space that was allotted to the traditional *sari*. Many who wore the *abaya* more frequently in public life possessed a few “festival” saris that were selectively worn during weddings. A wedding that warranted a *sari*, varied significantly from one in which they would wear an *abaya*. When exploring differences in meaning, the women unanimously stated that a “wedding for which we don’t receive an invitation to” would call for a *sari*. In other words, these often entailed wedding celebrations of

close family members, where it was customary to perform a functionary role at the reception desk or as food-server for example.

On the other hand, their role as invitees to weddings of distant or non-relatives required a certain form of decorum, which necessitated an *abaya* or more generally, a less flamboyant form of dress. While these nuances in wedding dress codes warrant deeper exploration, I draw on this phenomenon to illustrate the fact that public veiling was far from being perceived as a rigid and totalising practice in the lives of some women. Moreover, social propriety (and not piety) was seen to determine the rules of wedding dress codes, for most women were quick to point out that the *hijab* as pious practice warranted a complete “surrender.” However, this insufficiently answers the question of whether these adherents of the (selectively worn) *hijab* also perceived it as an enforced or disciplinary practice?

The *abaya* and other veiled costumes were often used during longer journeys into town, or outside the district. Herein lies the ambiguity of the *abaya* as *both* a signifier of socio-moral respectability and spiritual piety. Migrant domestic workers often stated that they perceived the *abaya* as a singularly religious costume, often worn by women for whom “faith was exclusively on their minds.” These discursive constructions of the *abaya* may at times seemingly contradict the mundane practical uses to which veiling is put to. Yet, in a normative context, a woman’s newfound prosperity was perceived to be fundamentally at odds with the stock of spiritual capital that she was seen to possess. In other words, social perceptions pertaining to the corruptive power of wealth, particularly in the hands of a woman, was often problematized. As Raihana articulates:

“Families send their daughters away because of poverty...as a necessity. However, this means that we return with negative perceptions strapped to our backs. Sometimes even close family members are reluctant to ask what my experience away was like, although my Arab family was very virtuous, and they taught me a lot about Islam. Yet, some women are not so lucky and have been through bad times. When I returned home, I remember one or two [non-Muslim] men who were excise officers telling me disrespectful things. They said now that I was rich I could ‘find a good catch.’ So it makes things easier for us to continue wearing the *hijab*, because we’ve now grown accustomed to it.”

Therefore the veil, at times, was tactically employed to signify the fact that a woman’s real worth could be found in her moral respectability which seemingly had to be established *first* (before her sense of religious piety), regardless of her material possessions. In one respect, Raihana’s narrative alludes to the fact that while her spiritual knowledge was deepened during her time away as a domestic worker, what was gained was counterpoised by the gendered stereotypes she had to contend with upon returning home. Veiled costumes therefore, seemed to play an interceding role in neutering negative identities associated with the “moneyed housemaid...once a piece of a stranger’s kitchen” as Amina put it. In this respect, the *abaya* could be conceived as (an enacted) disciplinary practice.

Labour migration particularly in the context of Sri Lanka’s rural east, has often been perceived as an emancipatory force in the lives of Muslim women from economically marginalised backgrounds. In a number of contexts, their roles as “producers of capital” have enabled them to carve out new identities associated with their material wealth, technological sophistication, together with the cultural and spiritual capital they were seen to have accrued when living in the perceived centre of the Islamic world (Thangarajah, 2003: 160). I would argue however, that the degree of social respect and acceptance that Middle Eastern returnees receive in their home environments, particularly in the northeast, is immensely chequered. More often than not, their identities were coloured by their negative gendered identities as wage earners, which by no means is considered altogether deviant among the many households in the rural east that have relied on the earnings of female migrants.



However, the moral ambiguity with which village communities are seen to perceive young unmarried women in particular, is very much associated with their (perceived) social biographies as domestic workers who left home and hearth, and may have at times exposed themselves to moral transgressions.

As this section is particularly concerned with self-perceptions of social propriety and religious piety, it remains to be asked how these women have striven to recast negative stereotypes associated with their experiences abroad. With respect to questions on re-assimilation, respondents revealed a certain degree of ambivalence towards their status as former migrants. While three of them were successful in investing their earnings in new property, businesses and in renovating existing homes, they indicated that their material wealth may have hardly translated into a form of upward social mobility. Indeed, they spoke of other women in order to demonstrate this predicament:

“...folk who return from the Middle East have to be wary of men who prey on them for their money. These men are usually village scoundrels, and even if a girl has a lot of money, very seldom do we hear of women who married a doctor, or a lawyer, a fewer number may have married school teachers. In our culture it is men who should be the earners. There are two women in my village. One went abroad several times...she donates money to mosques and schools, and although her money is accepted, she is not respected very much. The other woman gives less to charity, but purchased a lot of paddy land and bought a shop. When she married a Divisional Education Officer, people started saying that he married her for her money. His standing in the community also went down.”

Laila, 27 years, a former domestic worker from Dubai and Kuwait

This is not in the least to state that the fortunes of young women like Raihana, Amina and Laila who have returned from the Middle East, have not significantly improved. Neither are their opportunities for upward mobility singularly bound to the possibility of making a “good marriage.” On the whole, their acquisition of wealth at the very least has enabled them to accomplish significant life aspirations - building or improving housing infrastructure, purchasing livelihood capital, investing in children’s and siblings’ education, and in strengthening their engagement in civil groups for example. However, one needs to be more cautious in associating their use of the *hijab* with social perceptions of their religiosity and by virtue, their trouble-free acceptance into local village life, contrary to what early scholarship has revealed. Narratives such as Laila’s illustrate that women are arguably more conscious of the *limits* of veiling, particularly as a signifier of spiritual piety. In this context however, embracing more modest forms of dress such as the *abaya* in everyday public life, may serve to neutralise negative stereotypes, but may never entirely erase them.

## **6. Refashioning Muslim womanhood: University students and their perceptions of self and the other**

In the northeast at least, many of the participants contended that the highest concentration of veiled costumes could be found within the spaces of its public universities, and undoubtedly its Arabic colleges and *madrasas*. The third and final empirical context focuses on university women who chose to wear the *abaya* (and sometimes the *niqab*) daily to university. The second focus group comprised eight undergraduates. Three were enrolled at the Eastern University, comprising a mix of Tamil and Muslim students. The remaining five were attending South Eastern University that presently contains the highest enrolment of Muslim students in the island in proportion to its other ethnicities. The participants were aged between 21 and 25, were from lower-middle class and upper-middle class backgrounds, and resided in the more peri-urban spaces of Trincomalee.

The students in this study often articulated the fact that Muslim and Sinhalese communities in the Eastern Province at least, were latecomers to tertiary education. Ironically, the infamous Standardization and District Quota System (SDQS) that was introduced in 1974, benefitted youth from the Eastern Province with respect to university enrolment (Nuhman, 2010: 191). Moreover, the founding of the Eastern University and the South Eastern University in the 1980s were said to have played as much of a role in creating a new class of educated professional elites among Muslim communities in the East Coast. This demographic also constituted the backbone of the new political leadership. Their constituencies supported relatively newer ethnicised political parties such as the SLMC that gained prominence in the eighties, with the strengthening of proportional representation within the electoral system (Haniffa, 2008: 350). While the entrée to formal higher education among east coast Muslims started from the early seventies, the institutionalisation of Islamic religious education began much earlier, in the late nineteenth century during British Ceylon. With the first Arabic college being set up in 1884, others swiftly followed suit though with a lower concentration in the Eastern Province. Arguably, much of their doctrinal influences at that time were drawn from southern India (Nuhman, 1998: 6).

On the other hand, contemporary Arabic colleges and *madrāsas* were seen to derive much of their religious consciousness from more “reformist” and revitalising variants that came from the Middle East (at times via Pakistan and northern India), from the late forties. These doctrinal influences were diverse, comprising those of the *Jamittathu Ansaris Sunnathul Muhammatuya*, *Tabliqi Jama’at* and *Jamaat-e-Islami* among others, that were quick to dismiss previous religious teachings and practices from south India as backward and ritualistic, thereby starting a process of “cultural purification” (ibid: 7). However, one of the lasting impacts of Islamic revivalist movements and the strengthening of religious schools was that it was seen to increase the enrolment of Muslim women in formal education. In 1921, the literacy rate among Muslim women was reported to have been a meagre 6 per cent, and by 1998, it was pegged at 75.5 per cent, while the national female average was at 82.5 per cent (ibid: 9). Similarly, transformations in education led to significantly higher numbers of Muslim women’s participation in the teaching professions, yet these opportunities were arguably more class-determined.

While the heterogeneity of doctrinal beliefs and religious practices remain visible, the institutionalisation of Islamic teaching (and preaching), created discourses of normalisation that in part, served to contain inter-religious, kin and class-based differences (see Haniffa, 2008). In this light, it would seem immensely problematic to couple doctrinal leanings with women’s individual choices in dress. Yet, one’s socialisation in veiling (referred to as appropriate “Islamic” attire) were often said to begin within the spaces of Arabic colleges. Yet, not everyone attends Arabic college. As this section reveals, while the popularisation of veiling could be attributed to a heightened sense of religious consciousness, the meanings expressed also encompass modernist and non-elitist sentiments that hardly convey a sense of adhering to a radical, exclusionary identity.

Unlike the participants in the previous case studies, the university students displayed a steadfast commitment to wearing their *abayas* (and sometimes the *niqab*), when engaging in public life at all times. Alternating between diverse styles of local dress was often considered objectionable, and their adherence to the *hijab* suggested a sense of self-mastery, a necessary first step towards spiritual rediscovery. This was not in the least a dismissal of the role that more “cultural” modes of dress played in their everyday lives, for most women stated that they often wore their *shalwars* as undergarments. While the *abaya* was generally imbued with meanings of *both* moral propriety and religious piety, it was embraced as the most practical and versatile article of clothing that would fulfil different dimensions of a woman’s modesty:

“When you think about clothes, you must think about why you wear them: is it because it makes you look pretty or is it because it protects you? People have the right to think about

clothes in different ways. If I were to choose a costume that protects the modesty of women, that would be the *abaya*. It covers the *awrah*<sup>26</sup> as prescribed by the Prophet, but so does a *shalwar* or jeans and t-shirt. Yet, when we talk about concealing the body, we also talk about concealing one's figure, which only the *abaya* can do. I started to think about this and came to understand that traditional practices are not those that are always religiously accurate. I began reading books about Islam and gaining knowledge on my own. As Muslims, this is what the Prophet wants us to do - to think for ourselves..."

Jamilah, 23 years, law student, South Eastern University

Jamilah's narrative reflects her identity as a modern, well-informed Muslim woman who possesses her own resources to differentiate the intransigence of tradition, from critical thought and a religiously rational mode of living. The narratives of other students were remarkably similar, for hardly ever were the influence of teachers in the *madrasas* and Arabic colleges of their past, or were the discourses of the *Ulama*,<sup>27</sup> local notables or family members returning from the *Hajj*<sup>28</sup> invoked. In many ways, these narratives are evocative of similar studies among young non-Arab Muslim women, for example in rural Java, who were seen to express a sense of religious awakening when validating their preference for the *jilbab* (Brenner, 1996: 673).

Similarly, their narratives reveal a sense of departure from local tradition, signifying a heterodox parochial past that is more often than not disconnected from the spiritual-religious ethics by which their everyday lives are re-ordered. The delineation of religious values and customary precincts are a necessary process in the act of purifying "mind and the daily choices one must make," as a participant voiced. Yet, the significance of breaking with tradition should not be underestimated, for as Brenner (1996) argues, it also "challenges deeply ingrained patterns of ritual practice, personal belief and interpersonal relationships."<sup>i</sup> However, it remains to be asked how one's reconstruction of a modern, pious identity sits with self-perceptions of her mother and grandmothers, who more often than not, were attired more "traditionally." As Afra posits:

"...we were not people who wore the *abaya* from the beginning. As far as I can remember, my grandmother wore a skirt and blouse, and my mother often wears sari when she leaves home. In those days, whenever you wanted to know about religion you had to approach the *Ulama*. Nowadays we can take the initiative to find out more, through books and the internet. This was an opportunity that our mothers missed because learning was not so common then. When you start becoming more educated, you start becoming more conscious. You then start to understand that something like the dowry-system has no place in Islam. So naturally, dresses like this [the *abaya* and *niqab*] also become more popular. When I wear the *abaya* I feel a great sense of bliss."

Afra, 20 years, Geography student, Eastern University

The image of their own religious consciousness was very much allied with a sense of veneration for the educational opportunities and technology that enabled their self-transformation. These opportunities arguably mark the intergenerational boundary between students like Afra, from the women of her mother's and grandmothers' generations. While a number of respondents remarked that dress was in itself a superficial expression of religious consciousness, more diverse traditional

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<sup>26</sup> Intimate parts of the female and male body that ought to be concealed. At its minimal, it comprises the area from the navel to the knees, but the definitional extent of the *awrah* may differ between variants of Islamic thought and the status of the external observer (i.e. female/male, Muslim or non-Muslim). What is considered intimate may often differ, for some may consider their voices *awrah*. I thank Thomas Gugler for pointing out the definitional nuances in this context.

<sup>27</sup> Islamic scholars (singular: *alim*). Every graduate is considered an *alim*.

<sup>28</sup> Pilgrimage to Mecca and/or Medina.

styles of dressing (the *makkadu-sari*, *shalwar* etc.) were often polarised and bundled alongside a litany of outmoded and irreligious practices of the past. These practices were often juxtaposed against the role that education was now seen to play in developing a modern, mobile and critically thinking Muslim woman. The esteemed status of women within canonical Islamic discourse, and their ability to meander between the interrelated domains of education, politics and commercial activity, was often invoked as an emancipatory template by which young women patterned their lives. Their aspirations after leaving university were diverse; some envisioned their own legal practice, others designed on joining the teaching profession, while a few planned on contributing to their family businesses.

However, one's educational trajectory is not entirely religious or wholly secular. All but one of the participants had attended Muslim secondary schools that followed the national curriculum, and ran on the Islamic calendar. Many had simultaneously attended Arabic colleges in their adolescence, and private mixed sex after-school tutorials to which they had worn their *abayas*. However, there did exist some degree of ambiguity within the participant group, concerning the extent to which *madarasas* and Arabic colleges were seen to singularly influence women's preference in clothing styles. Similar to other contexts where young women were seen to more recently embrace the *hijab*, the importance of retaining one's own motivation in adopting and sustaining the practice, was clearly visible (see Brenner, 1996: 682). Yet, their impetus to adopt the *abaya* was hardly influenced by their upbringing or rather, by their predominantly *sari* and *shalwar*-wearing mothers and grandmothers.

This perception interestingly inverts the directional flow of religious instruction and practice, in a country where young people, particularly women have conventionally been expected to follow in the footsteps of their elders. Often however, these intergenerational differences were hardly located in narratives of "challenging parental ideas," as seen for example in the context of Dwyer's (1997: 17) study among young British Muslims. Changes in everyday attire were often associated metaphorically with the dawning of a new (spiritual) epoch of progressive educational access and democratised information flows. This perception was eloquently captured by a participant who unequivocally stated that now she could open a window and choose what she wanted to see, from her own unique vantage point. In this context, religious awareness is recast as more than just the attainment of knowledge. It encompasses "new away of being in the world and a new subjectivity" (ibid, 1996: 684) in which one is granted the responsibility of self-fashioning a pious and morally righteous path in life.

So far, the narratives of university women have focused almost exclusively on expressions of religious faith and identity. We are left asking how perceptions of social difference are negotiated, and how everyday interactions are ordered in multi-ethnic settings, such as public universities. Approximately 90 per cent of Muslim women attending universities, at least in the Eastern Province, were said to exclusively wear the *abaya* to class. The remaining often wore *shalwars*, and a much smaller fraction were said to wear long skirts and blouses, t-shirts, jeans or pants. Yet many would at the very least, be seen to loosely cover their hair with a shawl.

Often, the women emphasised that they did not perceive internal differences between Muslim female students who dressed differently from the way they did. The group was swift to maintain that outward appearances did not necessarily signify religious piety or the fact that a woman clad in jeans was necessarily a "bad Muslim." However, similarities or differences in dress made an impact when young Muslim female students first entered universities, for many reported that during the first few months they were shy and often nervous. Their first friends were almost always young women who dressed similarly. Yet over time, their circle of friends would grow to be more socially diverse. While outward markers of dress may serve as social icebreakers, it was never seen as a basis for peer-group bonding and camaraderie. Similarly, when the discussion moved on to matters of love and

relationships within campus life, five women were steadfast in asserting that their decision to veil had little bearing upon their choice of a partner:

“...we even find it offensive that people connect these two very different things...the *abaya* is a kind of dress and we would like to regard it as one. It is not a barrier to love. Love and the desire to marry someone are feelings that originate from the heart. The *abaya*, like other kinds of clothes are things that you throw over your skin. Love comes from a place that is much deeper. This garment protects me, but by no means does it conceal or stifle my desire.”

Fatimah, 24 years, Chemistry student at the Eastern University

While many of the participants believed that inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriages were markedly less in universities in the Eastern Province, Fatimah’s narrative powerfully communicates her proclivity to differentiate her choice of dress from matters of the heart. In this context, the *abaya* hardly served as a device to tame sexuality, nor was it perceived as a container of one’s religious identity in the narrowest sense, that may play a significant role in attracting a certain type of partner, or in shutting out others. Everyday choices in dress were supposed to be *understood* for their superficiality, and at best, could only be juxtaposed with the complexities of life, such as falling in love for example.

Nevertheless, a number of university students were quick to affirm that the *abaya* unwittingly led to a process of social othering. This differentiation in clothing styles was not necessarily applied to all forms of “Islamic” women’s attire. For example, non-Muslim peers were said to view the *shalwar* and shawl as less of a cultural deviation than the *abaya*. This distinction, they argued, came about because the *abaya* was singularly read as a Middle Eastern costume, correlating with notions of transnational Muslim extremism, and in some localised contexts, to perceptions of *Salafist* or *Wahhabi* radicalism and its so-called “takeover.” These slippages in meaning arguably called for a certain degree of conscious reworking. The *abaya* also carried with it, possibilities of freeing oneself from the confines of social class and the iniquities of displaying ones status through material consumption. As Karima shares:

“My Tamil friends mostly were very intrigued by the *abaya*. I know they first thought it dull, but they also told me what an economical dress it was, unlike a *shalwar*. They later thought it would be something very practical to adopt. An *abaya* can be purchased for 2,000 rupees<sup>29</sup> or less, and we only use a limited range of colours. When a girl is relatively poor arrives at the hostel she can still afford the same kind of clothes. Of course there are differences in the cost of *abayas*...but basically it is a garment that can be shared among a group of girls. It is flexible enough to be worn by different friends, unlike the *shalwar* or skirt and blouse.”

Karima, 26 years, Management student at South Eastern University

The *abaya* was recast as an egalitarian costume possessing the agency to unify women, as opposed to drawing boundaries or distinctions between them. Karima’s narrative, similar to those of the young women in her focus group, often framed the *abaya* as a costume that was not exclusively religious, but one that simply originated from the precincts of the Islamic faith. It was therefore alluded to as a form dress that could appeal to a diversity of women, irrespective of ethnicity or religious background, given its ability to “protect.” The question that remains to be asked is protection from whom or what? Certainly, moral transgressions might seem a rather superficial response. Indeed, a number of university students argued that they found it surprising that a costume that was meant to shield the modesty of *all* women (who chose to wear it), was recast as a symbol of “religious competition”, and at times, a threat to national security. While more recent

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<sup>29</sup> Approximately USD 15.00.

“conversions” to veiling are often associated with notions of self-awareness and modernity among young women, their non-Muslims peers have at times been indicted of encouraging them to *comply* with past traditions in dress, often taken as markers of ethno-religious plurality and syncretism. Yet, in both cases a sense of reinvention remains inevitable. Either way, with or without the *hijab*, a certain part of one’s multifaceted subjectivity remains muted, whether it concerns modulating one’s spiritual practice in public life, or on the other hand, seeming to accentuate a transnational faith-based identity, at the expense of being recast a religious radical.

Interestingly however, many of the students argued that the politicisation of the *hijab* was in fact a marginal issue in Sri Lanka’s immensely complex Sinhalese-Muslim conflict narrative. The root cause, they felt, lay in the fact that dominant ethno-religious communities in Sri Lanka lacked an imagined transnational faith-based community that they could identify themselves with. In this context, self-referencing oneself with the *ummah* or any global community that transcended the boundaries of a nation-state was perceived as a necessity in *circumventing* conflict. As de Munck (2005: 401) and others have argued, the local seeding of Islamic revivalist movements should be understood against the fact that a translational *ummah* offers Sri Lankan Muslims the promise of a global identity, supplanting a sense of “national identity from which they are presently excluded.” While this reading may in some contexts bear relevance, at the same time it may be too simplistic to assert that the dream of an inclusive national identity was altogether replaced by a transnational one. In this context, university students averred that inter-religious discord came about precisely from the reason that there was no global “*ummah-like*” community among the Sinhalese-Buddhists and the Tamil-Hindus that they could turn to for spiritual-political guidance, resulting in a state of inter-group conflict. Therefore that one’s sense of belonging to the transnational *ummah*, was seen to serve more as a political anchoring device that only the Sri Lankan Catholic community for example, might come close to sharing. At this point, the old question emerges of what it in fact means to be “Sri Lankan” (in all its multiplicity), in a contemporary post-war context?

In harking back to questions concerning the *construction* of identities, Fearon and Laitin (2000: 850) argue that such formations may often intersect with the “content of a social category” (for example, the myth of the industrious, scheming Muslim tradesman), and/or its “boundary rules,” (for example, geo-political distinctions between Sri Lanka’s southern and east coast Muslims). In the case of the latter, it is the porosity of margins, their expansion, conflation, or the lack thereof that remains particularly interesting, in terms of re-defining one’s sense of self and nationhood. In one respect, the Andersonian “imagined community,” starts not within the borders of the nation-state but from outside, within the fluid, transnational spaces of the global *ummah*. This arguably represents a different kind of modernity, and a diverse politics of re-engagement in civic life, through what Bayat (2007: 57) terms as “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary.” It is an informal everyday form of politics, played out individually through direct action, and not as a “politics of protest” (ibid: 59). Neither does it embody a certain form of anti-politics. This calls to question how BBS and similar Sinhala ethno-nationalist groups are often juxtaposed and associated with “dirty” (formalised) politics which, as the students expressed, the *All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama* (ACJU) would not have engaged in unless being compelled to do so, in such an openly public and humiliating fashion.

Moreover, not only do these meanings point towards a certain process of social boundary making; it also calls to question much-debated occidental dualistic categories of inner piety/collective politics, majority/minority, self/other, interiority/exteriority for example, that continue to haunt Sri Lankan identity narratives. Therefore *nationalism*, in terms of its specific engagement with the nation-state, could be seen as an outmoded expression of one’s collective life. This is not in any way an assertion that the idea of nationalism is obsolete. It entrenches the idea of the nationalism(s) beyond the fringes of the nation-state as it were, for in order to live in a socially plural space, one is believed to be in need of a transnational anchoring identity *first*. As Afrah, the daughter of an ex-Provincial Councillor argued, “what did patriotism bring other than resentment and competition?”

## 7. Conclusion

This exploratory study constitutes one of the first forays into local costume culture among Sri Lankan Muslim women in the northeast, particularly within a post-war context. The findings reveal that the *hijab*, at least among its more recent adherents, is by no means a homogenous practice. The diversity of narratives presented in this study point towards the versatility of costumes such as the *abaya*, which by no means is regarded in singularly religious terms. Indeed, the *abaya* itself, as in the case of comparable costumes such as the *chador*, *bui bui*, *tesettürlü* and *çarşaf* among others, is a continually evolving form, not in the least within the world of “Islamic” fashion. Moreover, by no means do I attempt to reconstruct a coherent counter-narrative in response to a plethora of ethno-nationalist anxieties regarding the popularisation of veiling. Given the diversity of the women in this study, and the multiple meanings and embodied practices associated with the *hijab*, the promise of a unified narrative seems futile. Firstly, sensibilities pertaining to veiling are seen to be immensely disparate and multi-layered. Given the diverse social identities and miscellany of life experiences that the women in this study have expressed, the adoption of the *hijab* by no means shares a unified set of beliefs, values or practices. Meanwhile, this study constitutes just the tip of the iceberg. The voices of other groups of women, comprising *moulavia* or female religious teachers, or those who have recently returned from the *Hajj* for instance, have not been included. Neither have male narratives, as diverse as they are likely to be, or perceptions among children, women and men across other ethno-religious groups, given the social complexity of the northeast.

While I have focused on women who have more recently taken to veiling, it ought to be stressed that costumes like the *abaya* still remain a marginal form of dress in the rural northeast. Yet, perceptions of change, particularly with respect to everyday choices in dress seem remarkably varied too. Among village communities like Misgar, diverse clothing practices co-exist, and older generations may not necessarily perceive much internal contradiction. However, this is not in the least to discount the fact that younger women might potentially perceive this degree of hybridity as a source of conflict. Veiling practices, in many contexts, are hardly determined by the distinctions of private/indoor and public/outdoor life. Neither are they *entirely* patterned along the parameters of religious and non-religious space, although these spaces do play a significant role. The occupational identities of artisanal fisherwomen for example, which are linked to their intersecting class and caste-based subjectivities, calls for a necessary distancing from a discursive religious space, a space that is undoubtedly undergoing rapid change. The faded class photographs of *madrassa* schoolgirls over decades bear testimony to these shifts.

Moreover, these situated practices attend as much to the gendered perceptions of social propriety and respectability that are not sanctioned or mediated by religious spaces or practices alone. It is at this point that a distinction between the structures of patriarchy and Islamisation must be drawn. This is not in the least to downplay the struggles of non-veiled ethnic-Muslim women, usually subaltern who have had to face everyday forms of religious-communal sanctioning for perceivably being indecorously attired (see Ismail, 2013: 9). These disciplinary mechanisms, and their concomitant discourses of normalisation constitute but one thread in these multi-stranded narratives. Indeed, for women like migrant workers, the *hijab* did not always promise social endorsement in terms of their renewed piety, following their return. The structures of patriarchy that they found themselves having to contend with were situated as much in the realm of everyday life – in the spaces of customs offices or at military checkpoints for example. In sum, the narratives explored in this study all point towards an ambivalent sense of socio-moral anxiety as well as emancipation, in the context of adopting the *abaya*. In the post-war spaces of the northeast that are characterised by an enduring military presence, together with the island’s steady increase in the rate of gendered violence, the compulsion to veil arguably gains more salience.

Finally, we are left revisiting the inexorable public debate of what it means to be a “good” Muslim without having to embrace “Arabised” cultural practices. Arguably, there exists a great deal of ambiguity with regard to conflating one’s religious piety with (perceivably) Arab tradition. While many may surreptitiously scoff at the planting of date palms in open spaces, or the adoption of Gulf home-décor styles, veiling assumes a different category from the rest. Costumes such as the *abaya*, at least among its firmest adherents, are adopted *not* because they are essentially Middle Eastern, but because they are said to fulfil most dimensions of a woman’s physical modesty, in ways that more “traditional” forms of dress do not.

On the other hand the reluctance to treat the veil as a signifier of piety is equally apparent among the same group of adherents, who consider it to be a superficial marker. Yet, there do exist strong normative underpinnings with respect to how changes in dress are regarded. If veiling is considered as an initial and infinitesimal step (though not obligatory), to one’s religious awakening, veiling in this form is likely to gain more popularity through peer-group and intergenerational discourses of normalisation. Arguably, the dominant faultline may not simply be patterned upon the highly politicised distinctions between “good” and “bad” Muslims, but may gain more visibility along class-based, occupational and urban-rural divides, as it is doing now. Ironically then, the very garb exemplifying non-elitism among university students may come to embody its polar opposite, in ways for example that rural fisherwomen or petty tradeswomen often perceive the *abaya* - as a symbol of leisure and affluence.

Ultimately however, the vilification of the *hijab* in its entirety, may inevitably lead to the radicalisation of particular identities. In this context, costumes in general potentially contain a *surplus* of symbolic meanings, as do most material objects that are imbued with some degree of cultural or religious signification. Put differently, they can be seen as empty signifiers that can be readily re-politicised in ways that prove to be both counter-hegemonic and restrictive, much to the detriment of a diversity of women who have taken to wearing them. In one respect, Serdar Bey, the dubious local newspaper editor in Pamuk’s novel *Snow* (2004), embodies this precarious force as he pieces together a tangled storyline, long before the event has taken place.

Presently however, in this study women’s motivations to veil do *not* convey a sense of duality, a duality that separate the spaces of the sacred from the secular, or the perceivably feminine from the masculine, for example. Yet, these diverse narratives reveal the fact that its meanings simultaneously inhabit several points along a piety propriety continuum. These meanings are seen to shift, almost tactically according to diverse practicalities and forms of social convention, some imbued with more religiosity, and others with less. Yet, the act of donning an *abaya*, whether as a routinised everyday practice, or during selective occasions, is often guided by a consciously worked through set of motivations. This is not in the least to understate what Bordo (2003: 260) refers to as the “cultural grip” of manifold structures and their overlapping discourses that serve to normalise particular forms of self-presentation. However, neither can these women be perceived as docile bodies who have uncritically internalised a singular strand of religious orthodoxy, and by extension, are seen to have embraced a particularly reactive and exclusionary form of political radicalism, as proponents of Sri Lanka’s anti-veiling projects would like to believe.



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