

5 Veiling

Many Muslim women remain covered in public—only their faces show. This provides the most visible trait Westerners know of Muslim women. Fabric folds hide them. My friend used to call these cloth coverings “personal mini-tents”. Traditional Muslims often use the term *hijab*. “Veiling” provides a more generic word.

A veil or *hijab* always covers the hair and sometimes part or all of the face. When I made Hajj (the Muslim pilgrimage), I traveled in a group with a young woman whose veil covered her from head to toe. I only once caught a glimpse of the woman within. The light hit her veil at the perfect angle and it astonished me to see a real person there. I have often wondered if looking out through such a veil adds the same unreal sense to the world.

Veiling formed a stumbling block for me when I first explored Islam. I read my Quran for quite awhile before deciding to formally become a Muslim. My distaste for veiling provided one of the main reasons for this delay.

Even before I really became Muslim I tried covering all but my face and hands. I felt conspicuous and I found myself most uncomfortable in public places. I remember walking down the street hoping I would not meet anyone who recognized me. God spared me the agony of trying to explain my clothing. However, I never wanted to be seen in public like that again.

Embarrassment of my dress didn't cause the only problem. Having to worry about tripping over yards of billowing cloth as I tried to learn the movements of the Muslim Contact Prayer (or *Salat*) left me unable to concentrate on the prayer itself.

Had I only known, the Quran makes dressing in a normal modest fashion quite easy. The following verse covers almost all the elements of Quranic dress:

And tell the believing women to subdue their eyes, and maintain their chastity. They shall not reveal any parts of their bodies, except that which is necessary. They shall cover their chests, and shall not relax this code in the presence of other than their husbands, their fathers, the fathers of their husbands, their sons, the sons of their husbands, their brothers.... They shall not strike their feet when they walk in order to shake and reveal certain details of their bodies....
(Quran: The Final Testament 24:31)

Modesty forms the focus in this verse. Muslim women should not dress to be seductive and sexually alluring.

Let me stop for a moment and clarify the translation of the above verses. Most translators have translated the Arabic word “*khomoorehenna*”, which comes from the root word “*khimar*”, as “veil”. So they understand the verse to mean a woman should cover her chest with the veil she wears over her hair. This understanding comes from a cultural interpretation. “*Khimar*” simply means a cover—a bed cover, a tablecloth, etc. Referring to clothing it can apply to a dress, a blouse or a veil. Because of the cultural norm of veiling, people assume the chest should be covered with the head veil.

The Quranic verses leave a great deal of leeway for a woman to find her own comfort zone, though she should not expose something that should be hidden. If she finds it more comfortable to wear a scarf or a veil then she may do so. But the Quran does not require it. The only things required in the above verse are modesty, that she does not reveal more than necessary, and that her chest remains covered.

The definition of exactly what modesty means differs in each culture. To me walking down most Western streets in full *hijab* draws attention to you and so actually defeats the purpose of the *hijab*. Likewise, dressing as you would in the United States would not be covered enough in most of the Muslim world. Once again we confront cultural differences.

For me the following recommendation to elderly women highlights we should be dressing modestly, not necessarily veiling:

The elderly women who do not expect to get married commit nothing wrong by relaxing their dress code, provided they do not reveal too much of their bodies. To maintain modesty is better for them....
(Quran: The Final Testament 24:60)

Surely God would have at least mentioned it here if He required women to cover their hair. Instead God just tells these women not to “*reveal too much of their bodies*”.

The Arabic word “*hijab*” basically translates as “barrier” and does occur in the Quran several times. It never refers to women’s veiling.

If the Quran does not require veiling where did it come from? I’ve read a number of differing theories on its origin. In the New Testament Paul argues women should wear a veil during worship:

...Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered brings shame upon her head.... Indeed, if a woman will not wear a veil, she ought to cut off her hair. If it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, it is clear that she ought to wear a veil.
(1 Corinthians 11:5-6 - The New American Bible, 1970)

No one knows whether the requirement to veil originated with this Christian requirement or came from some other source. It does seem fairly certain it did not originate with the Arabs. We know Muhammad came into the world as a member of the Quraish tribe, one of the nomadic tribes of the Bedouin Arabs. Bedouin women did not then and do not now always veil themselves. The next Quranic verse shows women did not always veil or live shut away at the time of the prophet Muhammad:

Beyond the categories described to you, you are enjoined from marrying any other women, nor can you substitute a new wife (from the prohibited categories), no matter how much you admire their beauty.
(Quran: The Final Testament 33:52)

How could Muhammad admire the beauty of a woman he never saw because she wore severe *hijab* or lived in a separate area from the men and never interacted with them?

Please do not misunderstand me, I have no objection to others veiling if they so desire. However since the Quran does not require that I veil, I prefer while in Western society to dress in an Islamic manner more acceptable to that society. If I lived in Saudi Arabia the situation would be very different because of the different culture and its understanding of modesty.

You can find another important commandment in the Quran on the way women should dress in 33:59. Here God tells women to lengthen their garments. How long do you have to lengthen them? I believe what you see around you and your own comfort level, your age, the activity and culture all determine that. Each one of us has her individual responsibility to God and each must decide for herself what He indicates in the following verse:

O prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and the wives of the believers that they shall lengthen their garments. Thus, they will be recognized (as righteous women) and avoid being insulted....
(Quran: The Final Testament 33:59)

Quranic dress has the same function as all modest dress: it helps keep us out of uncomfortable or compromising situations.

The Muslim men I know who follow the Quran alone also dress modestly. (Please see 24:30.) It only makes sense; not inviting trouble keeps everyone out of it.

Sometimes wearing long clothing becomes difficult or even dangerous. Swimming in long flowing clothes becomes almost impossible and unsafe. I personally found wearing a dark pair of cotton pajamas over a swimsuit worked well as protection from the sun and remaining modest. I know other sisters who wear shorts or modest swimsuits.

Also, it seems unfair to keep young women from participating in physical education classes and sports because they must wear gym suits. In this case the intention seems important; no one wears those suits to look alluring.

Dressing modestly does not require us to appear dowdy. Some of the Muslim sisters I have met from India, Egypt, and Iran, for example, dress more beautifully than any other women I have ever seen. Their dress remains totally modest and they have class and grace that far outshines most fashion models.

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I cannot understand the zeal with which some Muslim societies enforce veiling. Men who never pray or fast become furious on seeing a woman who does not veil. It became a symbol to them, but a symbol of what? For such people the Quran does not provide guidance because culture and tradition veil this amazing book. This causes oppression in the name of religion. The following story shares a bone chilling reality for those of us who have always lived in freedom. The events in this story happened during the time shortly after the Iranian revolution of 1979.

The Quran Veiled

I was born and raised in a Muslim family in Iran. My father always encouraged me to have a higher education, but he never imposed religion on me. I learned how to read the Quran in Arabic in grade school, but we didn't actually know the Arabic language because our native language in Iran is Farsi. The teachers in the schools told us that reading the Quran in Arabic would give us more credit with God.

The Quran played a very dominant role in Iranian culture during my upbringing in Iran. I would hear the Quran recited in Arabic during different occasions. The Quran was usually recited at funerals or after the death of an individual. The Quran would also be recited throughout the month of Ramadan. The Persian New Year was an event at which the Quran would be placed on a table along with other ceremonial items representing the New Year to bless the upcoming year. I had witnessed and participated in the custom by which when someone is leaving to go on a trip a Quran would be held above their heads and the traveler would walk under it to be blessed for a safe trip. This tradition was so important that the main archway to the city of Shiraz has a giant Quran on top of it so that as the cars pass underneath it the passengers will be blessed.

About 25 years ago, my husband and I moved to the United States of America. A couple of years after we moved to the USA, the revolution in Iran broke out and then the Islamic Government took control of the country. At first it seemed that the people of Iran were very happy under the new Islamic Government. But within a few months our friends and family in Iran were telling us about awful events that were happening under the new government. Some of the ignorant religious governmental leaders were doing unspeakable crimes in the name of Islam like stoning women for adultery.

In one tragic case, a government soldier killed a young 17 year old in front of her mother in the streets of Tehran. The two were going shopping when they decided that they wanted to change their head covers to match their long dresses. So they both went into a telephone booth so nobody could see them switching their covers. This is because during that time, Islamic clergy were enforcing a law which forbade women to show their hair in public. Unfortunately, as they were changing their head covers, a young soldier saw them, became very angry, and began yelling at them. The daughter, being fed up with the oppression, came out of the telephone booth without her cover on her head and said to the soldier, "So what if my hair shows?" The young man became so furious that he brought his gun out and pointed it at the daughter's head. The mother jumped in front of her daughter and asked for him to have mercy on her young daughter. But he didn't care and he pushed aside the mother and killed the daughter.

With so many negative and tragic incidents happening in the name of Islam, I started to question many things. I asked myself, "Are these the laws of God? Are they actually in the Quran?" This question was actually echoed by many Muslims in Iran who said, "If this is Islam, we don't want to be Muslim."

—Patty, *Iran & U.S.A.*

[*Editor's note:* Patty's story does not end here. Please see the end of Chapter 17 for the conclusion.]

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Sisters Senobar and Naima wrote a good article in Masjid Tucson's monthly newsletter (the Submitter's Perspective). They titled it "Submitters' Dress". They discuss the meaning of Hijab, which occurs six times in the Quran. Here is what they wrote about those occurrences:

1. The dwellers of paradise will call the dwellers of hell: "we have found our Lord's promise to be the truth, have you found your Lord's promise to be the truth?" They will say, "yes." An announcer between them will announce, "God's condemnation has befallen the transgressors; ...who repel from the path of God and strive to make it crooked, and with regard to the hereafter, they are disbelievers." ...A barrier (hijab) separates them, while the purgatory is occupied by people who recognize each side by their looks, They will call the dwellers of paradise, "peace be upon you." They did not enter (paradise) through wishful thinking [7:44-46].

God barred the disbelievers from heaven. Therefore the barrier (hijab) here is spiritual as well as physical.

2. When you read the Quran, we place between you and those who do not believe in the hereafter an invisible barrier (hijab) [17:45].

3. Mention in the scripture Mary, she isolated herself from her family, into an eastern location. ...While a barrier (hijab) separated her from them, we sent to her our Spirit. He went to her in the form of a human being [19:16-17].

Mary isolated herself from her family and relocated while a "barrier" (hijab) separated her, spiritually and physically, from them. At that time God sent Gabriel to her.

4. A scripture whose verses provide the complete details, in an Arabic Quran, for people who know. ... A bearer of good news, as well as a warner. However, most of them turn away; they do not hear. ...They said, "our minds are made up, our ears are deaf to your message, and a barrier (hijab) separates us from you. Do what you want and so will we" [41:3-5].

Because they put on themselves a physical barrier of refusing God's message, God placed a spiritual barrier on them, making them deaf to the message.

5. No human being can communicate with God except through inspiration, from behind a barrier (hijab), or by sending a messenger through whom He reveals what He wills.... [42:51].

6. O you who believe, do not enter the prophet's homes unless you are given permission to eat, nor shall you force such an invitation in any manner. If you are invited, you may enter. When you finish eating, you shall leave; do not engage him in lengthy conversations. This used to hurt the prophet, and he was too shy to tell you. But God does not shy away from the truth. If you ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a barrier (hijab). This is purer for your hearts and their hearts.... [33:53].

The prophet's wives, while at home and relaxing, were not to be disturbed by men during their private times. God made their lives easier by commanding the men to speak to them, if at home, from behind a barrier (hijab). Some "Muslim" scholars have interpreted this to mean that only from outside walls could a man communicate with the prophet's wives. They also understood from the same verse that the prophet's wives never left home. They, therefore, wrongly concluded that their wives too must stay at home.

The Arabic word for walls in the Quran is "al hujrat" not hijab. "*As for those who call on you (Muhammad) from outside the walls (al hujrat), most of them do not understand*" [49:4]. If women were supposed to stay home all the time, there would not have been a need for commandments concerning the dress code for them.

—*Senobar, Iran & Naima, Morocco*

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In this chapter, the discussion has been on women wearing a physical veil on their heads. But I have found that at times God provides a different kind of "veiling"—one that protects me, as many women feel protected by their physical veils. My veiling seems to act as a spiritual guard around me so that it almost seems to hide me from evil or stops me from doing something wrong.

This has happened many times now. Let me give you a recent example. I have been working with others on a small publication on *Medium*, a major Internet blog. In a welcoming post, we stated our goal was to provide a way for other Muslims to share their opinions in a loving manner and to strengthen and unite the community by focusing on the Quran as our unifying factor.

At this point, I am doing most of the editing because I have the most time to do so. I had been working with a new writer to our publication on a post she had submitted to us for *The Heart of Quran*, our publication. Her native language is not English, and the post needed extensive editing. I got so caught up in trying to make it readable that I was not paying close enough attention to what she said, much of which went against God's teachings in the Quran. Thankfully, God had one of the other editors read her post as I was still editing it and he caught the issues. As a result, we modified our submission guidelines to deal with those issues and she decided to publish her post elsewhere.

If I had published that story, which focuses on many things that do not match what God tells us in the Quran, I would have been guilty of going against His scripture like that sister because of what God tells us:

Whoever mediates a good deed receives a share of the credit thereof, and whoever mediates an evil work, incurs a share thereof. God controls all things.
(Quran: The Final Testament 4:85)

I have spoken with several others who have also experienced this kind of protection, thus I am not at all unique or special in this. In fact, we can see an example in

Joseph's story. When his master's wife wanted to seduce him, God protected him in a similar manner (Verses 12:23-29).

I share this here because many women who chose to wear a veil feel that it protects them. Since I live in a society where veiling is not the norm I feel more protected by God's invisible veiling. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, each woman must listen to her own heart in this matter.