

Hijab - Unveiling the Mystery

American Muslim women today are rediscovering the pristine Islam as revealed by Allah, God, to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, more than 1,400 years ago but without any of the contradictions of ancestral culture. Consequently they are essentially engaging in a life-long exercise of rediscovering their own selves – what it means to be a human, a Muslim, and more so, a Muslim woman.

Wearing the Divinely Mandated hijab, the veil or head covering, as a part of their everyday dresses is among the first steps toward this rediscovery.

In a society which shamelessly publicly exposes a woman's body and intimate requirements where nudity somehow symbolizes the expression of a woman's freedom and where the most lustful desires of men are fulfilled unchecked – it is little wonder such an introspection leads many Muslim women to the decision to wear hijab

However, generalizations about Islam and Muslims are replete in today's media and, by extension, in the minds of many Americans who shape their image of the world through the media. Veiled Muslim women are typically unfairly stigmatized. They are regarded on the one hand as suppressed and oppressed, and on the other, as fanatics and fundamentalists. Both depictions are grossly wrong and imprecise. Such portrayals not only misrepresent these women's strong feelings towards hijab, but also fail to acknowledge their courage and the resulting identity hijab lends to them.

Amongst such misconceptions is also the belief that any Muslim woman who wears hijab is forced to do so. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, the final determination to wear hijab is often not easily reached. Days of meditation, an inevitable fear of consequences and reactions, and ultimately, plenty of courage weigh heavily in reaching the decision. Wearing hijab is a very personal and independent decision, coming from appreciating the wisdom underlying Allah's command and a sincere wish to please Him.

"I believe hijab is pleasing to Allah, or I wouldn't wear it. I believe there is something deep down beautiful and dignified about it. It has brought some beautiful and joyous dimension to my life that always amaze me," said Mohja Kahf, assistant professor of English and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, in an internet posting.

"To me hijab is a gift from Allah. It gives me the opportunity to become closer to Allah. Also quite importantly, (it provides me) the chance to stand and be recognized as a Muslim," Fariha Khan, 18, of Rockville, Maryland, said.

However, with this recognition comes tremendous responsibility as highly visible representatives of Islam and Muslims. Anywhere covered sisters go, Muslims and non-Muslims alike recognize them as followers of Islam. In a land where misinformation about Islam and Muslims abounds, Muslim sisters have the opportunity to portray Islam in its true light.

But the greatest responsibility related to hijab is the understanding that there is more to hijab than just the scarf; the internalized modesty really matters. This internal moral system gives meaning to the external scarf. This can be perceived from the overall demeanor of any Muslim woman – how she acts, dresses, speaks, and so on. Only when the internalized modesty manifests itself through the external hijab can sisters represent Muslims according to the beautiful example set by the Prophet, upon whom be peace, and followed by his companions.

"Hijab by itself is just a piece of cloth, at some level. I do not think we should take (it) as an exclusive marker of a woman's moral worth or level of faith. It is the surrounding context – the etiquette, the morals – which make it anything" Kahf said.

Saba M. Baig, 21, is a recent graduate of Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. She was 17 when she seriously started wearing hijab, and feels she is still in the process of learning internal hijab. "My biggest realization was that hijab was not just about wearing a scarf on my head, but more of a (veil) on my heart," said Baig. "Hijab is more than an external covering. That's the easy part of it all. It has a lot (more) to do with modesty and just the way you present yourself."

"In this life, I couldn't think of anything better than being a Muslim. Wearing hijab signifies it and reminds me of it. Hijab is important to me and it means everything to me when I wear it," Khan said.

"Unfortunately, it also has its down side: you get discriminated against, treated as though you are oppressed... I wear it for (Allah), and because I want to. Period," said Imaan, a convert to Islam, currently studying in Australia.

Yet, the general society, to some extent defines the image of hijab. "The surrounding context can make it oppressive," explained Kahf. "For example, in social contexts where observing hijab includes (the practice) of separating women from the resources of society including education, mosques, sources of religious and spiritual guidance, economic livelihood, etc., ... (hijab) develops oppressive qualities. Or when hijab is literally imposed through punitive sanctions rather than encouraged benignly, this distorts the underlying beauty of hijab and turns it into something ugly.

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"(At the same time,) the surrounding context can make it liberating, as we in the United States often experience. For many of us, in a society which imposes degrees of sexualized nakedness on women, wearing hijab has been a liberating experience. To us hijab has meant non-conformism to unjust systems of thought. We have experienced social sanctions for wearing it, and these experiences are seared in our memories, rather than experiences of being forced to wear it," Kahf concluded.

For many women hijab is a constant reminder that unlike other women they should not have to design their lives and bodies for men. "Before I started covering, I thought of myself based on what others thought of me. I see that too often in girls, their happiness depends on how others view them, especially men. Ever since, my opinion of myself has changed so much; I have gained (a lot of) self-respect. I have realized whether others may think of me as beautiful is not what matters. How beautiful I think of myself and knowing that Allah finds me beautiful makes me feel beautiful," said Baig softly, her eyes glowing.

Furthermore, modest clothing and hijab are precautions to avoid any social violations. Contrary to popular belief, this is not limited to women only. Preceding the verse in the Qur'an about women lowering their gaze comes the following verse,

"Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! Allah is Aware of what they do."
[Al-Qur'an 24:30].

In addition, on the authority of Sahl ibn Sa'd, may Allah be pleased with him, the Prophet, peace be upon him, said, "Whoever can guarantee (the chastity of) what is between his two jaw-bones (the tongue) and what is between his two legs (the private parts), I guarantee Paradise for him." (Bukhari).

Hijab is not worn for men, to keep their illicit desires in check. Rather, Muslim women wear it for God and their own selves. Islam is a religion of moderation, of balance between extremes. Therefore, it does not expect women alone to uphold the society's morality and uprightness. Rather, Islam asks men and women to mutually strive to create a healthy social environment where children may grow with positive, beautiful, constructive and practical values and concepts. Men are equally required to be modest and to conduct themselves responsibly in every sphere of their lives.

In fact, in this society, enough emphasis cannot be placed on the necessity for men to keep their gaze lowered, as a concerned brother put it. "Think about it -- what has the potential to cause more damage a sister otherwise modestly dressed but no scarf, or a brother who goes about gawking in the streets, (or) on campus? I cannot exactly quantify it, but guess the latter," he said.

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According to Jabir ibn Abdullah, when he asked the Prophet, peace be upon him, about a man's gaze falling inadvertently on a strange woman, the Prophet replied, "Turn your eyes away." (Muslim) In another tradition, the Prophet, on whom be peace, chided Ali for looking again at a woman – he said, the second glance is from Shaitan.

The concept of modesty and hijab in Islam is holistic, and encompasses both men and women. The ultimate goal is to maintain societal stability and to please God.

Since Muslim women are more conspicuous because of their appearance, it is easier for people to associate them with the warped images they see in the print and broadcast media. Hence, stereotypes are perpetuated and often sisters seem "mysterious" to those not acquainted with Muslim women who dress according to Divine instructions. This aura of "mystery" cannot be removed until their lifestyles, beliefs and thought-systems are genuinely explored. And, frankly, this cannot be achieved until one is not afraid to respectfully approach Muslim women – or any Muslim for that matter. So, the next time you see a Muslim, stop and talk to him or her – you'll feel, God-Willing, as if you're entering a different world, the world of Islam: full of humility, piety, and of course, modesty!

by Saulat Pervez