

The Veil of A Muslim Woman

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Scholars have established various explanations elucidating the subject of women covering. The two essential reasons as to why Muslim women must cover are to protect and defend women, as well as society.

Covering is a form of protection, maintenance of chastity, and aid in the avoidance of negative temptations in society for women and men alike. When women cover, they provide dimensions of moral character and dignity, not only for themselves, but also for society.

In general, men tend to be initially inclined and instinctively attracted to the physical beauty of women. Women are also attracted to men, but in general, the physical structure of women is more personable than that of men. This is one additional reason why Muslim women are required to cover.

Most importantly, however, it is to protect women from being victimized. It is well noted that throughout history women have been victims of physical, mental, and emotional abuse within societies. Many societies have exploited and dishonored women; therefore, Islam wanted (and wants) to shield her honor and dignity by protecting her physical nature.

Besides protecting the honor of women, religions wanted to inculcate upon men the importance of women in the sphere of life. Men are to regard women in a dignified manner and value them as equal human beings. The acknowledgment of a woman should not be based on her physical appearance or structure; respect and acknowledgment must be focused on her character, her intelligence, and her moral qualities.

The subject of covering is not as foreign as some people believe. Islam was not the only religion that required women to cover. Traditionally, female followers of the divine books had been covering for hundreds of years prior to Islam's emergence. Many faithful women in the history of Judaism and Christianity were covered, and some women continue to do so today. Islam continued with the convention, yet it added another dimension, the philosophy which is to "lower their gaze: yaghzuzna min 'absaarihin" (24:30). This can be interpreted as showing respect and modesty in all aspects of one's mind and body.

Fatma: Some claim that the Qur'an does not explicitly mandate women to cover, or that the doctrines are obscure and open to individual discretion. What exactly does the Qur'an state regarding the dress code for Muslim women?

Sayyid: There are two verses in the Qur'an that explicitly order and specifically state the

particulars of a woman's dress. It may also be corroborated by examining from numerous traditions of the Prophet, descriptions of the particular attire for covering. The first verse introduced is as follows:

Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils [khumur] over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the 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 hidden ornaments (24:31).

The word "veil" has been translated from the Arabic term "khumur." Khumur was a particular scarf used for covering during the Prophet's time.

The second tradition:

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments [julbab] over their persons when abroad: that is most convenient, that they should be known as such and not molested (33:59).

"Outer garments," in this verse is translated from the Arabic word "julbab." Julbab was also another article used for covering during the Prophet's time. The Qur'an also gives an account on the criteria for uncovering.

Know that women advanced in years, who no longer feel any sexual desire incur no sin if they discard their outer garments, provided they make not a wanton display of their beauty: but it is best for them to be modest (24:60).

Fatma: Could you describe the specific garments of julbab and khumur?

Sayyid: Julbab was an article worn over the clothes during the time of the Prophet. The likeness of it today would be an overcoat or a loose, long dress. Khumur was a loose scarf used during the time of the Prophet, but women wore it inappropriately. Women then only used the khumur for covering their hair while leaving their bosoms exposed. When Allah requested believing women to "draw their veils [khumurihin] over their bosoms," He wanted them to not only cover their hair, but also wrap the scarf around their bosoms.

Fatma: The term "hijab" is not used in reference to 24:31 and 33:59. Yet, Islamic scholars relate these verses in accordance with the attire of hijab. How is hijab defined and used in the Qur'an?

Sayyid: The word hijab in Arabic means to curtail, or detain the vision, or scene, or act as a

barrier, like a curtain. It has been used several times in the Qur'an. "When you ask his wives for anything you want, ask them from a screen: Wa 'izaa sa-'altumuuhun-na mataa-'an fas-'aluuhunna minw-waraaa-'i hijab." (33:53)

The word hijab has been applied toward Muslim women who adhere to the practice of hijab, that entails covering or curtailing the body by wearing an outer garment over the clothes that covers and prevents viewing the shape of their bodies and hair. The authentic attire for a Muslim woman is to wear a loose clothing article that covers the entire body from the face line to the wrist and falls below the ankles. She is not to wear any article that is form-fitting, reveals contours, is brightly colored, or transparent.

Fatma: Why do you suppose veiling has been significantly limited?

Sayyid: The Qur'an explains it with valuable reasons. "That they should be known as such and not molested" (33:59).

When a woman covers, her attire speaks on her behalf. Indirectly it implies that she does not want to be approached indecently. It also serves as an acknowledgment of her Islamic identity.

Fatma: Prior to the particular verse that required women to cover, the Qur'an makes a relevant point.

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them" (24:30).

Sayyid: Not only is it a relevant point, but also a pertinent declaration. Before the Qur'an advanced the required dress for Muslim women, Allah addressed the men first, in that they are the ones who should first lower their gaze and guard their modesty.

Fatma: "Lower their gaze." Does this signify a metaphorical or literal directive for men?

Sayyid: It signifies both. The ideology behind this verse is that women are to be revered. Women are not to be regarded or intentionally looked upon in an ill manner. Men are to be respectful. This verse denotes that men should not deliberately think or look at women in a lustful manner.

Islam regards women as an integral part of life. The Qur'an continuously iterates that women were created from the same essence as men, which also serves as a reminder that women are not inferior. According to Islam, women and men are equipollent in their creation; hence, they require the same respect and acknowledgement.

Nevertheless, some societies regard veiling as subordination or as a form of degradation for women. Objectively, if one questions the portraying of women in some societies, in particular Western societies, and how women are depicted in the media, establishments, and advertising industries, would one rightfully conclude that women are being liberated in a humanitarian

way? Is this what we want to teach our daughters, sisters, or wives, that the only way for them to be recognized and worthy of is to be exploited? Unfortunately, emphasis is being placed on the physical features of a woman rather than her character and intelligence. I believe that this is truly a form of subordination, degradation, but most of all, it is insulting to women. Islam does not consider women as mere entertainment. Islam values women. By covering the physical beauty of women, Islam has invited men to recognize their intelligence, character, and spirituality.

Fatma: Were most Qur'anic injunctions originated by actual events, such as the order for women to cover?

Sayyid: Many of the injunctions that are stated in the Qur'an were not necessarily as a result of certain incidents or predicaments. Islam slowly was introduced into a society for over twenty-three years as guidance for humanity. Guidelines, recommendations, orders, and laws emerged throughout these years. Considering that the particular society in which the Prophet lived was lawless and in need of direction and reform, such changes could not simply have been done in a short time. Islam was dealing with a society that had been accustomed to their traditions for centuries and deliberated the changes with caution.

In some instances, the Qur'an would intermittently touch upon a matter and mention it in a way to draw attention to it. In some instances, the Qur'an made advantage of incidents as preludes to introduce certain laws or revelations, such as the incidents in the market that instigated laws of trade. Sometimes, the Qur'an would introduce a resolution that ultimately would lead to an injunction. Take for example, the drinking of alcohol. Islam wanted to abolish alcohol consumption completely, but it had to gradually introduce its prohibition into a society that was accustomed to drinking. Initially, the Qur'an mentioned that when a Muslim stood before prayers, their minds should not be intoxicated. Then, ultimately, the Qur'an prohibited alcohol completely. Then there were laws that were ordained, but later abrogated. There is a variety of reasons as to why certain ordinances were applied, but not all of the injunctions resulted from particular incidents.

The verses that requested Muslim women to cover were instigated by incidents (but did not necessarily originate with the incidents themselves). The verses were predetermined, but the occasions introduced them.

The incident that generated the first revelation regarding the covering of women was of a young man who was overtaken by the beauty of a woman passing him. While looking at her, he walked into a wall and cut his head on a protruding object.

The second incident occurred in the Medina market between a Jewish merchant and a Muslim

woman patron. Apparently, her dress was revealing parts of her bosom that enticed the merchant to harass her provocatively.

Fatma: The Qur'an applies the words "julbab" and "khumur" in describing the form of attire for covering, but the word "hijab" is used in describing the form of covering for the wives of the Prophet. "When you ask his wives for anything you want to ask them from before a screen" (33:53). Some scholars have applied this verse as a form of covering, which includes the face and hands for all Muslim women. Does the verse only pertain to the Prophet's wives or all Muslim women?

Sayyid: Although some scholars believe that verse 33:53 may be applied to all Muslim women, the consensus of scholars is that the verse refers to and addresses the wives of the Prophet only.

Scholars describe a series of events that surrounded the Prophet as reasons for the aforementioned verse. Enemies of the Prophet, during his lifetime, continuously mocked and teased him by suggesting when he died they were going to marry his wives. This disturbed the Prophet. Thus ensued the dissension of the verse.

However, the idea behind the verse is to protect a woman from being perpetrated as an object of a man's desire.

"Ask them from a screen; that makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs" (33:53). The details of the verse may be ideal and realistically used in some societies where women still are being victimized or judged by their physical appearance.

Fatma: Nevertheless, there are some scholars who recommend that in certain societies women should cover completely. Would this not go against the ideology that men should "lower their gazes" and not think of women in an ill manner? How are men to learn and practice this idea if Muslim women are continuously asked to cover extensively?

Sayyid: Most scholars do not advocate the extent of such practices (complete covering). Certainly, it would be optimal if all men adhered to the teachings and principles of Islam, but it may be very challenging. Men, in general, are physically attracted to the sight of women and, for some men, one way to curb this attraction is to conceal this potential attraction.

Fatma: You mentioned the basic criterion for the dress code is from the foreline of the face to the wrist and to below the ankles. Is this how scholars define the verse that states "what must ordinarily appear" (24:31)?

Sayyid: Although the Qur'an does not mention the specifics of "what must ordinarily appear," Ahl al-Bayt scholars have made extensive studies of traditions from the Prophet and Imams of Ahl al-Bayt which generally state the areas that are permitted to be uncovered are the feet,

hands, and face.

Fatma: Why was the face not included since it may be one of the most attractive features of a woman?

Sayyid: The uncovering of the face is a form of identification. The face needs to be recognized; in addition, the woman needs to see and converse. The cause for the hands and feet to be uncovered is mainly for mobility.

Fatma: Some scholars have made it incumbent upon women to cover the soles of their feet. Why is that?

Sayyid: Scholars who make such rulings are relying on traditions that claim a woman should cover the soles of her feet because most of the traditions regarding covering exclude only the face and hands from being covered. Additionally, there is an authentic tradition that states when there is doubt about a particular matter, then precautionary measure (ihtiyat) is advised.

Fatma: The Qur'an states "that they [women] should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear" (24:31). Then, the Qur'an goes on to mention which people are allowed to see the woman unveiled. However, Allah seems to be revealing varying degrees of dress regarding certain people in relation to the woman. Could you explain the varying degrees of dress for a woman in front of other people?

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free from 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 hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! Turn ye all together toward God, that you may attain Bliss (24:31).

Sayyid: Your observation is correct. The verse has varying degrees of dress for a Muslim woman in relation to others.

Imam Muhammad Al-Baqir explained that there are three classifications or levels for displaying a woman's ornament (ziina)—meaning her physical features. The first ornament is for the public or strangers. The second level is for the immediate family members; the father, brother, or son. The third classification is for the husband.

If a Muslim woman is in public encountering or associating with men, then she is required to cover by the example given of the jilbab and khumur attires. Areas that she is not required to

cover when in public are the hands and face.

When a woman is at home and among her immediate family members, or only females, she is to be modest in her attire. For example, her clothing apparel should cover the areas of the upper chest to below the knees. Even though she may be among her father, sons, brothers, or females, she should still be moderate in her dress.

When she is in private quarters with her husband, she should be uninhibited and free to reveal any part of her body in front of her husband.

Islam believes that women have two sides; one is humanitarian and the other is feminine. Islam wants women to reveal their humanitarian qualities among the public. The Qur'an makes an allegorical statement regarding this point. "They should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments" (24:31). Not only is a Muslim woman required to cover herself physically, but also she must behave accordingly. Covering is only one aspect of hijab; another factor is her demeanor.

Fatma: Does the Qur'an mention what sort of punishment awaits a Muslim woman if she does not adhere to hijab?

Sayyid: After the Qur'an mentions the covering of women, it concludes with, "O ye Believers! Turn you all together toward God, that you may attain bliss: wa tuubuu 'ilal-laahi jamii-'an 'ay-yuhal-Mu'-minuuna la 'al-lakum tuflihuun" (24: 31). Tuubuu comes from the word inebba, which means going back or turning back. It has a very significant meaning to this particular verse in that Allah invites faithful women to turn humbly toward Him, to sincerely abide to His commandments, hence that they may attain righteousness and become prosperous.

Fatma: Do you believe that hijab has become a testimonial of a woman's faith?

Sayyid: For some women it has become a testimonial factor of their faith, in particular women who live in Western societies or in countries that claim to be Islamic yet have banned hijab. The practice of hijab for some women who live in these societies has become a symbol of their religious faith; an emblem of religious pride based on firm convictions of their faith; furthermore, hijab has become a means of preserving their Islamic identity.

Fatma: Could you discuss the parameters of a Muslim woman beautifying herself?

Sayyid: There is no limit for a woman to beautify herself for her husband; in fact, it is highly encouraged. However, when she is out in public she should be natural, with the exemption of two items in which may be added for health benefits, khol and henna. Khol is a natural black substance that resembles black eyeliner. It is used around the eye as a remedy to strengthen eyesight. Henna is a natural dye substance that is used to enhance skin tone and hair texture.

Henna, however, cannot be exposed publicly in the form of tattooing or decorative body art.

Fatma: Some scholars have ruled that jewelry is forbidden for a woman to wear. Are the reasons that “they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments” (24:31)?

Sayyid: This verse is metaphorical in that any means of intentionally attracting, provoking, or enticing men is forbidden for women to do, whether it be by her clothing, jewelry, make-up, or mannerism.

Yet, if a woman wears excessive or extraordinary jewelry in public, then it would be forbidden. The consensus of the scholars is that a woman may wear basic jewelry such as her wedding ring and an ordinary watch. Nose rings, bracelets, charms, and necklaces should not be displayed in public.

Fatma: What are the rules regarding men’s attire?

Sayyid: Interestingly, before the regulation of women covering, Allah addressed the men. “Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them” (24:30). Rules of modesty are equally applicable to men. When men are aware that their body structure has become a form of attraction for women, then they must adhere to the spirit of the verse.

Fatma: But a man’s form of dress is not defined by boundaries like that of a woman. Why?

Sayyid: Men do, in fact, have regulations concerning their attire. They do have a limit on covering themselves when among women. They must be covered from the chest to below the knees. The clothing is not to resemble that of women's attire. A man’s clothes cannot be tight, revealing, or enticing. Scholars add that, if a man becomes aware that his body is attracting women, then he must cover. It becomes incumbent upon him to dress properly. It is forbidden for men to wear silk and gold, as well.

Fatma: Why was the Qur’an silent on the dress regulations for men?

Sayyid: Traditionally, in the pre-Islamic era, men in that society did cover while, generally, women did not. When Islam advanced, it made changes in areas that needed reform. During that era, men were already dressed appropriately; hence, the Qur’an was not going to direct a particular issue when it was already being practiced. However, the traditions of the Prophet still mention the criteria regarding men’s apparel.

Fatma: But most Muslim men do not recognize that they are obligated in any way to cover.

.Sayyid: This is because they are unaware of the laws and practices of Islam