

The Veil and Muslim Women: Prophetic Tradition or Stage-Managed Islam?

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Abstract: *The veil has been largely associated with Muslim societies. There have been increasing discourses on the need and the substantiation on the use of the veil by the Muslim women. Many have also questioned the veracity of the practice, given the fact that the practice is justified as a religious duty on the part of the Muslim womenfolk. A problem with Islam and Muslims, that has persisted since ages is that the real sanctions and situations leading to various religious practices have been left unexplored. Whether veiling was suggested, was mandatory for the women, was suggested by the Prophet (pbuh) or was in reality a misinterpretation of something completely different is a matter of further study.*

This paper has been inspired by the philosophy of 'Itijihad', which strongly asserts a re-reading and reinterpretation of the Qu'ran, leading to the deconstruction of pseudo philosophies and practices which have come to be accepted as genuine and religiously sanctioned Islam.

Firstly, it needs to be understood that veiling, as head covering for the women has not been specifically mentioned in the Qu'ran. The Holy Book actually states very minimally on the issue. Thus, in this backdrop the clause and claims for the same were left to the liberty of those who claim to have the right to interpret the Holy Book, as per their convenience per se.

Key Words: *veil, Muslim, women, Prophet, Islam, Quran.*

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Within Islam, the all-male Islamic clergy (variously called faghihs, imams, muftis, mullahs, or ulumas) often act as interpretive authorities who are formally charged with distilling insights from the Qur'an or hadiths and with disseminating these scriptural interpretations to the Muslim laity (Munson 1988). Given that such positions of structural privilege are set aside for Muslim men, Islam is a patriarchal religious institution. Yet, patriarchal institutions do not necessarily produce homogeneous gender ideologies, a fact underscored by the discursive fissures that divide Muslim religious authorities and elite commentators concerning the veil.¹

However what should be questioned here is that --- what is the entire clamour of veiling all about? Is it actually anywhere intended to protect the modesty of the women? We here, however, are not concerned about those women who opt for veiling as a personal choice – Muslim or non-Muslim. Our concern here is mainly with the Muslim women who have been in some way or the other forced to adopt this practice, either in the guise of religion, religious duty, culture, way of protecting modesty, or any other such terms. In the Muslim world, the voices of the women have been by far silenced; actually the thinking voices of the Muslim folk have either been denied proper expression or have only got the opportunity for negligible expression. The question

¹ Read, J G, (University of Austin) and Bartkowski, J.P.(University of Texas), (2000) TO VEIL OR NOT TO VEIL? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas, GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 14 No. 3, June 2000 395-417 © 2000 Sociologists for Women in Society, Retrieved from http://www.soc.duke.edu/~jgr14/pdfs/g_s_pub.pdf

that we are asking here is that -- has veiling of the women been proposed as per religious norms per se or is it just the result of the threat which is created by the 'abnormal obsession with the seductive power of women'?²

The veil, popularly called as the hijab, in Islamic terms has been a topic of heated debate and discussion among the Muslim theologians, clerics and academicians as well. Before going ahead with the critical dimensions of the term and its implications let us first try and comprehend the meaning of the same.

The hijab --- literally "curtain" -- "descended," not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men. The descent of the hijab is an event dating back to verse 53 of sura 33 which was revealed during year 5 of the Hejira (AD 627).³ The fact of the matter is that the term has not only been misinterpreted to be a piece of cloth used to adorn and cover the hair and head of a woman; but has been totally de-contextualized out of time and space. A study of the circumstances and conditions leading to the establishment of this head covering as a fundamental Islamic norm clarifies many concepts which have over time come to be intrinsically related to the religion and has come to be justified and legalized in the name of Prophetic tradition.

There are many provisions in the Quran, which cannot and should not be understood in isolation. This being so because many of the verses and clauses mentioned in it were revealed under different circumstances and in different context. Al – Suyuti, has remarked in this perspective that – "It is impossible to understand a verse without knowing the qissa (the story) and the causes that led to its revelation."⁴ However later on, after the death of the Prophet and further later, a lot of the Qu'ranic verses were deliberately misinterpreted for specific reasons of specific groups of people, who wanted to maintain the pre-Islamic status quo, in which the women were not at par with the men. The hijab was an extension of this scheme, which was turned into a tool, for manifesting the male power psychology over the women. This scheme was crafted in such a manner that it came to establish that if the women were not properly covered, and a man was attracted to her for that reason, it wasn't the man's but the woman's fault. Such disastrous misinterpretations have been further stretched to unimaginable heights by the misogynists who claim to be the perpetrators of Islam.

For instance, around March 2002, Saudi Arabian newspapers had reported that – according to official count, at least fourteen young girls were burned to death or were asphyxiated by smoke when an accidental fire engulfed their public school. Parents who arrived at the event described a horrific scene in which the doors of the school were locked from the outside, and the Saudi religious police, known as the mutawwa'un, forcibly prevented girls from escaping the burning school and also prevented firemen from entering the school to save the girls, by beating some of the girls and several of the defence personnel. According to the statements of the parents, the firemen, and the regular police forces present on the scene, the mutawwa'un, would not allow the girls to escape or be saved because they were 'not properly covered', and the mutawwa'un, did not want physical contact between the girls and the civil defence forces.⁵

Such unforgivable acts in the name of religion can never be accepted or overlooked. It is untoward that a religion which actually elevates women in the social hierarchy has now come to be associated with anti-women claims. In fact for many non-Muslims around the world, Islam has come to represent a draconian tradition that exhibits little compassion or mercy towards human beings.⁶

Coming back to the background which brought about veiling as a practice, we need to know certain time-bound accounts. The first time that the hijab was mentioned was actually in a totally different context altogether. As Mernissi clarifies, the hijab was actually a curtain that the Prophet (PBUH) drew between himself and the man who was at the entrance of his nuptial chamber.⁷ As noted by Anas, the Prophet (PBUH) had just got married and was impatient to be with his new wife, Zaynab. As he was not able to get rid of the tactless guests who remained lost in conversation in his home, the veil was thus drawn, between them and his privacy.⁸

Another substantiation for the veil as a boundary between the first ladies of Islam and the male masses of that time also serves as a reasonable explanation. Al-Tabari, who comments on the Qu'ran, sentence by sentence also deals with this part. The Prophet (PBUH) was threatened by men who stated during his lifetime their desire to marry his wives after his death. How could this be?⁹ This would mean making the first ladies of Islam available to the common men after the Prophet's death. This was treated as a virtual impossibility and thus a barrier between the first ladies of Islam and the male masses was favoured. It is however to be noted that this was not for the other Muslim women. This interpretation therefore attaches both physical and metaphorical

²Saifi Omid (2006) *Progressive Muslims : On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, One World Publications, Oxford, England, pp37

³ Mernissi, F, (1987, 1991) *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights In Islam*, pp 85 Library of Congress Catalogue-in-Publication Data; English Translation © Perseus Books Publishing , L.L.C. 1991; Published by Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group

⁴ Ibid, pp 93

⁵ Saifi Omid (2006) *Progressive Muslims : On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, One World Publications, Oxford, England, pp33

⁶ Ibid 34

⁷ Mernissi, F, (1987, 1991) *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights In Islam*, pp 85 Library of Congress Catalogue-in-Publication Data; English Translation © Perseus Books Publishing , L.L.C. 1991; Published by Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group

⁸ Ibid 86

⁹ Ibid 92

connotation to the hijab. Physical implicating the separation; and metaphorical implicating the physical impossibility of such an instance.

The concept of the word hijab, is three dimensional, and the three dimensions often blend into one another. The first dimension is a visual one; to hide something from sight. The root of the verb *hajaba* (from which hijab comes) means 'to hide'. The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. So we have not just tangible categories that exists in the reality of the senses – the visual, the spatial – but also an abstract reality in the realm of ideas. A space hidden by a hijab is a forbidden space.¹⁰ Thus, this meaning makes it explicit that the literal meaning of the term hijab was actually introduced and practiced as something completely different.

From this explanation we can deduce how the term hijab was fitting in that context. It was meant to separate and hide the wives of the Prophet, marking them out of the realm of ordinary men; drawing a threshold between the common man and the life and privacy of the Prophet (PBUH) and also drawing an analogy of the first ladies of Islam to the symbolic 'forbidden fruit'. They were the Prophet's wives, and therefore only he had the right to them. He was the messenger of Allah and if any common man could claim his wives after his death, it would very clearly be an outraging of his divine status and sanctity.

The Sufis, however again use the word in a different context altogether. As Mernissi explains, for the Sufis, the hijab is actually a negative phenomenon. To them, when a person has access to boundless spiritual horizons, to which actually every Muslim must aspire to, they do not and should not feel the need for a hijab. "In Sufism, one calls *mahjub* (veiled) the person whose consciousness is determined by sensual and mental passion and who as a result does not perceive the divine light in his soul... In Sufi terminology, the *mahjub* is the one who is trapped in earthly reality, unable to experiment with elevated states of consciousness."¹¹

This means that according to the Sufis, the hijab is only required to be worn or practised or imposed by those who have not outgrown or who is unable to control his sensual desires and mental passion. And those, who have elevated themselves from the clutches of such lowly stages of human existence, do not feel the need to pursue the hijab either on themselves or on others.

Thus a study of the actual connotation of the term hijab unveils the reality of the veil in Islam. It was and still is a revolutionary concept but the contemporary implication and usage of the term is an absolute mockery of the same. There is utterly no argument in Mernissi's statement when she states that, since the hijab is a central or key concept in Islam, as the concept of sin in Christianity, or as credit in the American capitalist society; reducing or assimilating this concept to a scrap of cloth that men have imposed on the women to veil them when they go into the street is truly to impoverish this term, not to say to drain it for its meaning.¹²

To stick to the traditional and initial meaning of the term we understand that the hijab was actually a separation in the form of a curtain demarcating the Prophet's space into two – the public and the private or can also be seen as demarcating the sacred from the profane; but which later on came to be the segregation of the sexes.¹³

Thus, veiling of the women was never established as a fundamental norm of the religion of Islam. But that is what the Muslims made of it. To be more specific this norm of veiling has been essentially forced upon the Muslim women by the Muslim men who felt threatened by the gender-sensitive approach of Islam. When the Prophet (PBUH) started advocating women's rights and privileges with the new religion, it was not taken well by the patriarchal society which had so long treated women as mere objects alone. The male elite therefore required such a provision in the name of Islam, which would be legally sanctified in the name of religion and which would also help them maintain the pre-Islamic, pagan status quo, in which the women were treated as nothing more than inanimate objects available for sexual favours and subjugation by the men. Thus, when the verse of the hijab descended, it was the perfect opportunity for them to turn this into a tool by which they could perpetrate their dominion over the women further on, now legalized in the name of religion.

The larger picture in the backdrop however needs to be understood as well. This head covering also implies and imposes a restriction on the women and their mobility. Like already stated, the demarcation of the space of the Prophet was ultimately deduced by the Muslim male elite as the division of the space for the Muslim women into two – the public and the private. This here is again analogous to the public-private dichotomy that the feminists talk about. Now, since the space was divided into two, the women were confined to that space which was designated as 'more appropriate for them.' Thus, the injunction of the hijab became a very convenient means to limit the lives and opportunities of the Muslim women, in the name of their faith. Islamic states even in the present day have used such bases for depriving the Muslim women of basic rights and privileges.

¹⁰ Ibid 93

¹¹ Ibid 95

¹² Ibid 95

¹³ Ibid 101

Another interpretation that we can fit in here is that the female sexuality is viewed as a potential threat by the Muslim male elite. The covering of the women is therefore imposed so that, the men do not get attracted to them and do not indulge in any unanticipated and unlikely acts. Like most cultures, the Muslims here also have handed the responsibility of guarding the honour of the people and the civilization unto to the shoulders of the women. It is to be noted here, that not Islam, but the Muslims have done this. Hence, the covering is intended as means to restrain the men from being unduly attracted by the sexuality of the women, and thus to maintain a healthy society. But what is ironical is that the religion of Islam itself does not take a negative stand on sexuality. The mass media of the West asserts that Islam is a repressive religion. However, comparison with other religious traditions reveal that Islam is a sex-positive world religion. In the Prophet's teachings (as in the Qu'ran), sexuality is not an obstacle to spirituality in general.¹⁴

Thus, all this analysis has revealed that the hijab, never literally meant a veil for the women. The term was used in a totally contextualized reference and was indicative of a curtain that separated the Prophet's space into two. The deduction of the veil from this verse has to be termed as absolute stage-managing of Islamic philosophy and guidelines to serve the interest of the male elite of the religion, who have apparently, self proclaimed themselves as the interpreters of the faith.

It cannot be denied that the manifestation of the hijab was essentially a result of the attempt to curb the threat created by overt female sexuality. The post structuralist feminists, particularly Foucault, states that "power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1978, 93)¹⁵ Thus the threat created by the power of female sexuality can be said to be the reason for imposing restrictive sanctions on women, so as to create a 'balance of power' or to repress the power, which is viewed as a threat. Further study and analysis reveals that, we can also understand the deduction of the symbolic hijab into a head covering because of the predominance of a 'Phallogocentric' Islam which has come into being after the death of the Prophet. Phallogocentrism is a neologism used by Jacques Derrida to refer to a masculinist or patriarchal agenda. The inherent male domination in Islam has led to the birth of a Phallogocentric Islam, leading to patriarchal agendas for the women at the cost of religion.

This kind of suppression of the women by making impositions on them is a common form of cultural suppression found in many cultures, including Islam. The women are made to believe that if they do not conform to the guidelines imposed on them, they are religious violators and will be punished in after life for their doings. As Jameelah Medina (2014) states in her paper,

"Muslim patriarchy makes a Muslim woman believe that she must cover her body in order to protect her male coreligionists from temptation and sin. It makes her think that she has only two choices for her body: (1) be a righteous, virtuous Maryam (Mary), Mother of Jesus; or (2) be a painted, whorish Jezebel, Queen of Israel. It makes her think that her body is familial and community property, that she must safeguard her body at all costs because her worth and her family and community's honor are based on whether or not her vagina remains untouched and her hymen remains intact. It makes her think that she is impure, even filthy and untouchable, or unfit to worship Allah when her body, in synch with nature, sheds the lining of her uterus as it mirrors the full moon's monthly shedding of its fullness. This all places a very heavy burden on Muslim girls and women."¹⁶

Thus, in conclusion it can be said that what actually finds popular acceptance as a fundamental Islamic norm, is actually the stage-managing of the religion for the parochial interests of a narrow class of Muslim male elites who want to preach and propagate a 'male'specific variety of Islam'. The irony of the situation is that, the religion itself does not treat men and women separately. The Qu'ran talks of all in two broad senses-- 'believers' and 'non-believers'. Thus as far as the practice is concerned, when it is a personal choice it is a different case, but to impose it on the women as a religious diktat can in no way be accepted. For that matter there is metaphorical mention in Islam, about the control of the eyes for the men, meaning, if a man happens to be attracted by a female he should lower his gaze – this is a very strong argument for the women and against the men. However, as anticipated, because it is a women-centric provision it has been only negligibly highlighted. Whenever a breach of dignity takes place between the two sexes, within the Muslim community or beyond, it is the woman who is held responsible, this needs to be undone. Impositions need to be undone; restrictions falsely sanctified in the name of religion need to go. A religion, which advocated female literacy, widow remarriage, right to inherit to the women, cannot be reduced to a tradition which is conveniently crafted to create a status quo favourable to the men.

A re-reading and re-interpretation of the Qu'ran and its verses is the need of the hour to create a gender-sensitive Islam.

¹⁴ Saifi Omid (2006) *Progressive Muslims : On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, One World Publications, Oxford, England, pp192

¹⁵ Allen, Amy, 1996. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Feminists," in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, Susan Hekman (ed.), University Park, PA: Penn State Press.

Foucault, M (1987, 93) , <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/>, Retrieved on 16th January, 2015

¹⁶ Madina, J (2014) This Battlefield Called My Body: Warring over the Muslim Female, *Religions* 2014, 5, 876–885; doi:10.3390/rel5030876, www.mdpi.com/journal/religions, Retrieved 16th January, 2015.