

## Korea's response to Islam and Islamophobia: Focusing on veiled Muslim women's experiences

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Islamophobic attitudes are becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide, and Muslim women's veils have emerged recently as a powerful mark of Islamic identity. In the West, fear and hatred of Islam has been projected onto the veil; this has led to a rise in the victimization of veiled Muslim women. Considering the recent influx and visibility of veiled Muslim women in Korea due to the *hallyu* phenomenon and medical tourism since the early 2000s, this study explores how Koreans respond to Islam and Islamophobia, focusing on the experiences of veiled Muslim women in Seoul. This study includes both Korean and non-Korean veiled Muslim women as research subjects in discerning whether the responses are derived from an Islamophobia or a result of Korean ethnocentrism. This research fills the gap in discourses of Islamic studies, which lack Asian viewpoints, as well as gives voice to the experiences of marginalized Muslim women in Korea.

**Key Words:** Korea, Islam, Islamophobia, veil, Muslim women, multiculturalism

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## I. Introduction

### *A. Muslims in Korea, from invisible to visible, from guest to permanent settler*

On January 18, 2015, about 400 Muslims staged a street rally in the Itaewon District<sup>1</sup> of Seoul, South Korea's capital. They held picket signs that read: "We will continue the war against slander." It was the first public demonstration organized by Muslims in Korea. Although the march ended peacefully, it stirred subtle tensions among observers such as pedestrians, police officers, and journalists. The rally signified that Muslims in Korea were no longer passive onlookers but, rather, active defenders of their religious and cultural identities. Along with the emergence of the Muslim community in Korea's public spaces, veiled Muslim women have recently become more noticeable in Seoul, not only in popular tourist areas such as Gwanghwamun Square and the traditional Namdaemun Market, but also in everyday life. Some of these women are Muslim tourists who want to enjoy so-called hallyu—also known as the Korean Wave—or are part of Muslim families receiving medical treatment in Korea. Other Muslim women in the country include exchange students, workers, and permanent residents.

Korean responses to the increasing visibility of Muslims in the country have revealed both interest and concern. For instance, Korean business people hope to take advantage of the soaring Islamic economy. Their expectations have been burgeoning since the previous Korean President Park Geun-hye's visits to four Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and

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1. Itaewon refers to an area surrounding the neighborhood of Itaewon-dong in Seoul. As one of the most popular spots for tourists in Seoul, it has an international atmosphere and has become a symbol of multiculturalism. Muslims started to reside in Itaewon after the Seoul Central Mosque was built in 1976. According to a recent newspaper report, there is an invisible territorial division between the northern part of Itaewon, where affluent Western and European immigrants live, and the southern part, where Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants who seek for Korean Dream in Korea settled down. (Seo, 2016).

Qatar) in early March 2015, and to Iran in May 2016. During President Park's visits, economic and political ties between Korea and the Middle East were underscored. A prime concern of the Korean government is to join the emerging Islamic halal economy, which is expected to grow to a market worth of US\$ 2.2 billion by 2030. To promote a halal policy, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (MAFRA) established its Halal Division in March 2015 to export Korean halal certified food to Islamic countries. However, unlike the positive economic expectations of business people, some Koreans became increasingly concerned about the government's new policy related to the halal economy. These people worry about the influx of Muslims and their religious influence within Korea, as well as possible terrorist attacks. Some radical thinking people even encourage Islamophobia, using the rhetoric of the "arrival of the Islamic tsunami within Korea." Considering the two different responses toward the recent influx and visibility of Muslims in Korea's public spaces, this study examines growing Islamophobia worldwide and explores Korean responses to it, focusing on veiled Muslim women's experiences in Seoul.

### ***B. Significance and the scope of the study***

Korean experiences with the Islamic world are different from those of the West. Unlike the West's exploitative, colonial experience in the Islamic world, Korea was the main beneficiary of oil money from the Gulf in the 1970s and 1980s. Remittances from workers in oil-producing countries became indispensable seed money for modernizing Korea, as well as fueling its economic and industrial prosperity. After Korea grew economically, Middle Eastern and Islamic countries became the country's main trading partners in the 1990s, and still are today. However, Koreans often have a negative, stereotyped view of Islam found in other nations around the world. Hence, there are gaps between positive Korean, historical experiences with the Islamic world from an economic point of view, and the negative perceptions they have acquired over time, mainly since Korean society has absorbed a negative global image of Islam.

This study is important in terms of adding an Asian perspective and experiences to Islamic studies, since Korea has had a different relationship with the Islamic world than other states, particularly those in the West. At the same time, since the voices of Muslim women living in Korea have been lacking, this study could help diversify gender studies in Islam. As members of a minority, Muslim women in Korea have thus far been underexplored. By focusing on Muslim women's subjective, everyday experiences, this study examines their encounters with Islamophobia in Korea. Among the various styles of veils worn by Muslim women, this study mainly refers to the hijab, which is a moderate and popular form. For this study, I employed a qualitative research method borrowed from anthropology. Based on participant observation, I had consecutive in-depth interviews with nineteen (six Korean, and thirteen non-Korean) Muslim women living in Seoul, from March 2015 to June 2016. For this study, I include both Korean and non-Korean veiled Muslim women as research subjects in discerning whether Korea's response to the veil is derived from an Islamophobia or Korean ethnocentrism. The non-Korean Muslims were mostly from Arab countries, except three women who are respectively from Iran, Turkey, and Indonesia. Unlike the non-Koreans who were usually born Muslim, most Korean Muslim females converted to Islam due to studying fields related to Islam and the Arab world at university, or by marrying a Muslim. Conversions have also occurred due to curiosity about the religion, or respect for Islamic teachings.

## **II. Discourse on the Veil within the Paradigm of Muslim Women's (in)Visibility, and Islamophobic Responses from the West**

### *A. Discourse on the veil within the paradigm of Muslim women's (in)visibility*

Since the 19th century, Muslim women's veils have been discussed within various discourses. Although they cannot be simplified,

they are largely grouped into two opposing perspectives. Liberal or western voices are critical, and find the veil offensive and a symbol of female oppression, powerlessness, and backwardness. Other opinions are defensive and apologetic toward the veil, viewing it as a marker of political, cultural, and religious resistance, mainly against the West. From the paradigms of (in)visibility of the veil, however, Badran was one of the first to discuss this with a case study on Kuwaiti women during the Gulf war. Referring to "the appearance of a new public woman and a new private man," Badran explored the reverse use of gendered space that she observed among Kuwaiti men and women during the Gulf war (Badran, 1998: 194). According to her observations, Kuwaiti women, who once used to remain inside and were hidden, became active and visible warriors by participating in the independence movement. Women organized street demonstrations and carried medicine, documents, food and money under the *abaya*, a traditional black garment worn by women in the Gulf region. They used the *abaya* and their gender to evade Iraqi military checkpoints and acted in place of men.<sup>2</sup> By highlighting the recent trend of the veil's visibility as a sign of "Muslimness" and femaleness, Tarlo argued that,

the visibility aspect of hijab has been insufficiently explored in the western context [because] the hijab is associated more with notions of invisibility than visibility. It is linked in popular perceptions to the idea of hiding, concealment and the effacement of women's presence in the public sphere (Tarlo, 2007: 132).

As Tarlo pointed out, assuming that the previous paradigm on veiling practices explored Muslim women's invisibility, then contemporary discourse on the veil has focused more on Muslim women's visibility in public spaces. Discussion on the veil's visibility has accel-

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2. Similar cases are found among Algerian women in the 1950s regarding the independence movement from France, as well as among Egyptian and Iranian women who confronted Western cultural influences and protected their religious identity. However, those cases treat the veil within the context of nationalism, anti-colonialism and emergence of religious fundamentalism, rather than within paradigms of women's (in)visibility.

erated with the recent rise of a positive outlook on Islamic economic growth. Within the framework of Islamic consumerism, the veil has evolved as a fashion item among younger generations of Muslim women, who navigate between the sacred realms of religious dogma and secular global fashion trends. By participating in fashion, young Muslim women are reinterpreting conservative, traditional Islamic dress codes, and have even coined the term “hipster hijabi” or “hijabista.” Mainstream luxury designer brands such as DKNY and CHANEL, as well as popular fashion brands such as H&M, have joined the hipster hijabi phenomenon to attract new consumers from this niche market (The Economist, 2014). As a result, the boundaries have blurred between the veil’s religious, traditional, and conservative aspects versus its global, secular, modern, and liberal traits within the religious trend of value conscious consumerism or “Islamic consumerism”; more importantly, these new fashion trends challenge paradigms of the veil’s (in)visibility.

### ***B. The veil and Islamophobic responses from the western society***

Unlike the positive attention the veil has received within the paradigms of women’s visibility and Islamic consumerism, it has acquired new connotations such as “threat” and “fear” since 9/11, when Islamophobia began to rise in the West. The discourse on Islamophobia first appeared in a 1997 report titled “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All” published by the Runnymede Trust in England (Runnymede Report 1997; Klug, 2012: 666). The report summarizes Islamophobia in terms of the following four aspects: prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, and violence. The term “Islamophobia” received scholarly attention in the West in the early 2000s, and books and reports on the topic began to be published in the mid to late 2000s (Klug, 2012; Helbling, 2012: 6; Shryock, 2010: 2). As the term has recently come of age, it continues to ambiguously oscillate between racism, xenophobia, and multiculturalism; otherwise, it is used as a generic “unifying concept [which] brings [hatred, hostility, vandalism, and racism] into a single framework” (Shryock, 2010: 2). For

example, Allen defines Islamophobia as “not necessarily restricted to any specific action, practice, discrimination or prejudice, but rather existing within the process of identifying and recognizing Muslims, Islam or both” (Allen, 2014: 146). Kalin defines Islamophobia as a term that denotes acts of intolerance, discrimination, unfounded fear, and racism toward Islam and Muslims (Kalin, 2011: 4–5). In the same context, Chakraborti and Zempi define Islamophobia as “a fear or hatred of Islam that translates into ideological and material forms of cultural racism against obvious markers of “Muslimness”” (Chakraborti and Zempi, 2012: 271). Thus, Islamophobia became a general umbrella term that indicates acts or feelings against Muslims based on fear, dislike, and discrimination, which in turn create boundaries between “us” and “them.”

Chakraborti and Zempi’s research goes further in discussing the gendered phenomenon of Islamophobia. They argue that “Islamophobia is gender specific, rather than gender neutral.” According to their research, women are more likely than men to suffer from Islamophobic hate crimes because the veil makes females appear “more visibly Muslim”. Unlike typical hate crimes that tend to occur as a male-to-male phenomenon, the study showed that Islamophobia and its reflection in the veil reveal the opposite. People justify attacking veiled Muslim women as punishment for appearing visually threatening.<sup>3</sup> Muslim women are perceived as “soft and easy targets” due to their identities as women, as well as the fact that the veil connotes submission, passivity and powerlessness (Chakraborti and Zempi, 2014: 87).

Western case studies have raised questions about Korea’s current situation with regard to the visibility of veiled Muslim women in public: Does Islamophobia exist in Korea? If so, how is it expressed? How do veiled Muslim women cope with Islamophobia? Before exploring

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3. The victimization of Muslim women, as derived from Islamophobia, came to the fore after a study of Tell MAMA (MAMA is an acronym for “measuring anti-Muslim attacks”), which is funded by the British government. In the course of a year (1 April 2012 to 30 April 2013), 584 Islamophobic incidents were reported (Allen, 2014: 142).

their experiences in Korea, a brief history of Koreans' encounters with Islam should be explored, as it reveals the present position of Islam within the scope of Korean views. Then, the study will examine the local circumstances of Islamophobia.

### **III. Korean Perceptions of Islam and Reproduced Orientalism**

#### ***A. The current religious, cultural, and political expression of Islamophobia within Korea***

Anti-Islamic sentiments started to appear in Korea after 9/11. According to Lee, use of the term "Islamophobia" began to surge around 2008 and 2009, especially among Christians (Lee, 2011: 185–186). Prior to that period, Islam existed far away from many Koreans' reality. However, as Muslims became increasingly visible in public, and as Muslim laborers flowed into the country, Koreans began to become more aware of them. Some people view Muslims as rivals with whom they have to compete in the labor market for a restricted number of jobs due to the country's growing unemployment rate. For example, between 23 September and 18 October 2010, anonymous visitors posted 1,500 denouncements on an online bulletin board on the homepage of the Ministry of Employment and Labor, expressing their views of foreign workers. These messages contained anti-Muslim sentiments and included comments such as "Please, exclude Islamic countries from the list of labor-exporting countries," "Europe has recently banned manpower imports from Bangladesh and Pakistan, but Korea is going in the other direction," and "We have to give up multicultural policies" (Lee, 2011: 185–186). In explaining these anti-Islamic sentiments, Lee argues that mostly Protestant Christians have aggravated Islamophobia in Korea, using the rhetoric of the "Islamic tsunami is rushing [toward us]" or "Islam is waiting for a chance [to sneak into Korea]." According to Lee, some Korean Christians have even demonized Islam. To prevent Islam from influencing Korean culture, several churches initiated a "halt Islamization" move-



ment. Lee asserts that although violent incidents of Islamophobia in the West have yet to be reported in Korea, people feel Islamophobia as indefinite kinds of fear through the words of preachers, sermons, books, research and newsletters. Outside of churches, Islamophobia started to spread after ISIL emerged and the young Korean man known as Kim joined the group in 2015. The phenomenon became aggravated with consecutive terror attacks in the West and Asian countries, as well as ISIL's inclusion of Korea in its declaration of 62 nations as part of the "Crusader Alliance."

Islam is sometimes politicized in Korea. Parliament rejected the adoption of sukuk law ("Sharia-compliant" bonds) in 2011 due to major opposition from some politicians and Christian leaders. Opponents argued that it was unfair to give tax-free advantages only to Islamic institutions. They also asserted that terrorist groups could potentially receive the profits of "Sharia-compliant" bonds (Yonhap News, 2011). During the last election of members of the National Assembly in April 2016, the Christian Liberal Party carried out an election campaign against Islam. In 2016, the central government postponed the establishment of a halal zone within the National Food Cluster (an initiative by Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs) indefinitely due to consecutive anti-Islam demonstrations organized by some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and radical Christian activists. Furthermore, the Gangwon provincial government cancelled its plan to host the 2017 World Islamic Economic Forum in the county of Pyeongchang after people who fear Muslim terrorists petitioned them. In 2015 and 2016, countless small and large protests in various parts of Korea have rejected governmental policies related to the halal industry.

In short, Islamophobia and the threat of terror was of little concern before 9/11 among Koreans, but became "in here" (a real threat) after 2015. This was due to the emergence of ISIL and global terror attacks, as well as a growing fear of a Muslim influx due to hallyu and the Korean government's halal policy. Therefore, if Islamophobia is defined as a general umbrella term that indicates acts or feelings against Muslims based on fear, dislike, and discrimination, which in

turn create boundaries between “us” and “them” as discussed earlier, then Koreans share the Western sentiments toward Islamophobia. However, since Korea has had a different historical experience with Islamic nations, it is worth questioning how Korea’s Islamophobia differs from that of the West in terms of degree and expression. Therefore, it is useful to explore Korea’s encounters with Islam from a historical angle in order to dismantle and identify the characteristics of Islamophobia in Korea.

### *B. A brief history of Koreans and Muslim encounters in modern times*

Modern Korea has a very short history of encounters with the Islamic world. The history of Islamic immigration to modern Korea dates back to the 1950s at the outbreak of the Korean War (Grayson, 2002: 195; Lee, 1997: 40).<sup>4</sup> During the war, Turkish troops were dispatched to Korea to serve with the United Nations (UN) forces. A Turkish Imam named Abdulgafur Karaismailolu first propagated Islam and offered the first formal Islamic religious service in Korea for Muslim soldiers. Due to Islam’s brief history in Korea and society’s lack of contact with Muslims, people regarded the religion as an alien and unfamiliar faith until the oil crisis of the 1970s. After Islam was introduced to Korea in the 1950s, Muslim laborers began to immigrate in earnest during the 1990s. They are mostly from Central Asia and migrated due to the 1991 Gulf War, moving from unstable Middle Eastern host countries to safer countries in the Far East. Foreign laborers were welcomed at the time due to Korea’s shortage of manual workers, and because Korean youth abhorred so-called ‘3D jobs’ (dirty, difficult, and dangerous), which did not carry a sense of respect and honor (Kwon, 2012: 49-51).

These external and internal political-economic circumstances encouraged Muslim immigration to Korea, which has been growing

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4. It is known that the first contact between Koreans and Muslims can probably be traced back to the Silla Dynasty (661–935). The first encounter most likely happened between Silla and Muslim traders travelling on the Silk Road.

since the 1990s. According to statistics from the Ministry of Justice, the state's Muslim population now totals more than 200,000 (roughly 8.5% of all immigrant workers). Although this is a small number relative to Muslim populations in Western countries, the ratio of Muslims has grown fifty times since Islam was first introduced to Korea in the 1950s. As for Korean Muslims, their population is expected to expand to around 35,000 people. Some Koreans converted to Islam due to studying or working in the Islamic world, or by marrying Muslims. To accommodate Islamic religious needs, the number of mosques has expanded to fifteen, and praying spaces now number sixty (Song & An, 2015). Korean experts on the Islam and Middle East anticipate that the country's Muslim population will expand further in the near future.

Muslim immigration patterns have also changed; Muslims used to come to Korea for brief, individual visits for business, but are now settling permanently, whether by accompanying their families or by marrying Koreans. However, due to Muslims' strong social networks, they are more likely to refuse to assimilate into mainstream Korean culture, and to be treated as "outsiders" by locals. Based on their solid social ties, Muslims in Korea have become self-sufficient in terms of supplying their community with halal food, hijabs, and other religious items, such as prayer carpets and religious books. Cho called the isolation of Muslim residents in Itaewon "Muslim racial, ethnic and religious ghettoization" (Cho et al., 2008: 176).

### *C. Korean Islamophobia, as a meeting point of reproduced Orientalism and ethnocentrism*

Since 9/11, the number of academic studies on Islam within Korea has been growing thanks to government funding. Several have examined Korean views of Islam, which are discussed within the discourses of Orientalism or multiculturalism (Cho, 2004; Jamass, 2014; Jeon, 2011; Kim, 2013; Lee, 2011; Lee, 2011).<sup>5</sup> These works usually

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5. These works include: an article in Arabic entitled "A Study on the Image of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Korean Society" (Cho, Hee-sun, 2004); in

explore Korean negative perceptions of Arabs, Muslims, Middle Easterners, and Islam. According to these studies, Koreans associate Islam with religious fanaticism, brutality, and violence. They also consider Muslims backward, war- and terror-ridden, as well as sexist (this gender oppression is represented by the veil worn by Muslim women). At the same time, these studies stress that Korean opinions of Islam share the negative aspects of Western views due to a lack of concern over and direct contact with Muslims, and heavy reliance on Western media.

Apart from the influence of Western media, Jamass attributed Koreans' negative images of Islam to ethno-nationalism, which fosters a homogenized "Koreanness" based on so-called "pure" blood. Ethno-nationalism functioned as a significant ideology to unite Koreans after they won independence from Japan, and public education has inculcated this notion into Korean society. Using an introspective tone, Jang pointed out that even though ethno-nationalism functioned as a positive mechanism for national cohesion and development, it became a threat to Korean tolerance and acceptance of the "otherness" of foreigners (Jang, 2008: 105). However, with the rise of globalization, immigration and emigration increased, and Korean ethno-nationalism began to be challenged. Starting in the latter half of the 1990s, scholarly debates took place on the myth of pure blood, and the government's multiculturalism policy developed as the number of foreign workers rose. According to Nadia (2008), consistent with the myth of ethno-nationalism, Confucianism has easily lent itself to the idea of ethnic hierarchies (cited in Jamass, 2014: 19–20). Confucianism, a dogma based on a social order of age, class, and gender, has controlled Korean society. Nadia argues that the surge of Christian mis-

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English entitled "Images and Perceptions of Muslims and Arabs in Korean Popular Culture and Society" (Jamass, 2014); and "The Consumption of the Diabolic Arab Image in "Oriental" Korea: "The Other" Enjoying the Image of "The Other?"" (Jeon, Da-ye, 2011); "Framing Arab Islam Axiology Published in Korean Newspapers" (Kim, Su-wan, 2013); in Korean entitled "The Protestant Church's Image of Islam in Multicultural Korea: A Focus on Islamophobia" (Lee, Jin-gu, 2011), and "The Image of Arabs Represented in the Korean Media" (Lee, In-seop, 2011).

sionaries in the 19th century and the country's occupation by the United States Armed Forces, after the Korean War, further ingrained Korean traditions of associating lightness with superiority and darkness with inferiority. Just as Korean ethno-nationalism is based on Confucianism's class system, Korean perceptions of Islam as being inferior comes from reproduced Orientalism.

Lee borrowed Said's concept of Orientalism and coined the term "duplicated" Orientalism in order to explore how Koreans reproduced Western Orientalism, which influences their way of looking at and dealing with people from the so-called third world (Lee, 2002; 2003). For Koreans, modernization meant not simply catching up with Western countries, but also imitating and assimilating Western ways. Owing to Korea's aspirations to position itself amidst developed countries, Koreans have fully adopted the image of the third world produced by Western Orientalism, thus differentiating themselves from other nations in the Orient. The more Koreans accept reproduced Orientalism, the more likely they are to be detached from the idea of the Orient. With regard to perceptions of Arab, Jeon argues that Koreans became Westerners when they consume and reproduce images of "the Arab people" as the "other." Muslims became an anonymous mass; Koreans fantasized about, feared, pitied, and ridiculed them. By making them "other," Korean culture positions itself in the same way as the West: superior "us" versus inferior "other" (Jeon, 2011: 99 & 106).

Koreans have made slow but sure progress regarding how they perceive Muslims, thanks to increased efforts by Korean academe and mass media that try to secure a "third party objective perspective" that neither leans toward the West nor Islam (Song, 2006: 276). Sub-organizations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinate several cultural events that include an annual Arab cultural festival, the Arab film festival, and *Iftar* Korea.<sup>6</sup> These events aim to raise Korean cultural awareness of Islam and seem to have been successful, as shown in

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6. *Iftar* means "breakfast" and is the evening meal at sunset during the holy month of Ramadan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs organizes an annual *iftar* event, and invites both Muslims and non-Muslims in Korea.

Kim's research on Korean perceptions of Islam and Arabs (Kim, 2013: 63). Kim pointed out that some Koreans perceive Arabs as "kind, affectionate, well-mannered, and easy-going." However, it is still undeniable that Muslims in Korea are discriminated against and treated as the "other" in everyday life. Furthermore, Islamophobia overlaps with Korean ethnocentrism and reproduced Orientalism, which affects how Koreans treat Muslims. The following interviews reflect the experiences of Korean and non-Korean Muslim women within Korea, who show their Islamic identity by wearing the veil in public spaces.

#### **IV. Korean Perspectives of the Veil and Characteristics of Islamophobia**

##### *A. Korean perspectives on the veil: tolerable but negative*

As previously discussed, Koreans share the stereotypical and negative image of Muslim women's veils due to the influence of global media. Koreans generally interpret the veil as a symbol of gender oppression and segregation, and sometimes associate it with terrorism. According to interviews, most Koreans are unconcerned about the veil in everyday life, although interviewees do face occasional interventions. It is notable that older generations tend to interfere with the veils of Muslim women more frequently than the younger generation, and sometimes try to remove it. For example, Leila,<sup>7</sup> an Egyptian master's student who has been studying comparative Korean and Arabic literature for two years, revealed her experiences wearing the veil:

Koreans, especially *ajummas* [middle-aged women] or *ajussi* [middle-aged men] give me curious and awkward looks. Their first reaction toward the veil was "what is this?," and sometimes asked me to take it

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7. All the informants' names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms to protect their privacy. I greatly appreciate all the informants who shared their experiences with me and readers.

off. Young people seem to have more tolerance of the veil (Leila, 2015, Personal communication).

Different generational attitudes toward the veil are understandable given that the social milieu has changed; the youth of the previous generation were inculcated with a sense of ethno-nationalism, whereas contemporary young adults have grown up in a globalized and multicultural environment, and therefore hold less prejudice toward the veil. Cho links the attitudinal generation gap toward the veil to the power of education. She found that the younger generation's awareness of Islamic attire resulted from extensive academic research on it since 9/11 in Korea, an increased number of lectures at universities, recent books published on Islam, and media attention (Cho et al., 2010: 303). Another investigation by the Academy of Korean Studies showed that generation matters when it comes to social distance, and accepting foreigners as neighbors. The older generation shows a greater distance in terms of accepting "others." In other words, the older people are, the less likely they are to accept foreigners as neighbors. According to research conducted by the Academy of Korean Studies, people over 50 expressed a higher preference (54.3%) for maintaining national homogeneity than younger people (35.8% of the sample were in their 20s, while 36.8% were in their 30s) (Kim et al., 2011: 68-69). Besides, Korea witnessed more emigration before the 1990s and was thus able to maintain homogeneity; in contrast, more immigration occurred after the 1990s.

When it comes to religious matters, interventions seem to be on the rise. Amina, a Jordanian master's student who has lived in Korea for two years, made the following observations:

Sometimes Christian missionaries approach me because they know I am Muslim. They try to talk to me about the veil and convince me to go to church. However, I avoid talking to them because I know that if I start talking with them about religion, they will never stop (Amina, 2015, Personal Communication).

Korean Christians see the veil as an object to be removed because

they perceive it as a symbol of gender oppression in Islamic culture. Some Koreans consider the veil a form of Islamic cultural invasion. For example, a Turkish Muslim woman, Fatima, who has been studying at a Korean University for the past four years, said:

I was walking around the Express Bus Terminal with my Turkish friends. Some *ajummas* were behind us talking to each other. They said: "Those Muslims will engulf Korea; they will make Korea like their own country." The *ajummas* did not realize that we understood Korean since we were speaking in Turkish (Fatima, 2015, Personal Communication).

A similar incident happened to Reem when a woman passing her by asked, "Are you Muslim? Please tell your men not to marry our women." Korean Muslim women who wear the veil face more severe prejudice. Kim, a Korean Muslim student who converted to Islam after she studied in the department of Arabic Studies, shared her experiences: "Koreans are not accepting of differences. Some Koreans do not like us [veiled Korean Muslim women] because we are not like other 'normal' Koreans. They blame us [for following], what they think, uncivilized and undeveloped Islamic culture" (Kim, 2015, Personal Communication). Kim added, "in Korea where homogeneity [based on the idea of "pure blood" and ethno-nationalism] is considered a primary national value, difference is not only unwelcomed but also considered as a lawbreaker." Kim's story implies that Koreans tend to impose much stricter standards on their own compatriots. In addition, her comments reveal that reproduced Orientalism exists among Koreans, and that it is connected to a hierarchy of "our" modernized culture versus the uncivilized culture of the "other." Kim finally chose to take off her veil after several years of wearing it due to social pressure and being treated as the "other."

### ***B. Muslim women's responses toward Korea's Islamophobia and cultural negotiation***

"Islamophobia" is an umbrella term for prejudicial acts or sentiments against Muslims, and it creates boundaries between "us" and



“them.” Defined as such, Islamophobia certainly exists among Koreans as a form of subtle and invisible discrimination and exclusion in everyday life. Fatima described a friend’s experience:

I had a friend from Algeria who was studying for her master’s degree. She had to work all the time in the lab, but her professor and the other students did not help her become involved in experimental work. She was treated as an invisible person in the lab. After some time, she decided to return home because she could not bear the situation any longer. (Fatima, 2015, Personal Communication)

Discrimination and exclusion sometimes take the form of “punishment” toward those who refuse to assimilate into the host country. Using Foucault’s panoptic gaze and its relationship to Islamophobia, Chakraborti and Zempi discuss the idea that the object of a gaze operates upon the assumption of an “ideal” spectator, which promotes particular ways of seeing and being seen. Within the framework of a theory of gaze, the reaction of the observed is expressed within a binary opposition: resist or accept. In the case of veiled Muslim women, their response to the observer’s gaze is either to remain veiled, or to relent to the gaze by unveiling. In the former situation, the viewer sees veiled women as challenging and intimidating; the women are therefore regarded as threatening to society. The veiled women may be punished for their deviant behavior by being verbally and physically attacked in the public domain of the street, as they are viewed in British society (Chakraborti and Zempi, 2012). Even though “punishment” is not verbal or physical in Korea, Muslim women seem to be punished with an irritating stare. Rana, who is teaching Arabic, mentioned her experience with Korean animosity toward the veil, especially after the young man known only as Kim became involved with ISIL. She said, “after ISIL emerged, I felt like no one talked to me, and some people even turned their backs, expressing clear disdain. So I wore a cap on top of my veil to hide it during this socially sensitive period” (Rana, 2015, Personal Communication).

In order to adapt to a society that does not tolerate otherness, as well as to overcome the punishment of the “panoptic gaze,” Muslim

women respond to Korean Islamophobia in one of two ways: they either resist by continuing to wear the veil, or they take it off. In the former category, veiled women keep wearing their veils and ignore reactions from Korean society; this is similar to the attitude of resistance observed by Chakraborti and Zempi in the West. These women see wearing the veil as the utmost symbol of their religious commitment to God. For them, there is no room to negotiate, and they consequently ignore uncomfortable gazes. However, there are some Muslim women who wear the veil strategically. These women interpret the practice in a much more flexible way according to their social milieu. For these women, the style of their veil has come to depend on the social environment. For example, due to discriminatory stares from Koreans, Rana chooses to wear her veil strategically in a much more flexible way. She said, "When I am in Korea, I try to wear the veil in a much more liberal style, showing my neck, but back home, I change it to a more conservative style" (Rana, 2015, Personal Communication). Reem, who works for the Arab Embassy in Korea, also said she wears her veil in a "do-rag" style (a piece of cloth used to cover the top of one's head) and Koreans do not recognize that she is wearing a veil. For Rana and Reem, the veil became a fashion statement expressing both their religious identity in moderate way and their style. Depending on the situation, these Muslim women strive to reduce prejudice and alleviate cultural conflicts in the host country.

Unlike the women who keep wearing the veil, Muslim women who belong to the latter category remove it. However, interestingly, there are some women who tend to ritualize the practice of veiling in everyday life. Rather than completely discard the tradition, these women only cover their hair during the month of Ramadan or for religious events and gatherings at mosques. This pattern is observable among some Korean Muslims since they have to deal with tensions between Korean cultural and Islamic religious norms. Han, who once wore the veil when she converted to Islam several years ago, shared her opinion on the veil in Korean society, "The reason Muslim women wear the veil is for protection. But here in Korea it's not for protection; rather, it is a sign of distinctiveness. If I wear the veil, then

people will gossip. So I wear the veil during special religious occasions" (Han, 2015, Personal Communication). Considering the conservative social atmosphere in which Koreans accept "otherness" and "difference," Han's case shows how veiled Muslim women, especially Korean Muslim women who straddle the two cultures, adjust to meet the cultural and religious expectations of everyday life.

### *C. Implication of Korean responses to the veil and Islamophobia*

The experiences of veiled Muslim women highlighted in this paper are significant not only in terms of discussions of Islamophobia within the global context but also in terms of Korea's multicultural and social transformation with rapid demographic change. In addition to an aging population with low fertility rates, and an increase in non-married youth, Korea has seen a sharp increase in immigration over the last two decades. According to statistics from the Ministry of Justice, the number of foreigners staying in Korea increased from 300,000 in 1998 to 750,000 in 2004, and from 1.16 million in 2008 to 1.45 million in 2012. The number of foreign residents in Korea has more than quadrupled over a fourteen-year period to make up 3% of the country's population. It is anticipated that by 2020 the number will reach 2.7 million, with immigrants constituting 5.5% of the total population (Kim, Kang and Lee, 2014). With the increase of foreigners from various backgrounds, Korea is bound to become a multicultural society. Considering this demographic trend, the government has been introducing various policies to facilitate the social transition from an ethnically homogeneous society based on the myth of "one blood" to a multi-ethnic and multicultural society since 2000.

However, these governmental policies have been criticized in academia. Studies on multiculturalism commonly claim that Korean governmental policy aims to assimilate foreigners into Korean society under a policy of social integration, rather than facilitating coexistence by increasing the awareness and acceptance of difference and diversity among Koreans (Kim et al., 2014; Yoon, 2008; Lee and Baik, 2012; Hwang, 2010). Yoon argues that Korea's multicultural policy and

national consciousness does not keep up with rapid demographic changes. In other words, while the Korean government and people ostensibly claim multiculturalism, national consciousness remains closed to an ethno-nationalist discourse (Yoon, 2008: 75).

Korea's reaction towards the veiling practices of Muslim women provides an example of the discrepancies between an idealized and superficial concept of multiculturalism, and an ethno-nationalism practiced in every day. Although Muslim immigration to Korea began in the 1990s, they are still regarded as "outsiders." Koreans and Muslim immigrants have different expectations. Koreans expect Muslims to adopt Korean culture, especially those who changed their status from short-term guests to permanent settlers. One way to do that, as revealed in the case studies discussed in this paper, is to remove the veil in public spaces, which is a symbol of Islamic religion and culture. By not doing so, these women are treated as "eternal others" by the panoptic gaze. Muslims, however, want to be accepted and embraced with their religious identity intact. As shown in this paper, some women remain veiled as a sign of resistance and ignore the gaze, which leads to their isolation and exclusion in the host country. As noted, veiled Muslim women employ different strategies in situating themselves within the local community. For example, while some women adhere to veiling practice, others try to negotiate between the two cultures by choosing a loose style of veiling or by restricting the wearing of veils to religious occasions.

As this study suggests, interpretations of the visibility of veiled Muslim women in Korea should not be confined to discussions of religious contestation and Islamophobia; Korea's specific homogenous ethnic, cultural, and social context should also be taken into consideration. In other words, the experiences of veiled Muslim women in Seoul show the prejudice toward Islam, as well as the discrimination against and exclusion of their "otherness." Therefore, the veil has become a symbolic meeting point of Islamophobia, ethno-nationalism and reproduced Orientalism in contemporary Korea. Arguably, if the government's multicultural policy is expanded to increase ideas of acceptance and coexistence in the Korean populace, Islamophobia

and prejudice toward the veil would decrease.

## V. Concluding remarks

Since the first encounter between modern Korea and the Islamic world in the 1950s, the first major influx of Muslims began in the 1990s and continued afterward. Although Korean society still regards Muslims as a minority, recognition has increased with their immigration. Once invisible and segregated, Muslims in Korea have become a visible and active part of Korean society, and Muslim women's veils have emerged as a powerful mark of Islamic identity in public spaces. With the rise of Islamophobia in Western countries, however, hostility toward Islam has been projected onto the veil's obvious sign of "Muslimness," and has led to a recent increase in veiled Muslim women being victimized in the West.

Considering the growing visibility of Muslims in Korea and rising global Islamophobia, this study explored how Koreans react to Islamophobia, focusing on the experiences of veiled Korean and non-Korean Muslim women. Islamophobia has been defined as an umbrella term that indicates acts or feelings against Muslims based on fear, dislike, and discrimination, which in turn create boundaries "us" and "them." Based on this definition, even though Koreans do not seem to distrust Muslims to the same degree as people in the West, where hostility manifests as verbal and physical abuse, Korean society subtly discriminates against and excludes veiled women by treating them as "outsiders." Sometimes, these negative perceptions take the form of the "panoptic" gaze, or by Koreans culturally interfering in Muslim women's lives by trying to get them to remove their veils. These reactions do not only come from a hatred or fear of Islam itself, but also from Korean Christians, who see the influx of Muslims as part of the looming threat of cultural invasion, or from the older generation, who are less tolerant to otherness. Korean responses toward veiled Muslims seems to be where Islamophobia, ethno-nationalism, and reproduced Orientalism intersect. To adapt to a society that is less

tolerant of difference, and to overcome the panoptic gaze, veiled Muslim women often accept society's demands and take it off. Others, however, resist by continuing to wear the veil, sometimes using it strategically as a fashion item.

Currently, Koreans' overall attitude toward the Islamic world and Muslims is two fold. From an economic point of view, Koreans want to strengthen their economic partnership with the Islamic world. On the other hand, Koreans fear being culturally influenced by Islam. Yet, there is hope for reduction in prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in Korea, given that the younger generation is more likely to understand Islam and accept cultural differences. Their embracing attitude of Islam shows that education could offer a solution to overcome Islamophobia, ethno-nationalism and reproduced Orientalism. Korea is now experiencing an increase in Muslim immigrants. Hence, future studies could examine Muslim-Korean encounters in the context of marriage, second generation Muslims and their identities.

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