

Veiled Women: Hijab, Religion, and Cultural Practice

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Women's fashion is a major business that fuels the world economy. Each year women spend thousands of dollars to stay in fashion. In the Middle East and other Islamic countries the veil, or hijab, which covers the head, body, or face, is a predominant feature of women's clothing.¹ It is not, however, a simple fashion accessory, but is a representation of religion and culture. Many people outside of Islam have come to believe that Muslim women are being forced into wearing veils by a predominantly patriarchal society; women who wear the hijab argue that it is their choice to do so. From the origins of veiling, the different styles, and how it is viewed in today's world we can get a better understanding of what the veil means to Islamic societies.

Islam was not the first culture to practice veiling their women. Veiling practices started long before the Islamic prophet Muhammad was born. Societies like the Byzantines, Sassanids, and other cultures in Near and Middle East practiced veiling.² There is even some evidence that indicates that two clans in southwestern Arabia practiced veiling in pre-Islamic times, the Banū Ismā'īl and Banū Qaḥṭān. Veiling was a sign of a women's social status within those societies. In Mesopotamia, the veil was a sign of a woman's high status and respectability. Women wore the veil to distinguish

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¹ "Hijab," In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito, Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e839> (accessed 5-Dec-2013).

² Fadwa El Guindi and Sherifa Zuhur, "Hijāb," In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0306> (accessed 5-Dec-2013).

themselves from slaves and unchaste women.³ In some ancient legal traditions, such as in Assyrian law, unchaste or unclean women, such as harlots and slaves, were prohibited from veiling themselves. If they were caught illegally veiling, they were liable to severe penalties.⁴ The practice of veiling spread throughout the ancient world the same way that many other ideas traveled from place to place during this time: invasion.

When one culture invades another culture there is often some fusion in the cultural practices of the people. As the Greek, Persian, and Mesopotamian empires mixed with the Semitic peoples of the Middle East, there appeared a subsequent effect that these cultures adopted the practice of veiling women.⁵ The adoption of veiling by the Semitic people is evidenced in several biblical verses⁶: “When Rebekah looked up and saw Isaac...So Rebekah covered her face with her veil;”⁷ Also, “On that day of judgment the Lord will strip away everything that makes her beautiful; ornaments...necklaces, earrings, bracelets and veils.”⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:3-7 provides the most evidence for the early Christian veiling practice:

But there is one thing I want you to know. The head of every man is Christ, the head of women is man, and the head of Christ is God. A man dishonors Christ if he covers his head while praying or prophesying. But a woman dishonors Christ if she prays or prophesies without a covering on her head, for this is the same as shaving her head. Yes, if she refuses to wear a head covering, she should cut off all her hair! But since it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut or her head shaved, she should wear a covering. A man should not wear anything on his head when worshiping, for a man is made in God’s image and reflects God’s glory. And a woman reflects man’s glory.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Genesis 24:65

⁸ Isaiah 3:18-19

These verses show the importance that early Jews and Christians placed on covering a woman's head. A woman who did not veil herself would dishonor herself and Christ; she would also dishonor her husband or other male relatives, because a woman reflects man's glory and a man reflects God's glory.

During the time of Muhammad, veiling was not widespread; only his wives and upper-class women wore the veil as a symbol of their status.⁹ Muhammad had many enemies that were out to harm him or his family. In order to protect them, and other members of Muhammad's household, the women veiled themselves to conceal their identity from others.¹⁰ Verse 33:53 of the Qur'an is known as the hijab verse. It is believed that the revelation for this verse came down "after some wedding guests had overstayed their welcome at the nuptial celebration in Zaynab's house."¹¹

O Ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you...And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts.¹²

Before the hijab verse was taught, Muhammad's wives took part fully in the communal affairs of Medina.¹³ Other women of the community were not forced to veil.¹⁴ It was not until a generation later, after Muhammad's death that Islamic women started veiling themselves.¹⁵ It was no longer confined to the upper class.¹⁶

⁹ John L. Esposito, "Customs and Culture," In *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/acprof-9780199794133/acprof-9780199794133-div1-58> (accessed 11-Dec-2013).

¹⁰ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women In The Qur'an, Traditions, And Interpretation* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1994.), 132.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹² Qur'an 33:53

¹³ Stowasser, *Women In The Qur'an, Traditions, And Interpretation*, 91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁵ Guindi and Zuhur, "Hijab."

¹⁶ Esposito, "Customs and Culture."

Veiling became more widespread in Islam because the practice was supported by Qur'anic verse. None of the verses pertain to women's clothing, but instead hijab is referred to in a spatial partition or curtain form. Many of the other verses that talk about veiling, or hijab, do so by stressing the separation aspect of hijab.¹⁷ Veiling or hijab in the beginning of Islam was seen as a way to distinguish between two people or to keep them separated. Some examples are: the separating of God and mortals, "And in no way is it feasible for a mortal that Allah should speak to Him, except by revelation or from beyond a curtain, or that He should send a Messenger;"¹⁸ separating the righteous from wrongdoers, "And between the two there shall be a veil, and on the most elevated places there shall be men who know all by their marks;"¹⁹ separating unbelievers from believers, "And when you read the Qur'an, We make between you and the ones who do not believe in the Hereafter a screened curtain."²⁰ The practice of hijab also has an aspect of modesty more so than seclusion or separation. There are verses that point to the modesty aspect of hijab for both men and women and ask women to "hide their ornaments:"²¹

Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands ... or the children who have not attained knowledge of what is hidden of women; and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! so that you may be successful.²²

¹⁷ Guindi and Zuhur, "Hijāb."

¹⁸ Guindi and Zuhur, "Hijāb," and Qur'an 42:51.

¹⁹ Guindi and Zuhur, "Hijāb," and Qur'an 7:46.

²⁰ Guindi and Zuhur, "Hijāb," and Qur'an 17:45

²¹ Guindi and Zuhur, "Hijāb."

²² Qur'an 24:30-31.

Another verse that speaks about the modesty is, “O you Prophet, say to your spouses and your daughters and the women of believers, that they draw their outer garments closer to them; that will (make) it likelier that they will be recognized and so will not be hurt.”²³

The desirability of modesty is further stressed by referring to the contrasting concept of *tabarruj* (illicit display): “O ye wives of the Prophet! Ye are not like any other women. If ye keep your duty, then be not soft of speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease aspire, but utter customary speech. And stay in your houses. Bedizen not yourselves with the bedizement of the Time of Ignorance.” (33:32–33)²⁴

As one can see from these verses, concealing a woman’s body is presented as being for modesty or to protect her from harm: it is not to oppress or exclude women from the community, but for safety.

Al-tabbaruj, which means immodest show of a women’s body coalesced with teasing characteristics, was used in the pre-Islamic world, or the “days of ignorance,” to describe women’s public manners. While on the other hand, the term, *al-tahhajub*, means modesty in the way one dresses and in their manners. In Arabic, words are based on triconsonantal or quadrilateral roots, a set of three or four letters which denote a specific meaning. The words *tahhajub* and *hijab* come from the same root, *h-j-b*.²⁵ Any word in Arabic that has a root of *h-j-b* has a meaning that is related to separation, barriers or screens.²⁶ Today the *hijab* has become primarily a cultural and religious symbol associated with Islam.

Despite that common association with Islam, the *hijab* and practices associated with it vary. The examples below (in Figure 1²⁷) are illustrations of different veiling styles that are found all over the world. *Hijab* is not only synonymous with veiling, but is a style of

²³ Qur’an 33:59

²⁴ Guindi and Zuhur, “*Hijab*.”

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ Taylor Noakes, “The Differences in Muslim Coverings.jpg” web image, *GenderEyes*, <http://gendereyes.com/tag/honor/> (assessed 5-Dec-2013).

veiling as well, as seen in Figure 1. The hijab is the most common style, especially in the West. It is a square scarf that covers the head and neck, but leaves the face free.²⁸ The least common and most concealing is the burqa, which covers the whole face and body down to the feet, leaving just a mesh screen over the eyes.²⁹ The burqa has become associated with the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan. During their years in power, the Taliban ordered all women to wear the burqa. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, many Afghan women continued to wear the burqa, even though legal penalties for not wearing it were no longer in effect.³⁰ Once a custom has started it, it appears, it can often be hard to revert back to how society was before, especially when the practice causes no physical harm. Some Afghan women “believe it gives them freedom from being harassed by men.”³¹ The only Muslim country today that legally enforces the face veil is Saudi Arabia. The niqab is the style of veil found in Saudi Arabia, covering the face and the whole body like the burqa, but leaves an opening for the eyes.³² Where these different types of veiling can be found can give some insight to the society.

As stated before, the burqa can be found in Afghanistan; the niqab can be found in Saudi Arabia. The niqab is also worn in other countries, such as Yemen and southern Pakistan. Many women in Turkey and Europe wear the khimar, which is a headscarf and the mildest variety of hijab. The chador is often a light white, blue, or black blank which covers the entire body and head, but leaves the face open.; it is the traditional style for Iranian women. The al-amira is a modern form of the khimar, and is found in many of the same places. The shayla is a long rectangular scarf that is wrapped around the head. The shayla style is found throughout the Gulf

²⁸ BBC News. *In graphics: Muslim veils*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/05/europe_muslim_veils/html/1.stm (assessed 10-Dec-2013).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hadia Mubarak, "Burqa," In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World, Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e1100> (accessed 11-Dec-2013).

³¹ Ibid.

³² BBC News, *In graphics: Muslim veils*.

countries.³³ It is important to understand that these styles are not limited to the countries listed above, they can also be found in other countries as well. It is also important to understand that women are not limited to the style of veiling listed with their country. There are a variety of different veiling styles within many different countries (see figure 1). When traveling abroad, the form of veil that a woman is wearing may be indicative of their way of life.

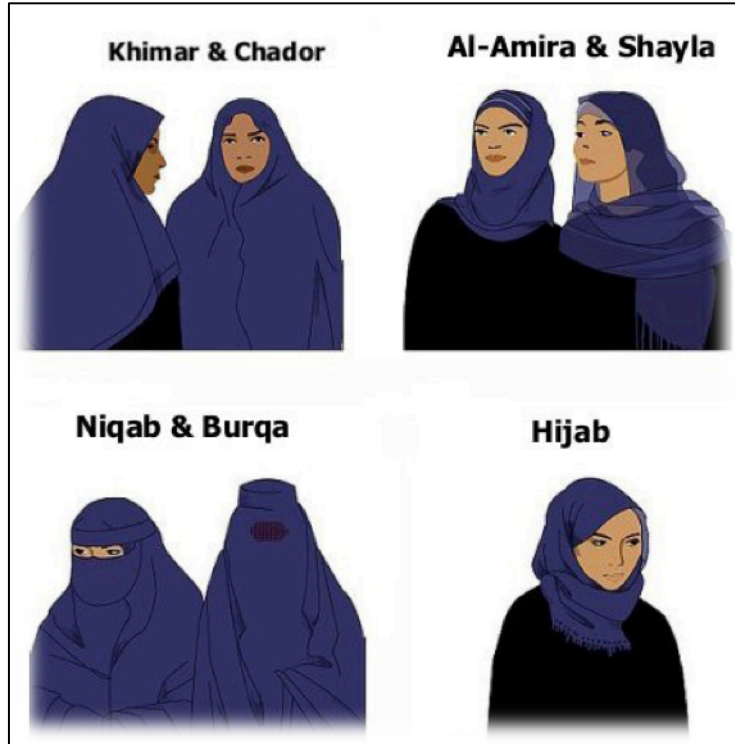


Figure 4

Sharia means “path” in Islam, and it is also a synonym for Islamic law. Islamic law is created by man and is not the law of

³³ K. Zh. Monkebayeva, N. Zh. Baitenova, and A. A. Mustafayeva, "History of Appearance and Distribution of Hija,." *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*, 2012: 1405-1408.

God.³⁴ However, man used the Qur'an as a path to seek out what God is saying and create guidelines based on God's words. Thus, sharia law means laws or regulations that guide someone to the path of God. When Muhammad was alive he inferred the divine laws for the Muslim society. After his death, it fell to the educated scholars and jurists to interpret God's law. In the ninth and tenth century, jurists developed a system that became known as Islamic jurisprudence or fiqh.³⁵ Four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence emerged by the end of the eleventh century: Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanafi Hanbali. The jurists of these four law schools created a moral scale by which to classify all Islamic actions. In Islamic law, each action is assigned one of the five categories of the moral scale: mandatory, recommend but not required, neither recommended nor mandatory, reprehensible and prohibited or sinful. Each school of fiqh developed their own view on what was expected of women with regard to dress. "Muslim women's dress was understood to be part of Islamic etiquette and not of required Islamic behaviors."³⁶ Within the Maliki and the Hanafi schools, jurists believe that a woman's entire body, except for the face and hands need to be covered. On the other hand, those in the Hanbali and Shafi'i schools, which are more conservative, require Muslim women to cover their entire body, including their face and hands. Muslims are expected to pursue the practices, such as the veiling practice, of the resident Muslim majority where they live. The practices are characterized by the particular school of law that area studies.³⁷ Based on this information, and the previous information about where certain styles of veiling are found we can infer that Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and southern Pakistan, where many of the women wear the niqab or the burqa, are likely to follow the Hanbali or Shafi'i schools. In Turkey, Iran, and Europe, where women often wear the style of hijab that leave the face open, they

³⁴ "Islamic Jurisprudence & Law," *Reorienting the Veil*, <http://veil.unc.edu/religions/islam/law/> (accessed 10-Dec-2013). "Fiqh" means "understanding in Arabic.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

are likely to follow the Maliki or Hanafi schools of law. But this is not always the case. Using the style of veiling as an indicator, in Afghanistan where the burqa is the main style of hijab, it was inferred that they would follow the Hanbali or Shafi'i schools of law. However, in Afghanistan they follow the Hanafi school of law.³⁸ The way the rest of the world views the veil has also drastically changed over time.

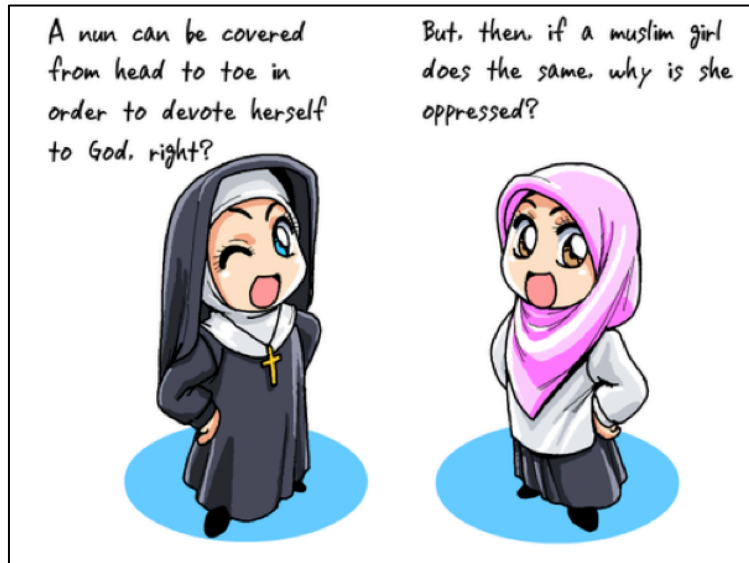


Figure 2

The way Americans and others view Muslims dramatically changed on September 11, 2001. Worldwide, Islam was recast as a terrorist-filled group. After 9/11 Muslim women who wore the hijab became target of religious and racial discrimination. Figure 2 illustrates the question of why veiled women of one religion were not being persecuted while women in Islam were. This is a valid point. Women in the Catholic religion have been wearing veils for centuries and society finds nothing wrong with this, but when a woman is in a hijab, she becomes a terrorist. As an anxious and angry public called for more security:

³⁸ Ibid.

The most visible target was the "marked" Muslim woman wearing a headscarf. Suddenly, her headscarf no longer evoked feelings of pity or confusion, but hatred and suspicion. She found herself a target of racial violence in public places and workplace discrimination. She feared for the safety of her school-aged children whose teachers and fellow students harbored anti-Muslim sentiment arising from stereotyping in the media. She questioned whether she should give up her religious right to wear the headscarf to preserve her and her families' safety as well as retain employment needed to financially support her household. And yet she had few organizations she could turn to in defense of her rights at the intersection of four identities: a Muslim, a woman, a racial or ethnic minority, and usually an immigrant.³⁹

Muslim women face what is known as "intersectional discrimination" because they face more than one factor when it comes to discrimination. In many countries, including some Islamic countries, there are bans now on all veils or just certain kind of veils. In Turkey, there is a ban on wearing any kind of veil in a university, whether it is private or public, and in government buildings. Turkey, a predominately Muslim community, is fighting back against the ban. About sixty three percent of Turkish women cover their heads in public.⁴⁰ A more notable uproar is taking place in France, where about five millions Muslims live. In 2004, France placed a ban on religious symbols and apparel in public schools.⁴¹ In most of the countries where bans have been placed women are pushing back and protesting against these bans.

³⁹ Sahar Aziz, "Terrorism and the Muslim "Veil," Oxford Islamic Studies online, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/Public/focus/essay1009_terrorism_and_the_muslim_veil.html (Accessed 11-Dec-2013).

⁴⁰ Sarah Rainsford, "Headscarf issue challenges Turkey," *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6122010.stm> (Accessed 11-Dec-2013).

⁴¹ Guindi and Zuhur, "Hijab."

As such, headscarved [sic] Muslim women have touted their freedom to move about easily in their societies without the harrowing eye of men seeking to sexualize their bodies. They have also boasted feeling self-respect and dignity when wearing the headscarf in accordance with their personal moral beliefs. Indeed, the proliferation of the headscarf in countries like Egypt have transformed it into a fashion item whose color and texture matched young women's trendy clothing and glamorous makeup.⁴²

These women are not asking to be freed from the headscarves; they are asking to be freed from the stereotypes placed on them because of the religion they follow.

The hijab's history, then, is a complex one, influenced by the intersection of religion and culture over time. While some women no doubt veil themselves because pressure put on them by society, others do so by choice for many reasons. The veil appears on the surface to be a simple thing. That simplicity is deceiving, as the hijab represents the beliefs and practices of those who wear it or choose not to, and the understandings and misunderstandings of those who observe it being worn. Its complexity lies behind the veil.

⁴² Aziz, "Terrorism and the Muslim "Veil,""