

Hijab, The Muslim Women's Dress, Islamic Or Cultural?

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Understanding what Hijab is through the Qur'an, Ahadith (traditions) and Muslim culture.

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Introduction

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

الحمد لله رب العالمين و الصلاة و السلام على محمد و آله الطاهرين

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Universe.

May Allah shower His blessings upon

Prophet Muhammad and his Progeny.

Islam is a world religion; its presence can be felt all over the world through conversion or migration.

However, the most visible symbol of Islam's presence in the West is the *hijab* – the head-dress used by a Muslim woman to cover her head. In the Greater Toronto Area, you can see Muslim women in *hijab* at schools, in colleges and universities, in the workplace, in malls, and on the streets.

Being the most obvious symbol of Islam's presence, it is also the easiest target for harassment against Muslims. Whenever a racist politician or the media or any hate group attacks Islam, the very first target

is the Muslim woman's *hijab*. Also, some so-called experts on Islam and the Middle East assume a patronizing attitude and try to teach Muslims that *hijab* is not a religious requirement in Islam, saying it is more a cultural issue used by Muslim men to oppress the women. Some self-loathing Muslim journalists, politicians and intellectuals also jump on that back wagon to prove themselves as “progressive” and “liberated”.

Is *hijab* really a cultural tradition of the Persians or the Turks that was adopted by the Arabs who implanted it into Islam? Or is there a religious basis in the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet for *hijab*?

The Term Hijab

The term “*hijab*—الحجاب” literally means a cover, curtain or screen. It is not a technical term used in Islamic jurisprudence for the dress code of women. The term used in Islamic jurisprudence that denotes the conduct of unrelated men and women towards one another, and their dress code, is “*satr* or *satir*—الستر، الساتر”.

In the last two decades however, the Muslims in the west, as well as the media, use the term “*hijab*” to define the headdress and the overall clothing of Muslim women.

It is in this latter meaning —headdress as well as the overall clothing— that we have used the term “*hijab*” in this article.

Studying the Qur'an

The holy book of the Muslims is the Qur'an; it is the revelation of Almighty Allah upon Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny). The 114 chapters of the Qur'an were revealed in a piece-meal form in around twenty-two years; some of the verses were revealed in Mecca while others were revealed in Medina. For Muslims, the Qur'an is the first and the foremost source of Islamic laws and values. It is considered the final message of God for mankind, and it is to be followed at all times and in all places until the end of this world.

“These days we are often told that we must keep up with the times,” writes Dr. Nasr, a prominent Muslim scholar who currently teaches Islam at the George Washington University in D.C. “Rarely does one ask what have the ‘times’ to keep up with. For men who have lost the vision of a reality which transcends time, who are caught completely in the mesh of our time and space and who have been affected by the historicism prevalent in modern European philosophy, it is difficult to imagine the validity of a truth that does not conform to their immediate external environment.

Islam, however, is based on the principle that truth transcends history and time. Divine Law is an objective transcendent reality, by which man and his actions are judged, not vice versa.

What are called the ‘times’ today are to a large extent a set of problems and difficulties created by man’s ignorance of his own real nature and his stubborn determination to ‘live by bread alone’. To attempt to shape the Divine Law to the ‘times’ is therefore no less than spiritual suicide because it removes the very criteria by which the real value of human life and action can be objectively judged and thus surrenders man to the most infernal impulses of his lower nature. To say the least, the very manner of approaching the problem of Islamic Law and religion in general by trying to make them conform to the ‘times’ is to misunderstand the whole perspective and spirit of Islam.”¹

* * * * *

Some Muslim sisters have started incorporating Western feminist ideology in studying the Qur’an; they believe that *hijab* and other related issues have been interpreted from almost exclusively male perspective. Some of them go to the extent of saying that since all Prophets and Messengers were men, and so the laws are also biased towards men.

The problem with this trend of thought is that there is no evidence to support it. It is baseless to accuse the Prophet (S), the Imams of Ahlul Bayt (‘a), and even the jurists —who are only considered an authority if they are just and upright in character— of having a male bias in interpretation of the divine laws. Are we going to have now a gender-based interpretation of the Qur’an where the men and the women will study the holy Book differently? The Qur’an clearly says,

وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوْا مَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بِهِ بَعْضُكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ ۚ لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا اكْتَسَبُوا وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا اكْتَسَبْنَ وَاسْأَلُوا اللَّهَ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا

“And do not covet that by which Allah has made some of you excel others; men shall have the benefit of what they earn and women shall have the benefit of what they earn; and ask Allah of His grace; surely Allah knows all things.” (4:32).

* * * * *

Such Muslim “feminists” are also of the opinion that a woman has a right to interpret Qur’an according to *her own* understanding, and that she has the right to choose how she interprets her dress code. In their discussion, the famous verse of Surah Al-Baqarah is brought as evidence:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

“There is no compulsion in the religion...” (2:256).

First of all, the verse 2:256 is not giving the choice for a Muslim to do whatever he or she likes. “Muslim” means someone who submits to God’s commandments. To say that a person can be a “Muslim” and still have “choice in everything” is a true oxymoron. Secondly, such brothers and sisters conveniently ignore the context of that verse. The verse is talking about the choice of religion before coming into Islam—submission to the will of God. It means that no one can be forced to become a Muslim.

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالطَّاغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدِ اسْتَمْسَكَ بِالْعُرْوَةِ الْوُثْقَىٰ لَا انْفِصَامَ لَهَا وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

“There is no compulsion in the religion; truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error; therefore, whoever disbelieves in the Shaytan and believes in Allah, he indeed has got hold onto the firmest rope which shall not break off; and Allah is Hearing, Knowing.” (2:256).

The verse is clearly talking about rejecting the Shaytan and believing in Allah. It does not mean that a Muslim has a choice in whatever he or she wants to do.

Once a person has submitted to God, there is no choice left for him or her in the matters already decided by Allah and His Messenger. See the following verse that makes the issue of obedience clear for both men as well as women:

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ وَلَا مُؤْمِنَةٍ إِذَا قَضَىٰ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ أَمْرًا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَعْصِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا مُّبِينًا

“And it behoves not a believing man and a believing woman that they should have any choice in their matter when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter; and whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he [or she] surely strays off a manifest straying.” (33:36).

And so the Qur’an is for all: man and woman, young and old, white and black, Arab and non-Arab, easterner and westerner; but it has to be studied on its own terms without imposing the personal likes or dislikes upon it and without strait-jacketing it into this or that ‘ism’.

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: SUNY, 1981) p. 26.

The Qur’an and Hijab

Islam has strongly emphasized the concept of decency and modesty in the interaction between members of the opposite sex. Dress code is part of that overall teaching. There are two verses in the

Qur'an in which Almighty Allah talks about the issue of decency and *hijab* as defined earlier.

The First Verse

In Chapter 24, known as an-Nur (the Light), in verse 30, Allah commands Prophet Muhammad as follows:

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ، ذَلِكَ أَزْكَى لَهُمْ

“Say to the believing men that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them.”(24:30).

This is a command to Muslim **men** that they should not lustfully look at women (other than their own wives); and in order to prevent any possibility of temptation, they are required to cast their glances downwards. This is known as “*hijab* of the eyes”.

Then in the next verse, Allah commands the Prophet to address the **women**:

...قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ

“Say to the believing women that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste)...” (24:31).

This is a similar command as given to the men in the previous verse regarding “*hijab* of the eyes”.

This *hijab* of eyes is similar to the teaching of Jesus where he says, “You have heard that it was said by them of old time, you shall not commit adultery. But I say unto you, That whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.”¹ So if you see a Muslim casting his/her eyes downwards when he/she is talking to a member of opposite sex, this should not be considered as rude or an indication of lack of confidence — he/she is just abiding by the Qur’anic as well as Biblical teaching.

* * * * *

After “*hijab* of the eyes” came the order describing the **dress code** for women:

...وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَى جُيُوبِهِنَّ

“...and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms...” (24:31).

There are two issues about this sentence.

(1) What Is The Meaning Of “Khumur” Used In This Verse?

Khumur خُمُر is plural of *khimar* خِمَار , the veil covering the head. See any Arabic dictionary like *Lisanu 'l-'Arab*, *Majma'u 'l-Bahrayn* or *al-Munjid*.

Al-Munjid, which is the most popular dictionary in the Arab world, defines *al-khimar* as “something with which a woman conceals her head — ما تغطى به المرأة رأسها .” Fakhru 'd-Din al-Turayhi in *Majma'u 'l-Bahrayn* (which is a dictionary of Qur'anic and hadith terms) defines *al-khimar* as “scarf, and it is known as such because the head is covered with it.”²

So the word *khimar*, by definition, means a piece of cloth that covers the head.

(2) Then What Does The Clause “Placing The Khumur Over The Bosoms” Mean?

According to the commentators of the Qur'an, the women of Medina in the pre-Islamic era used to put their *khumur* over the head with the two ends tucked behind and tied at the back of the neck, in the process exposing their ears and neck. By saying that, “place the *khumur* over the bosoms,” Almighty Allah ordered the women to let the two ends of their headgear extend onto their bosoms so that they conceal their ears, the neck, and the upper part of the bosom also.³

This is confirmed by the way the Muslim women of the Prophet's era understood this commandment of Almighty Allah. The Sunni sources quote Ummu 'l-mu'minin 'A'isha, the Prophet's wife, as follows: “I have not seen women better than those of al-Ansar (the inhabitants of Medina): when this verse was revealed, all of them got hold of their aprons, tore them apart, and used them to cover their heads...”⁴

The meaning of *khimar* and the context in which the verse was revealed clearly talks about concealing the head and then using the loose ends of the scarf to conceal the neck and the bosom. It is absurd to believe that the Qur'an would use the word *khimar* (which, by definition, means a cloth that covers the head) only to conceal the bosom with the exclusion of the head! It would be like saying to put on your shirt only around the belly or the waist without covering the chest!

Finally the verse goes on to give the list of the *mahram* – male family members in whose presence the *hijab* is not required, such as the husband, the father, the father-in-law, the son(s), and others.

The Second Verse

In Chapter 33 known as al-Ahzab, verse 59, Allah gives the following command to Prophet Muhammad:

...يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ، قُلْ لَأَزْوَاجِكُمْ وَبَنَاتِكُمْ وَنِسَاءَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلَابِيبِهِنَّ

“O Prophet! Say to your wives, your daughters, and the women of the believers that: they should let down upon themselves their jalabib.” (33:59).

What Is The Meaning Of “Jalabib”?

Jalabib جَلَابِيبُ is the plural of *jilbab* جِلْبَابٌ, which means a loose outer garment. See any Arabic dictionary like *Lisanu 'l-'Arab*, *Majma'u 'l-Bahrayn* or *al-Munjid*.

Al-Munjid, for instance, defines *jilbab* as “the shirt or a wide dress—القميص أو الثوب الواسع.” While al-Turayhi, in *Majma'u 'l-Bahrayn*, defines it as “a wide dress, wider than the scarf and shorter than a robe, that a woman puts upon her head and lets it down on her bosom...”⁵

This means that the Islamic dress code for women does not only consist of a scarf that covers the head, the neck and the bosom; it also includes the overall dress that should be long and loose.

So, for instance, the combination of a tight, short sweater with tight-fitting jeans with a scarf over the head does not fulfill the requirements of the Islamic dress code.

¹. The Gospel of Matthew, chap. 5, verses 27–28.

². *Al-Munjid* (Beirut: Daru 'l-Mashriq, 1986) p. 195; at-Turayhi, *Majma'u 'l-Bahrayn*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Daftar Nashr, 1408 AH) p. 700. See at-Tusi, at-Tibyan, vol. 7 (Qum: Maktabatu 'l-'Ilam al-Islami, 1409 AH) p. 428; at-Tabrasi, *Majma'u 'l-Bayan*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dar Ihya' 'l-Turathi 'l-'Arabi, 1379AH) p. 138; also see the famous Sunni commentator, Fakhru 'd-Din ar-Razi, at-Tafsiru 'l-Kabir, vol. 23 (Beirut: Daru 'l-Kutubi 'l-'Ilmiyya, 1990) p. 179–180. Even the Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Languages Services, 1976) defines al-khimar as “veil covering head and face of a woman.” (p. 261) No one has excluded the covering of the head from definition of “al-khimar”.

³. Ar-Razi, at-Tafsiru 'l-Kabir, vol. 23, p. 179, and other famous commentaries and collections of hadith such as at-Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, vol. 15 (Tehran: Daru 'l-Kutub, 1397AH) p. 121; al-Kulayni, al-Furu' mina 'l-Kafi, vol. 5 (Tehran: Daru 'l-Kutub, 1367AH) p. 521. Also see the commentaries of al-Kashshaf, Ibn Kathir, at-Tabari, and al-Qurtubi.

⁴. Ibid, also see, al-Bukhari, Sahih (Arabic & English) vol. 6 (Beirut: Daru 'l-'Arabiyya) p. 267; Abu 'l-A'la Mawdudi, Tafhimu 'l-Qur'an, vol. 3 (Lahore: Idara-e Tarjuman-e Qur'an, 1994) p. 316.

⁵. Ibid. *al-Munjid*, p. 96; at-Turayhi, *Majma'u 'l-Bahrayn*, vol. 1, p. 384.

The Sunna and Hijab

The *sunna* —the sayings and examples of the Prophet Muhammad (S)— is the second most important source for Islamic laws. It is impossible to truly understand the Qur'an without studying the Prophet's life that provided the context in which the holy Book was revealed. Almighty Allah says,

بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالزُّبُرِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“And We have revealed to you (O Muhammad) the Reminder (i.e., the Qur’an) so that you may clarify to the people what has been revealed to them, and so that they may reflect.” (16:44).

“Sunna” is that “clarification” mentioned in this verse.

There is a tendency among the so-called progressive and liberated Muslims to claim that they only follow the Qur’an and ignore the *sunna* of the Prophet. Responding to such Muslims, Drs. Murata and Chittick write, “We are perfectly aware that many contemporary Muslims are tired of what they consider outdated material: they would like to discard their intellectual heritage and replace it with truly ‘scientific’ endeavors, such as sociology. By claiming that the Islamic intellectual heritage is superfluous and that the Koran is sufficient, such people have surrendered to the spirit of the times. This is a far different enterprise than that pursued by the great authorities, who interpreted their present in the light of a grand tradition and who never fell prey to the up-to-date—that most obsolescent of all abstractions.”^{[1](#)}

From the Shi’i point of view, the authentic sayings of the Imams of Ahlul Bayt portray the true *sunna* of the Prophet and further clarify the meaning of the Qur’anic verses. The Prophet himself introduced the Ahlul Bayt as the twin of the Qur’an.^{[2](#)}

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The following two sayings from the Imams of the Ahlul Bayt on the issue of *hijab* are presented here as an example.

Al-Fudayl bin Yasar asked Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) about the forearms of a woman: whether they are included in the “beauty” as described by the Almighty when He says, “*and they should not display their beauty except for their husbands...*” The Imam replied, “Yes, and what is beneath the veil covering the head (*khimar*) is from the beauty [as mentioned in the verse], and also what is beneath the wristbands.”^{[3](#)} As one can clearly see in this authentic hadith, the Imam has exempted the face and the hands, but everything else has been counted as “*the beauty that should not be displayed except for their husbands...*”

Abu Nasr al-Bazinli quotes Imam ‘Ali as-Rida (‘a) as follows: “A woman does not have to cover her head in the presence of a boy who has not yet reached the age of puberty.”^{[4](#)} The implication of this statement is obvious that once a boy who is not related to a woman reaches the age of puberty, she has to cover her head in his presence.

Even the founders of the Sunni schools of law are unanimous in this view. According to the Maliki, the Hanafi, the Shafi’i, and the Hanbali views, the entire body of a woman is ‘*awrah* and therefore it should be covered with the exception of the face and the hands.^{[5](#)}

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The two verses discussed above put together clearly show that *hijab*, as a decent code of dress for

Muslim women, is part of the Qur'anic teachings. This is also confirmed by how the Prophet Muhammad (S) understood and implemented these verses among the Muslim women. This is further confirmed by how the Imams of the Ahlul Bayt ('a), and the Muslim scholars of the early generations of Islam understood the Qur'an.⁶

It is an understanding that has been continuously affirmed by Muslims for the last fourteen centuries. And, strangely, now we hear some so-called experts of Islam telling us that **hijab** has nothing to do with Islam, it is just a cultural issue and a matter of personal choice!

- ¹. Sachiko Murata & William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1995) p. xi.
- ². For more information on the sunna and also the connection between the Qur'an and the Ahlul Bayt, see my Introduction to Islamic Laws.
- ³. Al-Kulayni, *al-Furu' mina 'l-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 64.
- ⁴. As-Saduq, *Man la Yahduruhu 'l-Faqih*, vol. 2, p. 140; *Qurbu 'l-Asnad*, p. 170. See *Wasa'ilu 'sh-Shi'ah*, vol. 14 (Beirut: Dar at-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.) p. 169.
- ⁵. 'Abdu 'r-Rahman al-Juzari, *al-Fiqh 'ala 'l-Madhahibi 'l-Arba'ah*, vol. 5 (Beirut: Daru 'l-Fikr, 1969) p. 54-55.
- ⁶. Besides the references quoted earlier, also see at-Tabrasi, *Majma'u 'l-Bayan*, vol. 7-8, p. 138, 370; at-Tusi, *at-Tibyan*, vol. 8, p. 361; Fakhru 'd-Din ar-Razi, *at-Tafsiru 'l-Kabir*, vol. 23, p. 179-180.

Muslim Culture & the Style of Hijab

It is quite probable that these so-called experts of Islam and of the Middle East have confused the basic order of the Qur'an with the style of *hijab* worn by Muslim women of various ethnic backgrounds.

The requirement of *hijab* is a Qur'anic command. The basic requirement is that a Muslim woman should cover her head and bosom with a *khimar* (a head covering), and her body with a *jilbab* (a loose over-garment). Of course, she can leave her face and hands open.¹

When it comes to the style, colour, and material of the *khimar* and *jilbab*, each Muslim ethnic group can follow the Qur'anic injunction according to their own cultural background. The variety in styles of implementing the same Qur'anic law is so because Islam is a world religion, it is cannot be confined to one region or tribe or culture.

Therefore you see that the Muslim women in Arabia use *'abaya*; the Persian Muslim women use *chador*; the Afghani Muslim women use *burqa*; the Indo-Pakistani Muslim women use *niqab* or *purdah*; the Malaysian/Indonesian Muslim women use *kerudung*; the East African Muslim women use *buibui*; and now in the West, the Canadian Muslim women use mainstream clothes worn with a bigger scarf over the head and a loose outfit.

Islam is not concerned with the style as long as it fulfills the basic requirement of *khimar* and *jilbab*. This

is where the religion and culture interact with one another, and therein lies the dynamic aspect of the Islamic *shari'a*; and this interaction might have confused some of the so-called experts of Islam who erroneously believe that *hijab* is a cultural tradition and not a religious requirement.

¹ Putting a veil to cover the face is not the initial requirement of the rules of *hijab*. The Shi'i as well as majority of Sunni jurists say that the face should be covered only if there is a danger of fitna, a situation that could lead to committing a sin.

Why Hijab?

One of the many questions that I have been asked is why does Islam make *hijab* mandatory for women? Islam has introduced *hijab* as part of the decency and modesty in interaction between members of the opposite sex. Verse 59 of chapter 33 quoted previously gives a very good reason; it says:

“This is more appropriate so that they may be known [as Muslim women] and thus not be harassed [or molested].” (33:59).

Men, whether they confess it or not, are slaves of lust and desire.

- *Hijab* protects women from such men; it symbolizes that she has been sanctified to one man only and is off-limit to all others.
- *Hijab* contributes to the stability and preservation of marriage and family by eliminating the chances of extramarital affairs.
- Finally, it compels men to focus on the real personality of the woman and de-emphasizes her physical beauty. It puts the woman in control of strangers' reaction to her.

Commenting on the attire of women in North Africa and South East Asia, Germaine Greer, one of the pioneers of the women's liberation movement, wrote:

“Women who wear *cortes* or *huipiles* or saris or jellabas or *salwar kameez* or any other ample garments can swell and diminish inside them without embarrassment or discomfort. Women with shawls and veils can breastfeed anywhere without calling attention to themselves, while baby is protected from dust and flies. In most non-Western societies, the dress and ornaments of women celebrate the mothering function. Ours deny it.”¹

Note that she also specifically mentions the *salwar*, *kameez* and *jellabas* that are used by Muslim women in the East.

Feminists and the Western media often portray the *hijab* as a symbol of oppression and slavery of

women. This sexist angle of viewing the *hijab* reflects the influence of Western feminists who are subconsciously reacting to the Judea-Christian concept of veil – “the symbol of woman’s subjection to her husband”.[2](#)

To look at one’s own religious or cultural history and then to pass a judgment against another religion is, on the milder side, an intellectual miscalculation, and, on the harsher side, outright cultural imperialism! My father made an interesting observation in an article that when the Europeans penetrated the interior of Africa a century ago, they found some tribes who went about naked. They forced the tribes to wear clothes as mark of civilization. “Now those advocates of ‘civilization’ are themselves discarding their clothes. One often wonders if the ‘primitive tribes’ of the last century were not more civilized than the rest of the world. After all, it is rest of the world which is now imitating the ways of the so-called primitive society.” [3](#)

I am surprised at the society which shows tolerance towards those who would like to go around topless but finds it difficult to tolerate a lady who by her own choice wants to observe *hijab*! According to Naheed Mustafa, a Canadian Muslim, “In the Western world, the *hijab* has come to symbolize either forced silence or radical, unconscionable militancy. Actually, it’s neither. It is simply a woman’s assertion that judgment of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction. Wearing the *hijab* has given me the freedom from constant attention to my physical self. Because my appearance is not subjected to scrutiny, my beauty, or perhaps lack of it, has been removed from the realm of what can legitimately be discussed.”[4](#)

Hijab is not a symbol of oppression. Women are oppressed because of socio-economic reasons even in countries where women have never heard about *hijab*. On the contrary, the practice of displaying pictures of almost naked women in the commercials, billboards, and in the entertainment industry in the west is a true symbol of oppression.

Neither does the *hijab* prevent a woman from acquiring knowledge or from contributing to the betterment of human society. Historically women have also greatly contributed to Islam. Lady Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet, played a significant role in the early history of Islam. A successful businesswoman in her own right, she was the first person to accept the message of Prophet Muhammad (S). Her acceptance and faith were a great source of emotional support for the Prophet. She stood by her husband in the difficult days of early Islam, and spent her wealth for the promotion of the new religion.

The first Muslim person to be martyred in Muslim history was a woman by the name of Sumayya, the wife of Yasir and the mother of ‘Ammar. She was killed along with her husband for refusing to renounce Islam.

Lady Falimatu ‘z-Zahra’, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, was a beacon of light and a source of guidance for the women of her time. She faithfully stood by her husband, Imam ‘Ali, in his struggle for his right of caliphate, and strongly protested against the first violation of the right of inheritance for daughters

in Islam.

One of the most important events in the early history of Islam was the event of Karbala, which was a protest led by Imam Husayn against the tyranny of Yazid. In that protest, the soldiers of Yazid massacred Husayn and about seventy-two of his supporters. It was Husayn's sister, Zaynab, who continued the social protest and was very influential in bringing about the awakening among the people to stand up against the tyranny of the rulers. Zaynab greatly contributed to the factors that eventually brought about the downfall of the Umayyads.

[1.](#) Greer, *Sex & Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility* (London: Picador, 1985) p. 14.

[2.](#) See *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 468. For the Biblical Christian perspective, see what St. Paul says: "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head...Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?" (1 Corinthians 11:3–5, 13).

In simple English, it means that if a man keeps his head covered in prayer, then he is disrespecting Christ; and if a woman keeps her head uncovered in prayer, then she is disrespecting her man. For Biblical Jewish concept, see Genesis 24:65.

[3.](#) S. Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, "On Modesty", in *Sunday News* (Dar-es-salaam) 27 November 1966.

[4.](#) Mustafa, "My Body Is My Own Business," *Globe & Mail*, 29th June 1993.

Conclusion

To those who very harshly and quickly judge *hijab* as a symbol of oppression of women, I ask: When you see a nun in her habit, what do you think of that – is that a symbol of oppression or a dress that demands dignity and respect? The *habit* of a nun is a complete *hijab*. Why then the double standard? Is this not cultural imperialism? When a Catholic nun dresses in that way, she becomes dignified, but when a Muslim woman dresses in that way, she becomes the symbol of oppression?! In Islam, we want that dignity and respect for each and every Muslim woman, not only a few selected ones who have decided to serve the cause of their faith.

I salute those Muslim women who have found the courage in themselves to observe *hijab* in this non-Muslim society, and I strongly urge their male-counterparts to appreciate women's great contribution in being at the forefront in the struggle to carve out a niche for Islam in the multicultural society of Canada.

One last thing that I must say is that in spite of all the talk about suppression of rights of women in Muslim societies, we have had three countries in the world of Islam—Turkey, Pakistan and Bangladesh—which have had female Prime Ministers. Against this track record, the United States of America or Canada have not yet shown that openness for the advancement of women where a lady could be elected for a full term as a President or Prime Minister. I think that says a lot about Islam and the Muslims.

Appendix A: Common Questions about Hijab and Related Issues

1. Meaning Of Casting Down

1. What “**casting down** the glances” mean?

It means that a person should not look at the member of the opposite sex except for those parts that may be uncovered.

So, for instance, a man is allowed to look at the face and hands of a non-*mahram* lady who is not related to him provided it is not done in with a lustful intention. (“Mahram” means person in whose presence *hijab* is not required. See the list at end of this section.)

2. Shaking Hands

2. Is it permissible to **shake hands** with a person of opposite sex?

If the person is mahram, then it is permissible. But if the person is non-mahram, then it is forbidden.

3. Beautification Of Women

3. Is a woman allowed to line eyes with **kohl**, to put **mascara** on her eyelashes, and to wear **rings** in both hands?

A woman is allowed to put kohl or similar cosmetics on her eyelashes and also to wear rings provided it is not done with the intention of drawing lustful attention of men towards herself.

4. Exposing The Chin

4. A vast majority of Muslim women who observe *hijab* are used to keeping their chins and a small part of the **under chin** exposed while they cover the neck. Is this permissible? And how big an area of the face can women expose; are the ears included in that?

The ears are not part of the face, therefore it is obligatory to cover them. As for the part of the chin and the under chin that is seen when putting on the common head scarf, it is to be considered as part of the face and, therefore, can be exposed.

5. Facial Hair

5. Is it permissible for a woman who observes *hijab* to get rid of her **facial hair**, to straighten her eyebrows, and to wear natural and light **make up**?

Getting rid of facial hair, straightening of eyebrows, and wearing of light make up do not prevent her from keeping her face uncovered provided it is not done with the intention of drawing attention.

6. Wig As A Replacement

6. Can a woman put on a **wig** as replacement of the head-covering (*hijab*)?

Since the wig is an item of beauty (*zinat*), it must be covered in presence of non-mahram men.

7. High Heeled Shoes

7. A Muslim woman wears **high heeled shoes** that hit the ground in such a way that they draw attention. Is she allowed to wear them?

If it is intended to draw the attention of non-mahram men to herself, or if it generally causes temptation for committing sin, then it is not permissible.

8. Tight Fitting Shirt

8. If a woman puts on a scarf and wears a **tight-fitting** shirt and tight-fitting jeans or trousers or a tight-fitting *qamees* and *shalwar* – is that considered an acceptable *hijab* in the presence of non-mahram men?

Any dress that reveals the contours of her body or that would normally arouse temptation is not permissible and does not fulfill the requirements of *hijab*. It is a pointless *hijab*!

9. Men And Unisex Swimming

9. Is it permissible for a Muslim man to go to unisex **swimming pools** and other similar places where people go about half-naked?

It is not permissible for a Muslim man to go to unisex swimming pools and other similar places if it entails a *haram* act. Based on obligatory precaution, according to Ayatullah Sistani, he must refrain from going to such places even if it does not entail a *haram* act.

10. Defining Those Who Are Mahram

10. Is the **brother-in-law** or a **cousin** included among the list of the people in whose presence a lady does not have to observe *hijab*? Is she allowed to shake their hands or hug them?

The brother-in-law or a male cousin is not included in that list and, therefore, it is obligatory upon a Muslim lady to observe *hijab* in their presence, and also it is not permissible for her to shake their hands or hug them. The reverse will apply to a Muslim man in relation to his sister-in-law or a female cousin.

The Mahram

(IN WHOSE PRESENCE *HIJAB* IS NOT REQUIRED)

OF THE WOMAN OF THE MAN

1. Father. 1. Mother.
2. Grandfather. 2. Grandmother.
3. Brother. 3. Sister.
4. Father-in-law. 4. Mother-in-law.
5. Husband. 5. Wife.
6. Son. 6. Daughter.
7. Step-son. 7. Step-daughter.
8. Son-in-law. 8. Daughter-in-law.
9. Nephew. 9. Niece.
10. Uncle (paternal). 10. Aunt (paternal).
11. Uncle (maternal). 11. Aunt (maternal).
12. Minor boy. 12. Minor girl.
13. Women. 13. Men.

Appendix B: Hijab Jokes

“Appendix B” consists of a humorous write up about the pointless hijab that some Muslim sisters wear.

This is reproduced here from the internet.

Hijab Jokes

By: Ayesha Ayesha1998@aol.com [8]

Broadcasted on BIC News 20 November 1997

Brothers and Sisters,

Although it may seem humorous it can serve as constructive criticism both for the sisters, and the brothers. We learn from this that all those outward actions which Islam requires must be done correctly and with the correct intention, i.e. not for fashion or to fit into a certain group. That is it must all be solely for the sake of Allah (swt). The purpose of this article is not to offend anyone, rather it was written to make a point. Enjoy...

It has been my personal observation that some Muslim girls and women do not realize the significance of hijab. Hijab is Arabic for protection and cover. Some people put a lot of effort into their hijab, yet it serves no purpose. I am referring to the pointless hijab that some girls wear.

The first pointless hijab is referred to as the **headband hijab**. It is a band of fabric approximately 4 inches wide. It covers the back of the head and allows all the hair to be exposed. It doesn't serve much in terms of modesty, but at least it comes in handy in case of an unexpected tennis match.

The second pointless hijab is the dupetta, also known as the **Saran wrap hijab**. It covers all the hair, but it is totally transparent. Again it doesn't serve much in terms of modesty, but it keeps the hair nice and fresh.

The third type of hijab is known as the **Mickey Mouse Hijab**. It is when a girl wears a black scarf and tucks it behind her ear, so that her ears stick out.

We now move to my favorites: the **yo-yo hijabs**. The first yo-yo hijab, also known as the Benazir Bhutto hijab, is the scarf that keeps falling down and needs to be constantly pulled back up....up, down, up, down, just like a yo-yo. The second yo-yo hijab is also referred to as the **convertible hijab**. This type of hijab is predominant at any type of social event, i.e. an Aqeeqah, Bismillah party, Ameen party, wedding, etc. This is when an Imam or Qari comes up to the microphone and starts to recite Qur'an. At this point, all the convertible hijabs come up...until he says "Sadaqallahul adheem". I'm not sure, but apparently in some cultures that translates to "Ok sisters, you may now take off your scarves".

I'm sure this may seem odd, but what's even funnier is when people do not anticipate the recitation of Qur'an at a social event, and are forced to be creative and use accessories such as a purse to cover one's hair. I was surprised to see a woman hold her purse over her head as "*hijab*"...as if the multitudes of men surrounding her are not a good enough reason to wear *hijab*, but some guy reciting du'a compels her to hold a purse over her head. Her friends were more creative...one friend used her dinner napkin.

I was also laughing when I saw the **communal hijab** – two or more girls draped under one dinner napkin during the recitation of Qur'an. Her other friend was still more creative. She used her coffee saucer on the back of her head. I wasn't sure if it was *hijab* or a Yamaka. I didn't know if she was a Muslim or a Jew. I felt like going up to her and saying "Shalom alaikum, sister".

And, people should remember that *hijab* is not just a protection from guys, but from a girl's nafs (ego) as well. It should prevent girls from having to spend hours in front of the mirror doing their hair. But,

unfortunately, you see girls in front of the mirror for hours doing their *hijab* as they would do their hair, with all sorts of elaborate braids and the like. I wanted to go up to a sister and say "Is your *hijab* naturally curly?" I also felt compelled to go up to another girl and say "pardon me, but is your *hijab* naturally that color, or did you dye it?"

Well, the point to remember is that some people make an effort to wear *hijab*, but it is futile, because it is not fulfilling its purpose. It's like using an umbrella with holes in it. *Hijab* is used for protection from guys as well as from the girl herself, and should not be used as an accessory or for beautifying one's self. Anyway, that's it...

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