Does Islam Oppress or Liberate Woman?

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Abstract

There are many people who have failed to understand the actual meaning of a Muslim woman’s veil. This article describes features of the significance of the head covering or “Hijāb.” In order to appreciate the nature and extend to which Muslim women’s condition is considered as oppressed or liberated, I will look to The Koran “Holy Qur’ān” and the Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad, the fundamental sources of Islamic teachings, to better understand the status of women in Islam.

Key words Islam; Religion; Woman; Veil; Oppression; Liberation; Gender; Equality; Koran.

Introduction

The Arabic word "سلام " Islam means peace, submission and obedience. The religion of Islam is the complete acceptance of the teachings and guidance, revealed as word of Allah and the Hadiths or the tradition of his prophet Muhammad. The Qur’ān is the sacred text of Islam. It is written in Arabic, and regarded as the revealed word of God.

The Qur’ān is not only the prime source of knowledge about religious beliefs, obligations, and practices, it is also the guide, whether specific or implied, for many aspects of Islamic civilization. One great irony is that Islam, in part a movement of liberation for Arab-Muslim women, is now commonly blamed for the oppression of women. The simple practice of veiling, which is nowhere clearly demanded by The Holy Qur’ān, came to be recommended as a means of protecting Muslim women.² Although Islam stresses the protection of woman, such protection has come to be seen as a form of oppression.

The veil

The question of the reason why Muslim woman wear a veil or Hijāb is one of many questions asked by non-Muslims and even by Islam itself. It is seen as a form of oppression by some religious traditions. The Hijāb "الحجاب" comes from the verb "hajaba" "حجاب" in Arabic, which means to hide from view or to conceal (a covering for a woman’s hair, but still showing the total face).³ Is there any benefit or purpose for a Muslim woman wearing a Hijāb? Yes, in covering the head and the body, a Muslim woman feels protected, mainly because she feels she is following Allah. Because Islam seeks the preservation of social tranquility and familial peace, it asks women to cover themselves in their interactions with men⁴. The veil is essential for modesty and offers women a sense of identity, as some verses in The Qur’ān declare:

"O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the believing woman to draw their outer garments all over their bodies in order to may be known and not molested” (Qur’ān, Surat, 33:59).

Therefore, anyone who sees a Muslim woman covering her head will know that

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⁴. Islamic Center Japan, 1998, op. cit., p. 34.
she is a Muslim with a good moral character. In other words, for a Muslim woman, the Hijāb shows her identity, dignity, chastity, modesty, and purity.\(^5\)

However, The Prophet Muhammad encouraged both believing man and woman to lower their gaze for the sake of modesty.\(^6\) This has become an important aspect of Muslim self-respect. A Muslim woman should not show "her beauty or adornments" except to her family. This is why the Hijāb covers the hair, the neck and the bosom, as it is indicated in The Qur’ān:

"Say to the believing men to lower their gaze, protect their private parts and guard their modesty. That will make greater purity for them..... And say to the believing women to lower their gaze, protect their private parts and guard their modesty, and do not display their beauty and ornaments except what ordinarily appear thereof...... They should not display their beauty except to their husbands...” (Qur’ān, Surat, 24:30–31).

Because The Qur’ān did not specify the exact style of dress that man and woman should wear, the interpretation of The Qur’ān Surat varies among scholars and between the Shi’i and Sunni denominations of Islam’s Shari’a (Law). Consequently, Muslim women dress differently across Arabic and Islamic countries. In some countries like Tunisia or Turkey, which are considered moderate secular countries, women neither wear long dresses nor cover themselves with Hijāb.\(^7\) Furthermore, the head coverings were prohibited under the Tunisian law after independence. The women of these countries, therefore, appear liberated in both dress and lifestyle, according to Western

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5. Abu Al alā, Al Maudouūdī, الحجاب [Al-Hijāb], Beirut: Dār Al fiker, unknown, pp. 41–42.
7. Haddad, Tahar, إمرأتنا في الشريعة والمجتمع [Imra’atuna fil-Shari’a wal mujtama’a], Tunis: Addar Attunisiya li’nasher, 1984, pp. 218–220. He is from Fatnassa, a small locality situated in the region of Gabès. He belonged to a modest family; his father managed a small shop of commerce in the central marked of Tunis. He studied at Zitouna Mosque, where he got his diploma (end of high school education). He enrolled at the Law University of Tunis in 1920. Because of his attitudes towards the emancipation of women, he was prevented from passing the exam at the end of his studies, thus failing to obtain his diploma in Law.
standards. Young Turkish and Tunisian women today prefer to wear Western clothing. On the other hand, the older generations prefer more traditional Islamic dress. This trend is also seen in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Russia, and in other parts of the Islamic World.\(^8\) However, in some Middle Eastern countries, and particularly among the Shi’i, women still observe traditional dress and wear the Niqāb (a veil that covers the entire face except for one eye) and gowns covering the entire body, except for the hands.\(^9\) This practice follows the Prophet Muhammad’s tradition of “Hadiths” that said:

“When a girl reaches the menstrual age it is not proper that any part of the body should be exposed, except the face and hands.”\(^{10}\)

It is clear here that both the Qur’ān and the Hadiths required thick clothing for women that hid the shape of their bodies, forbidding even showing the color of the skin. Their clothing also should not attract male attention.

Modesty and Islam

The head coverings and gowns required in Islam not only conform to the ideal of modesty in The Qur’ān, but also give a woman a Muslim identity. Moreover, it is another aspect of submission to Allah and protects Muslim women (The Qur’ān states that women should not be sexually harassed in any way in her daily life). In other words, Islam encourages preventive measures for protecting woman from unchastity and harassment, with an eye to creating patterns for how to live life more safely:

“…And those who launch a charge against chaste woman, and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegations) Flog them with eighty stripes; and


\(^{10}\) Ben Bāz & Salah, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 85.
The veil or the head covering is not uniquely an Islamic convention. It is a continuation of pre-Islamic customs. The practice of women wearing a veil has a long history in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which Catholic Nuns practice to our own day.\(^\text{11}\) Of course, these practices differ from culture to culture and from religion to religion. Moreover, their meaning can also vary a great deal.

The veil in Christian tradition

In Christian tradition, the use of the veil for women has a long history from the inception of the Christian religion. The Catholic Nuns have been covering their heads for hundreds of years.\(^\text{12}\) In the New Testament, St. Paul’s rationale for women to wear a veil is for an acknowledgement of male authority, since a man is in “the image and glory of God”.

“Now I want you to realize 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 who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head — it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her head cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and the glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.” (1 Corinthians 11:3–10).

\(^{11}\) Abdel Al Amir, *op. cit.*, pp. 195–199.
Mother Teresa (1910–97), founder of the Order of the Missionaries of charity and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize (1976) always wore a veil, as do most women who follow holy orders in the Roman Catholic Church today. Moreover, women in some Protestant denominations, particularly the Amish and the Mennonite, always cover their heads to symbolize their submission to their husbands and to God. Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220), an early church father, said that if the unveiling of women be proper, why not practice it always, outside of the church as well as in it. In one treatise, he also stressed the importance of the veil for women in their daily life style:

"If on account of men they adopt a false garb, let them carry out that garb fully even for that end; and as they veil their head in presence of heathens, let them at all events in the church conceal their virginity, which they do veil outside the church. They fear strangers: let them stand in awe of the brethren too; or else let them have the consistent hardihood to appear as virgins in the streets as well, as they have the hardihood to do in the churches."  ⑧

The veil in Jewish tradition

The Rabbinic literature also stressed that the Jewish woman should wear a covering when going out in public. Though the customs varied, some are similar to what Muslim women wear in Afghanistan and Middle Eastern Shi‘i practices today. Dr. Menachem M. Brayer, Professor of Biblical Literature at Yeshiva University, said that the veil should completely cover the woman, leaving only one eye exposed. ⑧ He also quotes some famous ancient rabbis, saying that:

"It is not like the daughters of Israel to walk out with heads uncovered" and

"Cursed be the man who let’s the hair of his wife be seen... a woman who exposes...

her hair for self-adornment brings poverty”.  

Today, among Orthodox Jews who follow rabbinical tradition, a bareheaded woman, especially a married one, is prohibited from praying or reciting blessings when her head is uncovered. The Orthodox Jews see an unveiled woman in public as a shameful display of nudity. However, Dr. Brayer also mentioned that the veil signified a woman’s self-respect and social status. The women of lower classes would often wear the veil to give the impression of a higher social standing. Because the veil was a sign of nobility and luxury, prostitutes were not permitted to cover their hair in ancient Jewish society. Even prostitutes wore a special headscarf in order to appear respectable.

Conclusion

It is clear that Islam did not invent the Hijab. The use of the veil dates back to ancient times and is seen in the history of many other religions, traditions and cultures. In Jewish tradition, the veil sometimes symbolized distinction, luxury, dignity, even the superiority of noble women. In Christian tradition, it signified a woman’s acknowledgement of male authority and of following God’s will. In Islamic tradition, it represented modesty, identity and protection from harassment. In each of these examples, the veil did not mean the oppression of women or being as a sign of servitude.

Finally, we can say that the aim of Islam from the time of The Prophet was to lift the status and dignity of women. The goal of Islam was to protect and to encourage women by raising their status with rights equal to men. The Holy Qur’an and Sunna, which offered truth in how people should conduct their lives, lead to peaceful harmony.

15. Ibid., p. 316.
16. Ibid., p. 317.
17. Ibid., p. 139.
among men and women, with the hope that each person would find fulfillment in human dignity?

Bibliography

5. Abu Al alā, Al Maudūdī, al Hijāb, Beirut : Dār Al-fiker, unknown.


