

# Under the Veil

*The personal and political  
meanings of the hijab*

**O**n a frigid January afternoon, I sat in the foyer of Shadified Salon & Spa, waiting for my sister to arrive. Across the lobby, I could see mirrors and barber chairs, but most of the customers were hidden by a corner wall. I could still hear their conversations, and when the stylists, many of whom were Lebanese, were done, their customers weren't just gorgeous, they were, "Gorgeous, *wallah!*"—a word many in this north Edmonton neighbourhood near Little Lebanon would recognize as, "I swear to God."



BY OMAR MOUALLEM // PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESSICA FERN FACETTE

**LIKE ANY SALON, IT WAS A ROOM OF ACTIVITY,** banter and high spirits. Ceiling speakers shot out songs from the pop stars inspiring the haircuts. The clients waiting with me, however, were subdued and silent, as if stuck in a medi-clinic below a nightclub. A twenty-something woman with wavy hair sat on a couch flipping through an issue of *Cosmopolitan*. Across from her a tired-looking mother with a lap full of teen-sized winter jackets stared at a whiteboard of microdermabrasion prices. Beside her, a stylish lady with blonde Taylor Swift curls texted compulsively. Nothing could break the detached concentration of waiting.

Until my sister entered.

From the neck down, my older sister, Janine Mouallem, resembled the texting woman. She arrived carrying a designer purse and wearing Lululemon clothing. But the similarities ended where the incongruities began. Because here, in a busy urban salon where everything was about the hair, my sister's was not to be seen. It was concealed by a tight seafoam-coloured lace *hijab*. All eyes turned to her and lingered a beat too long, as if she had shown up for jury duty in a thong and tank top.

Janine sat down beside me, said hi, and glanced at her iPhone: 2 p.m. *Just in time*, her look said. Behind the till, a young woman in a tight pink and black shirt, sporting big coily hair, instantly recognized her. She said hello and my sister said hello in return. "Martha is my personal stylist," she said to me.

### Revealing her hair to an outsider male would defile its sanctity.

Martha led us down a blue hallway, past a row of women with heads in hair steamer domes, and into a calming yellow room with two salon seats and a washing station. She closed the door behind us. Janine sat in the hydraulic chair. I took a seat in the empty chair beside her and looked around the sparsely decorated room. The only thing on the walls was a purple sign advertising permanent tattoo

makeup and ear candling. Janine must have noticed me taking it in. "There's a lot less stuff," she said.

Martha explained that the salon paraphernalia normally found in the room belonged to a hairdresser who once preferred working out of this room but no longer; it simply got too crowded operating from one small room.

Janine removed her glasses and unwrapped her headscarf. Martha removed the second layer, a teal bandana, for her. It felt strangely intimate, because my sister was, in fact, undressing. Yet in that moment, Janine's hijab was not an emblem of her faith; it was just a piece of cloth.

Here is where I have to stop depicting my sister's hair in any detail: she invited me to her salon on the condition that I would not unveil her with words. Although I'm not religious, Janine is, and though she will unveil to Martha and me, she will not for any man who is not her husband or part of her immediate family. Janine is *hijabi*, a woman who observes the Islamic code of modesty, which begins with her clothing and ends with her interactions with men. Revealing her hair to an outsider male—in public, in a photograph, or even in an adjective as benign as "brunette"—would defile its sanctity.

"I'm thinking of going for a deeper red," Janine said to Martha, squinting at her in the mirror. "But when I take a shower will I have red coming out all the time?" "No, you shouldn't."

"Do you think red would suit me?"

"It's going to suit you," said Martha,

"but I could do more of the natural just in case."

Janine seemed unconvinced, so she asked Martha for a hair colour book and copy of *Celebrity Hairstyles* to look around for a new do, knowing only that she was not going to cut it short. "I've tried to grow it out three times," she said, almost as if to herself, "then I get sick of it and just go short. But I'm going to stick it out this

time." She was trying to grow it out because her husband finds long hair attractive. He is also, of course, one of the few men who will ever see it.

**THE HEADCOVERING KNOWN AS A HIJAB** might be the most evocative personal symbol of Islam. For some, it represents religious commitment even more than fasting during Ramadan or pilgrimage to Hajj, in Saudi Arabia. But is it compulsory? Unlike Ramadan and Hajj, the modest-dress code of Hijab is not one of the five pillars of Islam (prerequisites for entry into paradise and a symbol of faith). The word hijab appears in the Qur'an seven times, but in none of those seven instances does it specifically refer to wardrobe. Until recently, the Arabic word hijab meant a literal or metaphysical barrier. When I was an infant, my mother pinned a dangling ornament to my sleepers to protect me from evil spirits. That was a type of hijab. When we would go to the mosque to pray every Eid, my sister and mother would join the women in a section partitioned by a curtain—another hijab.

There is, of course, Islamic jurisprudence on dress code. The Qur'an is meant to be read with the books of Hadith, the sayings and teachings of Prophet Muhammad collected by his earliest followers. These scriptures have edicts on modesty for both genders, though for men it's noticeably more lax. But where these ancient texts get sartorial is with the proper Arabic words for each garment: wear a *jilbab*, or cloak or coat, when you leave the house; cover your bosoms and much of your torso with your *khimar*, or headscarf. (And it is worth reminding ourselves that Islam is not the only faith to employ headcoverings, the habit of Catholic nuns being but one example.)

Veiling has been constant in Islam and the tradition predates the religion. It was a fashion of upper-class women in Mesopotamia that Muslim women of privilege adopted as a symbol of their own (slaves and concubines were banned from veiling). Later, anti-sex and anti-woman teachings by male philosophers, medieval in both historical period and mentality, drew a direct line between seduction and women, calling for the seclusion of free "believ-



Hijabs (and accessories on following pages) from Maysaa's Fashion Fusion

ing" women. By the nineteenth century, the keeping of slaves and concubines became uncouth, but equating unchaste women to unveiled women remained, even though the Muslim world was entering a modern period more recognizable to observers today. By the nineteen-sixties, the veil was more neutral; it was principally a garment worn by elderly and rural women, regardless of their religion. In films, art and texts created centuries apart, the word hijab was never used to describe the piece of cloth or the principles observed by the women who wore it. The tradition predates Muhammad, but the verb hijab, to cover or to veil, doesn't even predate Muhammad Ali.

Though anti-veil politicking in Europe and Canada (such as the bill currently before Parliament to ban face-veils from voting booths) is recent, some of the first governments to ban or punish veiling were predominantly from Muslim nations such as Turkey, Iran and Egypt. Then, in the mid nineteen-seventies, after decades of such bans and after the decline of the Arab Nationalist Movement following the Six-Day War, Islamization arose, which saw everything through the lens of Islamic doctrine. It was cultivated by a proliferation of Saudi scholarships that attracted young Muslim men from around the world, taught them how core Muslim

values apply to everyday life, and sent them back home with renewed perspective (often imbued with the doctrine of political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood). It didn't take long before young Egyptian women, for instance, who'd previously resembled Jackie O with their houndstooth skirts and big sunglasses, were veiling their heads and sometimes their faces. It was a broader social movement, a celebration of faith as well as a rebellion against Western ideals, which the parents of this younger generation wholeheartedly embraced.

A new term entered the Arabic lexicon: *al-ziyy al-Islami* or "women's Islamic dress." Whereas previously a khimar was a khimar and a niqab was a niqab, a hijab became a symbol for the countless garments worn by pious women who veiled. Adopters of the hijab became *muhababaas*, anglicized as hijabi. Before Hijab, a woman in a headscarf was just a woman in a headscarf. And she was probably not a student at Cairo University.

The Hijab movement reached a crescendo during the Iranian revolution. Headscarves are now mandatory for Iranian women, but until 1979 veiling was outlawed and a veil could be forcibly removed by police. During the uprising, images of young veiled Iranian women in the streets reclaiming their rights and

religion were splashed in newspapers around the world. In countries where veiling was uncommon—such as Lebanon, Malaysia and Canada—women began wrapping the rectangular scarf that we now call a hijab around their heads and necks to identify themselves as believers.

"The hijab in Canada became obvious in the late 1970s and early 1980s," Soraya Hafez, president of the Edmonton chapter of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, explained from Cairo via email. "The new immigrants who came at that time brought that tradition with them and affected the rest of the Muslim women in Canada. When I arrived in Canada in 1970, no one wore the hijab except for older women, who wore it for old age, not as 'hijab.'" After a recent pilgrimage to Hajj, in Saudi Arabia, Hafez began covering her hair with a bonnet, a word she uses because doesn't consider herself hijabi. "My position on the hijab hasn't changed," she said. "In the Qur'an there is no punishment for not wearing it, and, if it is *that* important, why wasn't it included in the pillars of Islam?"

Alia Hogben, the executive director of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, said in a recent interview, "In the early nineteen-eighties, one-by-one women were wearing it, but much more than that, it was highly pressured as the way to dress. If you didn't dress like that, you weren't a good



Muslim.” That makes Hogben, who hesitated to make generalizations, uncomfortable: “It’s not part of my cultural baggage.”

A CBC and Environics Research Group survey in 2007 put the number of Canadian Muslim women wearing the hijab at thirty-eight per cent, not counting a small number of women wearing full body veils. Though no comparative studies exist, even a cursory look through archival photos of Canadian Muslims before the nineteen-nineties shows the majority of women wearing skirts and blazers and with their hair openly in the styles of the time.

Hijab fashion helped embolden Muslim identity, but today’s generation has many reasons to wear it, as Kathy Bullock found in the mid-nineties when she interviewed Canadian Muslim women for her PhD thesis on the politics of veiling at the University of Toronto. “There are probably as many reasons as there are women,” said Bullock, who wrote the book *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* and is president of the Tessellate Institute, a think-tank for Canadian multicultural issues. Bullock converted to Islam and became hijabi during her doctoral work. From her interviews with other hijabi, she learned that some women veiled to rebel against consumerism, others to be

identified as Muslims. For some, it was to defy their parents’ generation, a generation the youth thought dissolved too eagerly into the melting pot. Of course, Bullock added, it could also have been “any and all of those things.”

For my sister, thirty-three years old and a mother of three, it was even simpler still. “Hijab is a symbol of my religion,” she told me. “Everyday I wear it I learn how much it’s a benefit instead of a sacrifice. When I go out in the winter and it’s cold, I’m warm; when it’s summer and it’s hot, it protects me from the sun. When I go out in public, I don’t feel like I’m objectified. If I’m passing by males, for instance, I’m not looked at like I’m just an object passing by. With it on, I become a person.” Before becoming hijabi, she said she could be, “looked at as some *thing*, not as some *one*.”

When Janine told me this I asked her if the hijab did not also sometimes lead to the very same outcome, if it didn’t make her a *thing* to some—a foreigner, a threat, a victim of chauvinism?

Her response came without hesitation. “I’m sure that to some, in their eyes, I’m not someone but some *thing* following orders. It’s not something I think about or worry about because I know that what I’m doing is right for me.”

A standard defense of the hijab—one often invoked—is that veiling repels the lustful gazes and catcalls of men. But even if we were to accept the rationale, does the evidence support it? In Egypt, where up to ninety per cent of women veil, eighty-three per cent of women, according to the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, say they’ve encountered sexual harassment, from slurs to assault. A 2008 *Washington Post* story suggested that the hijab exacerbates misogyny because it exoticizes the women who wear it. The reporter pointed out that almost three quarters of harassed women were veiled and that almost all Egyptian women veil, but never connected the phenomena, as my sister did when I told her this statistic. Hijab can diffuse sexuality in decent men, she said, but was still no match for misogyny. Bullock cast doubt on the implications of the *Post* story, noting that such behaviour is clearly un-Islamic, but she added that if the story was in any way accurate, then it was, “clear that (this) problem needs to be dealt with through a social-education campaign. The fault lies not with the veil, nor the women who wear it.”

Bullock is adamant about two things: The veil is not magic armour, and one cannot understand veiling without

## THE GATEKEEPER’S CHILDREN

This is the house of the very rich.  
 You can tell because it’s taken all  
 The colors and left only the spaces  
 Between colors where the absence  
 Of rage and hunger survives. If you could  
 Get close you could touch the embers  
 Of red, the tiny beaks of yellow,  
 That jab back, the sacred blue that mimics  
 The color of heaven. Behind the house  
 The children digging in the flower beds  
 Have been out there since dawn waiting  
 To be called in for hot chocolate or tea  
 Or the remnants of meals. No one can see  
 Them, even though children are meant  
 To be seen, and these are good kids  
 Who go on working in silence.  
 They’re called the gatekeeper’s children,  
 Though there is no gate nor—of course—  
 Any gatekeeper, but if there were  
 These would be his, the seven of them,  
 Heads bowed, knifing the earth. Is that rain,  
 Snow or what smearing their vision?  
 Remember, in the beginning they agreed  
 To accept a sky that answered nothing,  
 They agreed to lower their eyes, to accept  
 The gifts the hard ground hoarded.  
 Even though they were only children  
 They agreed to draw no more breath  
 Than fire requires and yet never to burn.

~ Philip Levine

veiling. Even then, she said, “When you ask a woman about her decision to wear it, it’s amazing how unique her journey is.”

**MY OLDER SISTER, AND BROTHER AND I GREW UP** in a moderate Muslim household in High Prairie, Alberta, about three hours northwest of Edmonton. It was *Little Mosque on the Prairie* without the mosque (which was an hour south). At the same time my sister was arriving at her faith, I was drifting away from mine. I became more

analytical, she became spiritual, and we mostly avoided talking about religion. In fact, it was only a week before she agreed to allow me to interview her for this article that we spoke for the first time about her decision to become hijabi.

To say that a woman doesn’t just wake up and decide to become hijabi is probably true in every case but my sister’s. Eleven years ago, she dreamt that she had put off wearing the hijab until it was too late. It was Judgment Day. “I woke up, and right

then and there I told myself that the next time I get up I’m not going to do a single thing—just put it on right away and leave the house so that I don’t change my mind.”

The first time she left the house in a hijab, in 2000, Janine became the only hijabi in Drayton Valley, a predominantly white town of a few thousand people about ninety minutes drive southwest of Edmonton, where she’d moved to be with her husband Abdallah. “I had this excitement like I’ve never had before. I came out of the apartment building and there was a group of teenagers just looking at me. I didn’t feel embarrassed. I didn’t feel awkward. I just had this huge smile on my face and I don’t know why.”

With her baby boy in her arms, Janine walked into the restaurant Abdallah co-owned with his brother. Her mother-in-law was sitting at a table and didn’t recognize her at first. When she did, she made a scene. Abdallah came out of the kitchen. He was elated and proud to see his wife, my sister, dressed like an Islamic woman. “That was important to him,” she told me. “But he’d never mentioned it to me before. And I don’t think he thought I would at that time.”

About a month later our family saw Janine in a hijab for the first time. She hadn’t warned us before we left to visit her. When I saw her I was stunned. I was fifteen, she was twenty-one—the age my mother was when she’d stopped wearing the hijab. I was still a baby when my mother stopped wearing it, which meant that for many years thereafter the only women around me in headscarves were my aunts. Now, as a fifteen-year-old, I was confronted by my big sister with her hair hidden and her face framed between folds of cloth. She looked like one of my aunts.

Growing up in High Prairie I remember my sister as an average teenager with an above-average sense of style. She wore the brands popular kids wore, usually before the popular kids. Her favourite pastime was drawing her own fashion designs in sketchbooks she filled with sharply angled skirts and blazers—a little haute couture in our tiny tin pot town, even if they were only drawings. She always wore full makeup, and had a particular fascination with her hair, which was usually coloured



and styled after the latest trend. She also did her friends' hair.

As we sat at Shadified, looking at one another through the salon mirror, I told her of these memories.

"Actually, I was thinking about becoming a hair dresser," she said, while Martha folded square after square of tinfoil over every section of her hair until it almost looked as if she were veiled again. Before becoming hijabi, Janine continued, "fashion was everything. It was part of my personality." She paused. "Wearing the hijab just makes the styles different."

Adjusting to her new hijabi lifestyle was surprisingly easy for Janine. Cultural tolerance has emerged palpably, if slowly, in smaller prairie towns. Arriving in High Prairie in the nineteen-eighties, after years living in a town with a large Muslim Canadian population, my mother, who had jumped on the Hijab bandwagon, was in a situation like Janine's. She had arrived in a place where she was the only woman in a headscarf. In 1985 she thought it alienated her, so she took it off and hasn't worn it since.

In 2011, my sister lives in Edmonton, a city with several mosques, libraries and tens of thousands of practising Muslims. She lives in the Internet age, when she can find ample religious support online or surf sites like Fashion Fatwa for chic, modest fashions. Edmonton hijabis can now stop by boutiques where window-display mannequins model colourful silk scarves embellished with sequins, where a row

of heads behind the front counter sport the newest styles. And there is, of course, Shadified and its salon cousins. Women who want to have attractive hair—for their eyes and the eyes of their husbands, that is—can now find a hair salon to cater to them. It's easier for Janine today than it was for our mother in 1987, and she feels becoming hijabi has brought many positive changes; fellow Muslims call her "sister," which she prizes. In the presence of non-Muslims, Islamophobic insults have been almost nonexistent (racial slurs have come her way twice, she told me, and both times she "handled it").

Not that there aren't challenges. "Sometimes when you wear a hijab," Janine told Martha, "people assume you're a foreigner. But I was born and raised here! Once my sister-in-law, who doesn't wear a headscarf, came here from Lebanon. She was pregnant at the time, so I made an appointment for her at the clinic. I called ahead to the nurse and told her that I was going to bring in my sister-in-law and that I'd be translating for her, since she didn't speak English. So we walk in and the nurse comes and shakes my sister-in-law's hand and says, 'Hi, Janine, nice to meet you. This must be your sister-in-law.'"

This anecdote put Martha into hysterics, which made her rhinestone cross jiggle. It was the first time I'd noticed this religious symbol, which was stylish but considerably subtler than Janine's. A reli-

gious symbol a woman could wear most anywhere in the world without fear or concern. A religious symbol *he* could wear as readily as *she*. Not so the Muslim veil, institutionalized by gender and, for some, not just around the face, but *in* your face. For many, it remains a symbol, a device, even, for female oppression; the metaphor wrapped around the head as tightly as the scarf.

**SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO AT THE UNIVERSITY OF** Toronto, in a city that's now home to almost half of Canada's 900,000 Muslims, Kathy Bullock's commitment to Hijab was received differently than my sister's. Bullock, an Australia-born Muslim convert to Islam, was researching her doctoral thesis and working as a teaching assistant. She worried how students would react. "I walked into the classroom and wrote the word 'hijab' on the chalkboard. I said, 'I've become Muslim, I'm wearing a hijab. If anyone wants to ask me any questions about it they can talk to me after class. Right now we're going to do Hobbes. Sit down, open your books to page seventeen.' After class, two people came up to me. One person asked, 'Do you have to wear that in the shower?' and the second said, 'Have you heard anything about Jesus?'"

I told Bullock about my sister's positive experience in becoming hijabi, and she speculated that the difference probably had something to do with the fact

that Bullock was a woman of privilege—a middle-class, white, PhD student. Why, people asked her, would a woman with all these advantages embrace such an oppressive tradition? A friend bluntly told her that she'd just made herself a second-class citizen.

The perception of Islam as a religion that oppresses women and uses the veil as a mechanism for tyranny is well documented. In 2006, a Trudeau Foundation poll found that of the thirty-seven per cent of Canadians who hold unfavourable views towards Islam, one-fifth cited the religion's treatment of women as the primary reason for their negative opinions. (That number has likely risen since the murder of Aqsa Parvez, a sixteen-year-old Mississauga girl whose father strangled her in 2007 for refusing to wear the hijab.)

The roots of this perception are deep. In colonial times, when Europeans returned from Middle Eastern and North African travels, they mythologized Muslim polygamy and harems. The West considered itself superior, Bullock told me, and thought anything connected to the Middle East was backward and oppressive; the veil symbolized that.

By the time we started to move away from the Christian era and into the secular era of the twentieth century, Bullock noted, the Christian reaction of Muslim women being oppressed was picked up first by secularism and then by feminism. "The difference now," said Bullock, "wasn't 'we have to Christianize the people.' It was 'we have to secularize an westernize for them not to be oppressed.'"

In the early twentieth century, Britain's High Commissioner in Egypt, Lord Cromer, wrote in his book *Modern Egypt* that the seclusion of women was a "fatal obstacle" to modernizing the region and had an obvious "deteriorating effect on the male population." This stance was echoed by some Muslims. Qasim Amin, a late nineteenth century Egyptian nationalist who is sometimes called the father of feminism in Egypt, wrote scathingly of veiling and seclusion, which he said made women "worse off than a slave." Amin's criticisms were met with anger from Muslim women in Egypt, even though most at this time didn't veil. Malak Hifni Nasif, a feminist

writer born in the eighteen-eighties (when Muslim women were, in fact, under pressure to *not* wear the hijab), saw it as yet another example of what we would today call "Hislam"—Islam in the control of men: "If he orders us to veil, we veil, and if he now demands that we unveil, we unveil."

The debate over Muslim women's right to veil or not to veil has obviously been highly pitched for centuries both inside and outside Islam, and between genders. But it is also nuanced. Sometimes clerics even weigh in on minutiae, such as the tightness of clothing. Young women who wear see-through hijabs but who dress to accentuate their bodies with tight Rock & Republic jeans, and tighter tank tops over long sleeves, are sometimes called "muhajababes." It's hard to say what rules they think they're following because although the Qur'an does condone style to an extent (declaring clothing a divine gift that can "be an adornment to you"), the dividing line between the modest and immodest appears to centre around excessive embellishment, today and historically. The stomping of feet adorned with ankle bracelets (so as to tantalize men with their jingling) was condemned in the Qur'an. But what is excessive today? Makeup, jewellery and other adornments are as normal to Muslims as non-Muslims. How do you define immodest? And who is doing the defining?

**Young women who wear see-through hijabs with tight jeans are sometimes called "muhajababes."**

In much of the world, Hijab means wearing a headscarf to cover a woman's hair and clothing to cover her skin to her wrists, ankles and collar. This is the law according to Hadith recorded by early male and female followers of Muhammad; this means believers like my sister are following God's will. Still others, particularly men of the Wahhabi religion dominant in Saudi Arabia, say a modest woman should cover every inch of skin but her eyes. Others don't even spare women that privilege. In rare instances, it's taught that a modest woman does not leave the

house unless she has a male relative companion. Of course, as the religion grows and becomes more globalized, there are more liberal Muslim scholars—male and female—publishing their own interpretations. The tradition of veiling, in other words, is coming under increased, and microscopic, examination.

*Khimar*, for example, appears in the Qur'an, but does it mean headscarf or an unspecified "cover" like a shawl? In Surah 24:31, the most pertinent passage on the subject, only a woman's private parts and bosoms (depending on the translation) are singled out for covering, the latter to be dressed with a khimar. The verse is actually more specific about which men a woman does not need to cover herself for (every man a woman couldn't theoretically marry). The passage exhaustively details these men, from a husband to male servants to any child too young to understand sex.

Bullock, who, like most experts, believes khimar has always meant headscarf, has witnessed increasing opposition to this definition over the last fifteen years. Contemporary writers such as Reza Aslan believe the tradition of khimar as headscarf evolved from Muslim women emulating the Prophet's wives, who were veiled in much the same way that Victorian women emulated Queen Victoria's fashion sense. If books by Aslan and Leila

Ahmed, an Egyptian-American scholar who wrote *Women and Gender in Islam*, become the preferred interpretations of tomorrow, it might mean a good Muslim woman will feel free to wear her hair publicly and guiltlessly. But clearly the hijab will always have considerable religious potency, not just because it's an ancient ritual but also because it's so malleable a symbol, able to adopt meaning according to changing history, geography, politics and the zeitgeist. My sister happens to live in a time in which the hijab means piety, not chastity, or privilege. She also lives in

a country that doesn't govern modesty with the rigidity, or righteousness, of Saudi Arabia. The fact that women like my sister choose to dress to their wrists, ankles and collars, and cover their hair, is, at root, a reflection less of the times in which we live than how these times are interpreted by Muslim clerics and religious scholars.

**MARTHA LEFT THE ROOM TO LET JANINE'S HAIR** soak in the dye for forty-five minutes. My sister smiled as she anticipated what was, to her, the best part of any hair cut. "I love when you're getting your hair washed and your head rubbed..."

I suggested that surely there were cheaper ways to get a head rub. She laughed, so I followed with what seemed to me a fundamental question: Why, if the only time she exposed her hair was when she was alone or at home—bearing in mind that every time she removes her hijab and unwraps her hair it must be restyled, and that every time it's restyled it's

essay by secular Iranian writer and feminist Azam Kamguian: "The main reason for hijab is the need for controlling women's sexuality. Veiling internalizes the Islamic notion in women that they belong to an inferior sex, and that they are sex objects. It teaches them to limit their physical movements and their free behaviour. Veiling is a powerful tool to institutionalize women's segregation and to implement a system of sexual apartheid."

"Is that it?"  
 "Yes," I replied.  
 "I don't believe that at all," she said. "That's so silly to think that, because on the other side, through my eyes, when I see television shows and commercials with girls moving up and down, their whole bodies exposed, and that being the main point in every music video, I think that's objectifying. And I think that's making women and their sexuality into objects."

I read her a second passage by Kamguian: "The law of veiling is not only

leaders in Muslim households. It's not the hijab that makes it so, she said, it's the Qur'an. But what compels my sister to veil more than any man or cleric is the pressure from within to have *taqwa*, the love and fear of God. *Taqwa* is the charge a Muslim gets from praying and the shame she gets from drinking. It is, like Hijab, experienced individually while simultaneously being influenced by teachings in a male-dominated arena. But, for Janine, Hijab does not make her a servant to men but to a genderless deity rewarding pure devotion.

When Janine wears her hijab she's revealing what's underneath it. Not her hair, but her conviction that this is what a faithful woman does. The veil externalizes her certainty about her faith, and she sees it as but one question on the exam she must pass to enter paradise. Some will tell her she is doing too much, or not enough, but no one will change her mind. Unless she changes it herself.

Martha returned and rinsed out Janine's hair, supplied the treasured head rub at the washing station, then gave her hair a trim. When it was all over and done with, her hair looked lovely to me in ways I literally cannot describe. My sister put her glasses back on and took in her new look in the mirror. Next, she ran her fingers through the strands, pursed her lips.

"This is going to take some getting used to," she said.

Martha and I assured her that it was striking. Janine pulled the fitted cap over the top of her head and grabbed her hijab. She stretched it at arms length by the tips and folded the long edge a third of the way down. Next, she pulled the padded straight edge over the top of her forehead and under her chin, then around her neck. Last, she tucked the tail into the front of her sweater. Her hair was gone.

She opened the door of the yellow room, releasing the pent-up hair product odour, and walked past the rows of women with their heads inside air steamers, none of whom would have known what my sister's hair looked like before or after. Janine paid up, then drove home to show her family her new look and, presumably, to let her hair down. ☐

### Her hijab does not make her a servant to men but to a genderless deity rewarding pure devotion.

done knowing that it will inevitably be rendered unkempt, because she must re-do the hijab when any man from outside her family enters the room—why then would she still dish out \$150 to get her hair coloured and cut? Why go to all that trouble for so little exposure?

"I'm doing it for myself," she explained. "It's nice for kids to see their mom looking good and being in style. And I do it for my husband because he's my life partner. Just because you cover your head doesn't mean you don't want to look good and please your other half. My hair is something special just for him. It's like a gift to him."

Janine sees Hijab as more than a commitment to her God; it's also a commitment to her marriage, given that, like many hijabis, she didn't start veiling until after marriage.

I wanted her to see it from the other side, so I read her a passage from an

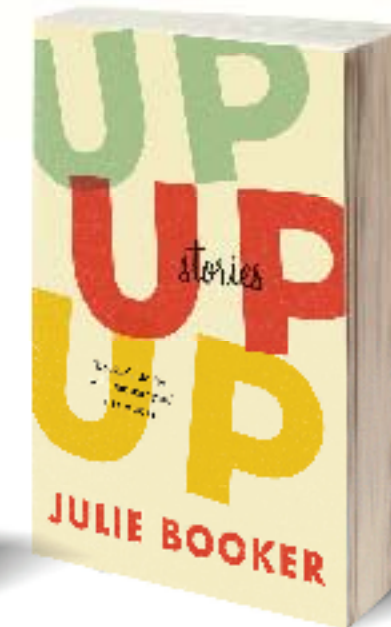
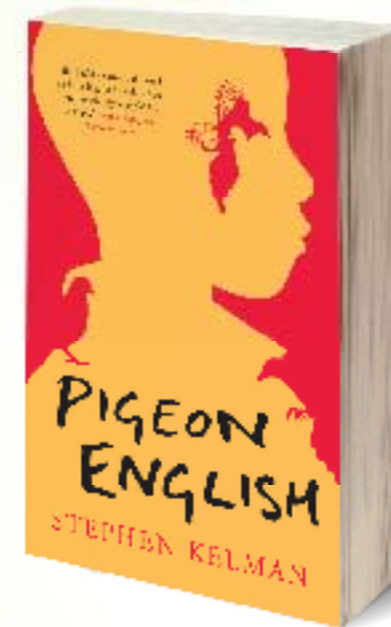
humiliating to women, but it is an insult to men. It is a clear indication that, in the eyes of Muhammad, all Muslim men are sex-crazed."

"It's not something asked by Muhammad," Janine said. "Muhammad is just the messenger. He brought the message. So whatever Allah asks for us to do in Qur'an has been proven time and time again to be beneficial to us. It doesn't only have to do with sexuality, and it doesn't mean every man feels that way. But maybe there are men that do, so it's protecting you from them. There are many benefits to ourselves, to our bodies, to our minds, that we don't even realize."

She wanted to be clear about two things: Abdallah didn't make her wear the hijab but he loved that she did and, "the whole reason I do this is that it's something asked of me by my God."

I asked her if the hijab being so gender-oriented made men the *de facto*

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