



Hijab in Islam: Liberation or Oppression from Islamic and Western Perspective

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Abstract:

The hijab is seen as a tool of Gender oppression. Is it really a sign of women's enslavement? Or 'degrading prison'? Or is it a sign of women's modesty and liberation? Why doesn't anyone ask the women who choose to wear it"? Or is it simply cultural difference (ethnocentrism or xenophobia) that it is regarded as oppressive. Many people argue Islam oppresses and discriminates women by wearing veils or hijab, while few people view it as a sign of women's protection or liberation. These two views are held by West and Europe, and Islam respectively. The tight, transparent or half nude dress which Islam prohibits is admired in western culture and flaunted by western women. Thus it would be quite improper and unfair to say that Islam oppresses women" unless we study it, research it or understand it in the light of Islamic perspective. In this paper, an effort has been made to throw light on hijab and its relevance with gender oppression or liberation in the light of Islamic and western perspective. This paper is primarily based on secondary data content analysis research methodology. The main objective of the paper is to make us understand what hijab is.? and to stimulate our brains regarding its relation with gender liberation or oppression.

Keywords: Hijab, Islam, Liberation, Oppression, West.

INTRODUCTION

While Islam views hijab as a sign of women's empowerment, modesty and liberation, West views it as a sign of gender oppression or women's enslavement. Since 9/11 terror attacks, Islam is being misrepresented in western media particularly, thus producing misunderstanding and confusion among the people. Muslims are being called terrorists, fundamentalists, poor and backward. There is a prevalent notion in the west that Muslim women are subjugated by their male superiors and the hijab these women wear is perceived as a symbol of oppression and backwardness. Moreover, since 9/11, hijab, which can serve as an outward Muslim identity, has often been associated with terrorism. In addition, gendered notions of empowerment, beauty or sexuality and how it should, or should not be portrayed in public are different and quite contrasting in Islam and West. An interesting instance is a comparison between Muslims and Americans in how they perceive a diamond. When presented with a diamond, a Muslim woman wants to keep it in a safe place where only special people can see it, whereas American women want to flaunt it so that everyone can see it. This diamond is a reflection of their bodies; with the hijab, a Muslim woman has control over who has an entry because she believes her beauty is a precious that not everyone should see.¹ This highlights the difference in perceptions

of beauty by these women. Thus the negative attitude of west towards Muslim hijab may be due to their differing perceptions of beauty and sexuality and also being the result of 9/11 idea that Muslim women are associated with terrorism and are oppressed.

In this paper, I will begin with the brief introduction to “what is the hijab” followed by Islamic and Western perspective on hijab.

WHAT IS HIJAB?

The word hijab varies from culture to culture. In the Christian west, the term “veil” is used to mean the covering of the face, but in Arabic, the term “hijab” refers to a barrier or curtain². This can be seen in the translation and English definition of the word “hijab”. According to the Merriam–Webster Dictionary, the hijab is “traditional covering for the hair and neck that is worn by Muslim women”. The Quran gives various meanings to the term “hijab” including “ a thing that prevents, hinders, debar, or precludes; a thing that veils, conceals, hides, covers, or protects, because it prevents seeing, or beholding... a partition, a bar, a barrier, or an obstacle”³. According to the Islamic faith, the hijab signifies things other than a headscarf; it also represents modest clothing and modest behaviour⁴.

There are other forms of veiling worn by Muslim women that cover the body more than the hijab. Most prominent of those is the burqa and the niqab, while the burqa is the term used for a garment covering the entire body and having a crocheted section for the eyes, the niqab is another term for the face veil that leaves the eyes uncovered⁵. In this paper word ‘hijab’ has been used as a general term for Islamic dress code including burqa and niqab; however, Merriam – Webster dictionary definition of hijab is used to distinguish it from other forms of Islamic dress.

HIJAB: ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

From an Islamic perspective wearing hijab is the commandment of God; it is a sign of modesty, purity and a tool of women’s protection; and has nothing to do with male domination. To the Muslim women, the hijab provides a sense of empowerment. It is a personal decision to dress modestly according to the commandment of the genderless creator; to assert pride in self, an embrace one’s faith openly, with independence and courageous conviction⁶The term hijab and its alternative terms occur a total of nine times in the Quran(1. Q (C) 7: (V) 46; 2. Q (C) 170: (V) (45); 3. Q (C) 19: (V) 16-17; 4. Q (C) 33: (V) 53; 5. Q (C) 38: (V) 32; 6. Q (C) 41: (V) 5; 7. Q (C) 42: (V) 51; 8. Q (C) 33: (V) 59; 9. Q (C) 24: (V) 30-31¹. Only on four occasions (Q 19:16-17; Q 33:53; Q 33:59; Q: 24:31), it has been used in relation to women.⁷In Q 19:16-17, hijab refers to the space of seclusion and silence that the Virgin Mary seeks when she learns of her virginal pregnancy. In Q 33:53, hijab again points to spatial separation: this time, it describes a screen between the Prophet’s wives and other men. So in this verse veiling was used to protect the privacy of the Prophet’s wives. In Q 33:59, hijab is used to distinguish and protect free women from

¹ . While Q stands for Quran, C for chapter and V for verse respectively.

molestation. In Q 24:30-31, hijab is used to cover women's beauty and ensure their modesty.⁸ So in all the cases above hijab has nothing to do with oppression or degrading of women, rather it empowered and liberated them. In pre-Islamic Arabia and other societies, the status of women was very low. For instance, in Babylonian civilization, the women were degraded and were denied all rights. The Greeks considered a woman to be subhuman and inferior to men. Prostitution later became a regular practice among all classes of Greek society. The Egyptian considered women evil and a sign of the devil. Prostitution and nudity were common amongst the Romans. In Arab women were looked down and very often when a female child was born, she was buried alive.⁹ Islam uplifted the status of women and granted them their rights 1400 years ago. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) changed the concept of women through his teachings. He gave full freedom to women in the public sphere. he established a common obligation for both men and women to endow them with ethical qualities, such as chastity, truthfulness, and patience, which work at both personal and communal levels¹⁰.

Islam has given the dress code of modesty for Muslims of both genders and ordered them to lower gaze. As mentioned in the Quran :

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And Allah is well acquainted with all they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their adornments¹¹

This is a clear command from Almighty Allah to both men and women regarding the purdah. The Muslims should not only observe purdah on their body but also lower their glances. The above verse forbids Muslim men to look at strange women and Muslim women at strange men and commands men and women equally to lower their gaze¹². Women are also ordered to cover their head with a veil. At another place, the Quran addresses Muslim women as:

O prophet! tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful.¹³

According to Mawdoudi, the above Quranic injunctions are binding to all believing women. Order for lowering of gaze and behave modestly in the presence of the opposite sex for both men and women indicates that the women can go outside her home and can also participate in legitimate business.¹⁴

So wearing of hijab by Muslim women is a commandment from Almighty Allah and thus constitutes part of their faith. Since the term hijab originally means something more than wearing of the headscarf which is defined by Almighty Allah in the above verse¹⁵. The real and appropriate term used for it is Khimar for which the Quran reads: "let them place their khimar over their necks and chests"¹⁵

According to hadith and Sunnah of the Prophet, there are basically six criteria for women hijab

1. The first criteria is that their body should be covered. This is different for men and women. The extent of covering obligatory on the male is to cover the body at least from navel to knees. For women, the extent of covering obligatory is to cover the complete body except the face and hands up to the hands e wrist. If they wish to, they can cover even these parts of the body. Some scholars of Islam insist that the face and hands are part of the obligatory extent of hijab.

All the remaining five criteria are the same for men and women.

2. The clothes worn should be loose and should not reveal the figure.
3. The clothes should not be transparent such one can see through them.
4. The clothes should not be so glamorous so that it attracts the opposite sex.
5. The clothes should not resemble that of the opposite sex.
6. The clothes worn should not resemble that of the unbelievers i.e. they should not wear clothes that are specifically identities or symbols of the unbeliever's religions ¹⁶.

WESTERN PERSPECTIVE ON HIJAB

The critical challenge of the west to the Muslims depicts that Muslim women are oppressed and suffering at the hands of men of their own families prohibited them from public life with little or no economic participation. Many orientalist have discussed that there were many different motivations for women to put on the hijab, from political protest to economic reasons, to piety. West considered that hijab is the hindrance to the progress of women. Woodshell, one of the orientalist of the 20th century, writes that "Undoubtedly the indicator of the social change in the Muslim world is the veil....in the most rigid form, purdah prohibits a women's voice from being heard by a man outside her own circle of relations. In short, it keeps a woman closely confined within the walls of her own zenana ¹⁷. So the west considered the veil ultimate barrier for the progress of women.

The veil of Muslim women became a symbol of oppression in the west from the 18th century. The first European lady Mary Montagu, who travelled to turkey in 1717 gave the idea that veil is oppressive. ¹⁸ However, the veil was considered oppressive from the 18th century but gained importance in the 19th century when the Muslim lands were colonized by the Europeans and used as a tool to justify their invasion to Muslim lands. The Europeans prepared a fictitious list of oppressions which the Muslim woman is facing like the hijab, polygyny, seclusion, easy male divorce etc. Katherine Bullock who is reverted women of west concludes that the reason behind describing the veil as oppressive is that when the European travellers visited Muslim lands during the colonial period, were annoyed at the face veil that prevented them from seeing the famed beauties of the Muslim's. The niqaab is real cloth piece that

prevented people from seeing the beauty underneath. Thus they became which led them to attack the veil which became a barrier to fulfil their desire¹⁹. She writes that the western tourists became more frustrated when they were seen by Muslim women but they could not see them. The western women feel herself naked when they see the Muslim women wrapped from head to toe whose eyes cannot be seen but are always seeing.²⁰ Likewise, Saher Amer writes when the West and Europe invaded Muslim lands they regarded veil oppressive to justify their invasion that they are rulers. When veil prevented them to fulfil their sexual desires they began to call it oppressive 'degrading prison'. They developed total deviant perceptions of hijab out of lust. They began to think, picturize like that how better it would have been if this hijab (or hijabi Muslim women) were transparent, tight, revealing or half revealing. This was manifest from their dairies and books containing nude and transparent drawings/ pictures of hijabi Muslim women.²¹ However, the orientalist convinced the Muslims that the veil has oppressive nature and degraded the women so they ought to follow west for improvement. These western convinced Muslims accepted the western thought that Muslims are backward and their women degraded and ought to follow the west for their progress. Thus the veil became a symbol of progress or regress of nation²².

Turkey under Ataturk provide one such example who replaced the Arabic Alphabet with Latin script, abolished caliphate, changed dress code, encouraged women to adopt European dress etc. Reformers across the Muslim world like Huda Shaarawi and Seza Nabrawi of Egypt. Jamal Sudki of Iraq, Suraya of Afghanistan agitated for similar kinds of changes in their societies²³. Reza shah banned the veil in 1936 and emphasized that women should take up the banner of modernity and follow the west in every sphere of life²⁴.

West and some westernized Muslims think that aim of the education of women is to earn her living and to acquire the arts of appearing attractive to the male and think that women are meant to add charm and sweetness to community life by her beauty, elegance and attractive manners²⁵. Maryam Jameela depicts the status of women in the west as,

"West insisted that the women must be liberated from domestic servitude and achieve full economic independence through whole-time employment in the industry. The subsequent champions of feminism insisted that women must be granted as much freedom to indulge in illicit sex as men through coeducation, employment outside the home alongside men, mixed social functions and courtship before marriage in semi-nude fashions, mixed social functions which include drinking, drug taking, and dancing with contraceptives, sterilization and abortion to prevent unwanted pregnancies and state-controlled boarding schools, many whom would be illegitimate. This is essence what women concept of women's rights amount to.²⁶

The western perception of purdah is that it prevents from receiving education and taking up the employment, restrict their movement outside the home and result in curtailment of their social participation. Their general view is that purdah affects the overall growth of Muslim women and confine them within the four walls at their

home but the fact is that when the responses were taken from the women wearing hijab, confined that the purdah does not limit their freedom, neither affect their education, but instead give them security as well as modesty and above all they considered it as a religious obligation²⁷. Y. Siddiqui writes that, that backwardness of Muslim women, in general, has been attributed to the prevalence of purdah system. However the images which purdah conjures up in our minds may often bear only a superficial relationship to the actual reality and sufficient attention is seldom paid to the actual nature of the purdah observance and the socio-economic background of the females, the general perspective, therefore, has been too stereotyped and vague.²⁸

The western perception of hijab among the people of the west is that it makes women a radical statement about her violent political ideas and may think that a woman with hijab is the symbol of subjugation and is in dire need to rescue.

In the west, the women who wear hijab face discrimination as this modestly dresses declares them openly as Muslims which for the west is unbearable. A woman in the west who wears hijab finds difficulty to find a job and if she gets a job, she has to work harder than her colleagues in order to prove herself than a woman who does not wear. When the companies in the west, sees a woman with a hijab, immediately make the decision not to hire her because of her religion of choice, as the scarf may not have “a place in their work environment”, completely disregarding any and all skills the applicant may hold. Many discrimination cases happen to women every day and ma the news, local or otherwise. The problems faced by deciding to wear the hijab and by being a practising Muslim in today’s workplace or dreadful. Muslim girls wearing hijab are not allowed to join the school. In September 1994, a 13-year-old Emilie Quimet was sent home from Montreal (Quebec, Canada)’s Louise Riel High School because her hijab did not conform to the school's dress code. Two months later, a second Quebec girl, 15-year-old Dania Baali, was told she would have to transfer to another school from college Regina Ashumta if she wanted to observe hijab. It is hard to believe that why western men have so much fear in their hearts from this piece of cloth on a woman’s head.²⁹

Westerners are often puzzled to see Muslim women covering their bodies more than Muslim men do, and see that as proof of the woman’s inferior status. Islam lays out a dress code for both male and female believers, but the requirements for covering are different: and has to cover his body from navel to knee, and wear opaque, loose clothing while as women should cover the whole body and can expose hands and face depending on his will. Katherine Bullock interviewed many Muslim women about the difference of covering of their bodies of Muslim men and women, and the interview revealed that they are satisfied with this, as these differences are due to inherent differences between men and women. Equality does not mean sameness.³⁰

In addition to above, gendered notions of empowerment, beauty or sexuality and how it should, or should not be portrayed in public are different and quite contrasting in Islam and West. A curious example is a comparison between Muslims and Americans in how they perceive a diamond. When presented with a diamond, a Muslim woman wants to keep it in a safe place where only special people can see it, whereas

American women want to flaunt it so that everyone can see it. This diamond is a reflection of their bodies; with the hijab, a Muslim woman has control over who has an entry because she believes her beauty is a precious that not everyone should see.³¹ The sexual gaze that Muslim women want to avoid is flaunted by American women. A women's beauty (physical attractiveness) is in part judged by nudity³²

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study of the literature reveals that hijab is regarded both as a sign of liberation and oppression by Islam and West respectively. While Islam regards it as a tool of modesty a shield against evil looks, lust and molestation, West considers it as a tool of discrimination and male domination. However western people fail to realize that hijab is a commandment of God and envisages both sexes to lower their gaze and guard their modesty. The literature also reveals that hijab was regarded as discriminatory and oppressive because of the West and European colonialism to justify their rule. Besides it shows differing notions of beauty and sexuality and how it should, or should not be portrayed in public is not just different but quite contrasting in Islam and west. These differing cultural values lie at the core in linking hijab with backwardness or regarding it as a tool of discrimination or oppression.

CONCLUSION

Islam sees the liberation of women as essential, as it considers, modesty, good character, and manners to be the way to achieve such liberation. The veil has various connotations in the western context. A Christian nun wearing a veil is seen as an image of sincere religiosity, purity and peace whereas Muslim women wearing a veil is to be seen as a symbol of the oppression of women and think that she might be supporting the Islamic terrorist organisations.^{33,34} So it is the double standard of the west which tries to create misunderstanding and confusion regarding the principles of Islam. A woman who covers out of the love of Allah is not just stating something about what she accepts but she is also saying something about what she rejects. The notion by the west that the veil is oppressive is to dominate over the Muslims. The wearing of hijab by Muslim women increases her beauty rather than degradation.

The women in society should be accepted for her character and behavior rather than for her outer appearance. Women's emancipation through extreme feminism and liberalism has backfired, caused more calamities, and added suffering in a world that is controlled by men in modern civilization a woman is entitled to honour and respect only to the extent to which she succeeds in performing the functions of man while at the same time exhibiting her maximum beauty and charm to public³⁵ Islam does not tolerate such distorted cultural values. The main difference between the western dress and Islamic dress is that the former's intention is to reveal the figure while the intention of the later is to conceal it, at least in the public³⁶

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