

Women in islam: the hijab essay



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“ In many Muslim societies, for example in traditional South East Asia, or in Bedouin lands a face veil for women is either rare or non-existent; paradoxically, modern fundamentalism is introducing it”, writes Ibrahim B. Syed, Ph. D.

In the name of Allah the most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

Literally, Hijab means “ a veil”, “ curtain”, “ partition” or “ separation.” In a meta- physical sense, Hijab means illusion or refers to the illusory aspect of creation. Another, and most popular and common meaning of Hijab today, is the veil in dressing for women. It refers to a certain standard of modest dress for women. “ The usual definition of modest dress according to the legal systems does not actually require covering everything except the face and hands in public; this, at least, is the practice which originated in the Middle East.” 1

The general term hijab in the present day world refers to the covering of the face by women. In the Indian sub-continent it is called purdah and in Iran it called chador for the tent like black cloak and veil worn by many women in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries. By socioeconomic necessity, the obligation to observe the hijab now often applies more to female “ garments” (worn outside the house) than it does to the ancient paradigmatic feature of women’s domestic “ seclusion.”

In the contemporary normative Islamic language of Egypt and elsewhere, the hijab now denotes more a “ way of dressing” than a “ way of life,” a (portable) “ veil” rather than a fixed “ domestic screen/seclusion.” In Egypt and America hijab presently denotes the basic head covering (“ veil”) worn

by fundamentalist/Islamist women as part of Islamic dress (zayy islami, or zayy shar'i); this hijab-head covering conceals hair and neck of the wearer.

In Surah 24: 31(Ayah), the Qur'an advises women to cover their "adornments" from strangers outside the family. In the traditional and modern Arab societies women at home dress quite differently compared to what they wear in the streets. In this verse of the Qur'an, it refers to the institution of a new public modesty rather than veiling the face.

When the pre-Islamic Arabs went to battle, Arab women seeing the men off to war would bare their breasts to encourage them to fight; or they would do so at the battle itself, as in the case of the Meccan women led by Hind at the Battle of Uhud. This changed with Islam, but the general use of the veil to cover the face did not appear until ' Abbasid times. Nor was it entirely unknown in Europe, for the veil permitted women the freedom of anonymity. None of the legal systems actually prescribe that women must wear a veil, although they do prescribe covering the body in public, up to the neck, the ankles, and below the elbow.

In many Muslim societies, for example in traditional South East Asia, or in Bedouin lands a face veil for women is either rare or non-existent; paradoxically, modern fundamentalism is introducing it. In others, the veil may be used at one time and European dress another. While modesty is a religious prescription, the wearing of a veil is not a religious requirement of Islam, but a matter of cultural milieu.

" The Middle Eastern norm for relationships between the sexes is by no means the only one possible for Islamic societies everywhere, nor is it

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appropriate for all cultures. It does not exhaust the possibilities allowed within the framework of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and is neither feasible nor desirable as a model for Europe or North America. European societies possess perfectly adequate models for marriage, the family, and relations between the sexes which are by no means out of harmony with the Qur'an and the Sunnah. This is borne out by the fact that within certain broad limits Islamic societies themselves differ enormously in this respect."

The Qur'an lays down the principle of the law of modesty. In Surah 24: An-Nur: 30 and 31, modesty is enjoined both upon Muslim men and Muslim women 4:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for Greater purity for them: And God is Well-acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women That they should lower their gaze And guard their modesty: and they should not display beauty and ornaments expect what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that They must draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, or their women, or their slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their ornaments.

The following conclusions may be made on the basis of the above-cited verses⁵:

1. The Qur'anic injunctions enjoining the believers to lower their gaze and behave modestly applies to both Muslim men and women and not Muslim women alone.

2. Muslim women are enjoined to “ draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty” except in the presence of their husbands, other women, children, eunuchs and those men who are so closely related to them that they are not allowed to marry them. Although a self-conscious exhibition of one's “ zeenat” (which means “ that which appears to be beautiful” or “ that which is used for embellishment or adornment”) is forbidden, the Qur'an makes it clear that what a woman wears ordinarily is permissible. Another interpretation of this part of the passage is that if the display of “ zeenat” is unintentional or accidental, it does not violate the law of modesty.

3. Although Muslim women may wear ornaments they should not walk in a manner intended to cause their ornaments to jingle and thus attract the attention of others.

The respected scholar, Muhammad Asad⁶, commenting on Qur'an 24: 31 says “ The noun khimar (of which khumur is plural) denotes the head-covering customarily used by Arabian women before and after the advent of Islam. According to most of the classical commentators, it was worn in pre-Islamic times more or less as an ornament and was let down loosely over the wearer's back; and since, in accordance with the fashion prevalent at the time, the upper part of a woman's tunic had a wide opening in the front, her breasts were left bare. Hence, the injunction to cover the bosom by means of a khimar (a term so familiar to the contemporaries of the Prophet) does not

necessarily relate to the use of a khimar as such but is, rather, meant to make it clear that a woman's breasts are not included in the concept of "what may decently be apparent" of her body and should not, therefore, be displayed.

The Qur'anic view of the ideal society is that the social and moral values have to be upheld by both Muslim men and women and there is justice for all, i. e. between man and man and between man and woman. The Qur'anic legislation regarding women is to protect them from inequities and vicious practices (such as female infanticide, unlimited polygamy or concubinage, etc.) which prevailed in the pre-Islamic Arabia. However the main purpose is to establish to equality of man and woman in the sight of God who created them both in like manner, from like substance, and gave to both the equal right to develop their own potentialities. To become a free, rational person is then the goal set for all human beings. Thus the Qur'an liberated the women from the indignity of being sex-objects into persons. In turn the Qur'an asks the women that they should behave with dignity and decorum befitting a secure, Self-respecting and self-aware human being rather than an insecure female who felt that her survival depends on her ability to attract or cajole those men who were interested not in her personality but only in her sexuality.

One of the verses in the Qur'an protects a woman's fundamental rights. Aya 59 from Sura al-Ahzab reads:

O Prophet! Tell Thy wives And daughters, and the Believing women, that They should cast their Outer garments over Their Persons (when outside): That they should be known (As such) and not Molested.

Although this verse is directed in the first place to the Prophet's " wives and daughters", there is a reference also to " the believing women" hence it is generally understood by Muslim societies as applying to all Muslim women. According to the Qur'an the reason why Muslim women should wear an outer garment when going out of their houses is so that they may be recognized as " believing" Muslim women and differentiated from street-walkers for whom sexual harassment is an occupational hazard.

The purpose of this verse was not to confine women to their houses but to make it safe for them to go about their daily business without attracting unwholesome attention. By wearing the outer garment a " believing" Muslim woman could be distinguished from the others. In societies where there is no danger of " believing" Muslim being confused with the others or in which " the outer garment" is unable to function as a mark of identification for " believing" Muslim women, the mere wearing of " the outer garment" would not fulfill the true objective of the Qur'anic decree. For example that older Muslim women who are " past the prospect of marriage" are not required to wear " the outer garment". Surah 24: An-Nur, Aya 60 reads:

Such elderly women are past the prospect of marriage,- There is no blame on them, if they lay aside their (outer) garments, provided they make not wanton display of their beauty; but it is best for them to be modest: and Allah is One who sees and knows all things.

Women who on account of their advanced age are not likely to be regarded as sex-objects are allowed to discard “ the outer garment” but there is no relaxation as far as the essential Qur’anic principle of modest behavior is concerned. Reflection on the above-cited verse shows that “ the outer garment” is not required by the Qur’an as a necessary statement of modesty since it recognizes the possibility women may continue to be modest even when they have discarded “ the outer garment.”

The Qur’an itself does not suggest either that women should be veiled or they should be kept apart from the world of men. On the contrary, the Qur’an is insistent on the full participation of women in society and in the religious practices prescribed for men.

Nazira Zin al-Din stipulates that the morality of the self and the cleanness of the conscience are far better than the morality of the chador. No goodness is to be hoped from pretence, all goodness is in the essence of the self. Zin al-Din also argues that imposing the veil on women is the ultimate proof that men suspect their mothers, daughters, wives and sisters of being potential traitors to them. This means that men suspect ‘ the women closest and dearest to them.’ How can society trust women with the most consequential job of bringing up children when it does not trust them with their faces and bodies?

How can Muslim men meet rural and European women who are not veiled and treat them respectfully but not treat urban Muslim women in the same way? 7 She concludes this part of the book, *al-Sufur Wa’l-hijab* 8 by stating that it is not an Islamic duty on Muslim women to wear hijab. If Muslim

legislators have decided that it is, their opinions are wrong. If hijab is based on women's lack of intellect or piety, can it be said that all men are more perfect in piety and intellect than all women? 9 The spirit of a nation and its civilization is a reflection of the spirit of the mother. How can any mother bring up distinguished children if she herself is deprived of her personal freedom? She concludes that in enforcing hijab, society becomes a prisoner of its customs and traditions rather than Islam.

There are two ayahs which are specifically addressed to the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (S) and not to other Muslim women. These are ayahs 32 and 53 of Sura al-Ahzab. “.. And stay quietly in your houses,” did not mean confinement of the wives of the Prophet (S) or other Muslim women and make them inactive. Muslim women remained in mixed company with men until the late sixth century (A. H.) or eleventh century (CE). They received guests, held meetings and went to wars helping their brothers and husbands, defend their castles and bastions. 10

Zin al-Din reviewed the interpretations of Aya 30 from Sura al-Nur and Aya 59 from sura al-Ahzab which were cited above by al-Khazin, al-Nafasi, Ibn Masud, Ibn Abbas and al-Tabari and found them full of contradictions. Yet, almost all interpreters agreed that women should not veil their faces and their hands and anyone who advocated that women should cover all their bodies including their faces could not face his argument on any religious text. If women were to be totally covered, there would have been no need for the ayahs addressed to Muslim men: ‘ Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty.’ (Sura al-Nur, Aya 30).

She supports her views by referring to the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (S), always taking into account what the Prophet himself said ‘ I did not say a thing that is not in harmony with God’s book.’¹¹ God says: ‘ O consorts of the Prophet! ye are not like any of the (other) women’ (Ahzab, 53). Thus it is very clear that God did not want women to measure themselves against the wives of the Prophet and wear hijab like them and there is no ambiguity whatsoever regarding this aya. Therefore, those who imitate the wives of the Prophet and wear hijab are disobeying God’s will.

In Islam ruh al-madaniyya (Islam: The Spirit of Civilization) Shaykh Mustafa Ghalayini reminds his readers that veiling pre-dated Islam and that Muslims learned from other peoples with whom they mixed. He adds that hijab as it is known today is prohibited by the Islamic shari’a. Any one who looks at hijab as it is worn by some women would find that it makes them more desirable than if they went out without hijab. Zin al-Din points out that veiling was a custom of rich families as a symbol of status. She quotes Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Maghribi who also saw in hijab an aristocratic habit to distinguish the women of rich and prestigious families from other women. She concludes that hijab as it is known today is prohibited by the Islamic shari’a.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali in his book Sunna Between Fiqh and Hadith 15 declares that those who claim that women’s reform is conditioned by wearing the veil are lying to God and his Prophet. He expresses the opinion that the contemptuous view of women has been passed on from the first jahiliya (the Pre-Islamic period) to the Islamic society. Al-Ghazali’s argument is that Islam has made it compulsory on women not to cover their faces during haj and salat (prayer) the two important pillars of Islam. How then

could Islam ask women to cover their faces at ordinary times? 16 Al-Ghazali is a believer and is confident that all traditions that function to keep women ignorant and prevent them from functioning in public are the remnants of jahiliya and that following them is contrary to the spirit of Islam.

Al-Ghazali says that during the time of the Prophet women were equals at home, in the mosques and on the battlefield. Today true Islam is being destroyed in the name of Islam.

Another Muslim scholar, Abd al-Halim Abu Shiqqa wrote a scholarly study of women in Islam entitled *Tahrir al-mara'a fi ' asr al-risalah: (The Emancipation of Women during the Time of the Prophet)*¹⁷ agrees with Zin al-Din and al-Ghazali about the discrepancy between the status of women during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the status of women today. He says that Islamists have made up sayings which they attributed to the Prophet such as ' women are lacking both intellect and religion' and in many cases they brought sayings which are not reliable at all and promoted them among Muslims until they became part of the Islamic culture.

Like Zin al-Din and al-Ghazali, Abu Shiqqa finds that in many countries very weak and unreliable sayings of the Prophet are invented to support customs and traditions which are then considered to be part of the shari'a. He argues that it is the Islamic duty of women to participate in public life and in spreading good (Sura Tauba, Aya 71). He also agrees with Zin al-Din and Ghazali that hijab was for the wives of the Prophet and that it was against Islam for women to imitate the wives of the Prophet. If women were to be

totally covered, why did God ask both men and women to lower their gaze? (Sura al-Nur, Ayath 30-31).

The actual practice of veiling most likely came from areas captured in the initial spread of Islam such as Syria, Iraq, and Persia and was adopted by upper-class urban women. Village and rural women traditionally have not worn the veil, partly because it would be an encumbrance in their work. It is certainly true that segregation of women in the domestic sphere took place increasingly as the Islamic centuries unfolded, with some very unfortunate consequences. Some women are again putting on clothing that identifies them as Muslim women. This phenomenon, which began only a few years ago, has manifested itself in a number of countries.

It is part of the growing feeling on the part of Muslim men and women that they no longer wish to identify with the West, and that reaffirmation of their identity as Muslims requires the kind of visible sign that adoption of conservative clothing implies. For these women the issue is not that they have to dress conservatively but that they choose to. In Iran Imam Khomeini first insisted that women must wear the veil and chador and in response to large demonstrations by women, he modified his position and agreed that while the chador is not obligatory, modest dress is, including loose clothing and non-transparent stockings and scarves.

With Islam's expansion into areas formerly part of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, the scripture-legislated social paradigm that had evolved in the early Medinan community came face to face with alien social structures and traditions deeply rooted in the conquered populations. Among

the many cultural traditions assimilated and continued by Islam were the veiling and seclusion of women, at least among the urban upper and upper-middle classes. With these traditions' assumption into " the Islamic way of life," they of need helped to shape the normative interpretations of Qur'anic gender laws as formulated by the medireview (urbanized and acculturated) lawyer-theologians. In the latter's consensus-based prescriptive systems, the Prophet's wives were recognized as models for emulation (sources of Sunna). Thus, while the scholars provided information on the Prophet's wives in terms of, as well as for, an ideal of Muslim female morality, the Qur'anic directives addressed to the Prophet's consorts were naturally seen as applicable to all Muslim women.