
The Beauty of the Islamic Dress: Is it a Political or a Religious Issue Today?

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Introduction

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world, and comprises well over 20 per cent of the world's population. A large majority are unaware of the fact that every sixth person on the earth is a Muslim and more than 40 countries are predominantly Islamic. Its influence extends from the Middle East and North and East Africa, but beyond those to Europe particularly France, Germany and the United States. Islam is practised by so many people around the world, but it is least understood by people of other faiths.

The Islamic ruling on dress is drawn up from the *Qur'an* (holy book) which instructs all Muslims to ensure that both men and women are clothed modestly in public. These restrictions are solely for modesty whose importance as a virtue is common to Judaism and Christianity as well. A Muslim woman is required to follow the Islamic dress code.

One of the common misconceptions about Islam is that women have no rights. The Muslim dress is considered to be outdated and oppressive by the West. After the September 11, 2001 attack, there were negative media reports towards the Muslim community and particularly of Muslim women. The wearing of the *hijab* by Muslim women has been

distorted by the media in Western society.

One of the reasons may be due to the fact that values in most western and industrialised countries have been changing over the years. For example, when we look back at the position of women in Japan fifty years ago, where it was considered vulgar to swim in a swim suit, but now bikinis are the norm. If however, a woman swam topless she would be regarded as shameless. But on the other hand, to go topless on the south coast of France however, is the norm. On some beaches in America, nudists lie as naked as the day they were born. The definition of what part of a woman's body should remain private to her is altered to suit the whims and fancies of either men or their surrogates who call themselves the feminists.

But in Islam there is no such problem as the Almighty Allah has defined what may and may not be bared and Muslims follow it. Sometimes Muslims are accused of being over sensitive about the Islamic dress but the degree of sexual harassment which occurs these days justifies the modest Islamic dress.

This paper attempts to highlight the definition of the Islamic dress, and how the head scarf worn by Muslim women in some of the western countries have been misinterpreted. It will also analyse how some of the Western countries have failed to regard the Islamic dress as a religious obligation which in no way obstructs the secular or political nature of the respective countries.

The Islamic dress code

In accordance with the Islamic ruling laid down in the *Qur'an*, every Muslim woman is required to wear a scarf or some sort of head covering and loose fitting modest attire. This is not a means of

controlling a woman's sexuality or suppressing her, but rather is used to protect her. By dressing this way, she will not be seen as a mere sex symbol and not subject her to unwanted sexual advances or harassment. Some Muslim women interpret the *Qur'an* and *Hadiths* (sayings and traditions of Prophet Muhammed) as guiding them to dress modestly and cover their heads in public, while others insist that their whole body including their hands and face be covered. While some others understand the guidance to mean a more general attitude of modesty, both in dress and attitude.

According to Rana Kabbani, author of *Imperial Fictions*, the practice of wearing a *hijab* was adopted by Muslims during the Byzantine period when affluent women covered themselves to avoid hungry looks from the rabbis. Another theory is that the garment was made obligatory where wars had created many widows and rape was rampant. This is why women in rural Afghanistan refuse to shed their *chadors*.¹

One may find it interesting to note that the head covering for women is not an Islamic innovation but was practised by Judeo-Christian women centuries earlier, and yet is scoffed at by the West today. Dr. Abdel Azim Sheriff, the author of *Women in Islam versus Women in the Judaeo-Christian Traditions: The Myth and the Reality* says: "It is one of the great ironies of our world today that the very same head scarf revered as a sign of holiness, when worn for the purpose of showing the authority of men by Catholic Nuns, is reviled as a sign of oppression when worn for the purpose of protection by Muslim women." Of course, no one says anything bad when they see a statue of Mary wearing a veil and no one yells at nuns, many of whom wear a dress similar to the Islamic dress.

Even Hindu women wear a veil, a practice that highlights the fact that veiling is not exclusively worn by Muslim women. Traditional and orthodox Hindu women cover their heads and at least partly obscure their faces in the company of unrelated adult males. Sometimes veiling is accomplished with a loose end of the women's sari and sometimes it is done with a scarf like fabric known as the *dupatta*.

The Islamic dress comes in a variety of styles and worn differently from country to country. For example, the *burka* comes in many variations. It thoroughly covers the face of the person wearing it, leaving only a mesh like section to see through. The *burka* is not a religious innovation, but rather one with roots in the pre-Islamic cultures of Persia and India. The word *hijab* refers to the variety of styles in which Muslim women use scarves and large pieces of cloth to cover their hair, neck and sometimes shoulders. In the United States, the *hijab* is the most common form of a head covering for Muslim women. While the *chador*, a full body cloak which Muslim women in Iran are expected to wear outdoors. Depending on how it is designed and on how the woman holds it, the *chador* may or may not cover the face. Many Iranians today subvert their dress code by wearing Western style clothing beneath the *chador*.

In Pakistan, Muslim women wear the *nikab* which is another form of Muslim veiling that comes closest to what is actually meant by the English word "veil." It covers everything below the bridge of the nose and the upper cheeks and sometimes also covers the forehead.

The *hijab* in no way prevents a woman from playing her role as an important individual in a society nor does it make her inferior.²

One of the benefits of adorning the veil is that it is a protection for women. Muslims believe that when women display their beauty to

everybody, they degrade themselves by becoming objects of sexual desire and become vulnerable to men, who look at them as "gratification for the sexual urge."³ *Hijab* solves the problem of sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances which is so demeaning for women, when men get mixed signals and believe that women want their advances by the way they reveal their bodies.

The western ideology of "if you have it, you should flash it" is quite opposite to the Islamic principle where the purpose is not to bring attention to ones self, but to be modest. Women in so many societies are just treated as sex symbols and nothing more than just a body who "display themselves to get attention."⁴ A good example is in advertising where a woman's body is used to sell products. Women are constantly degraded and subjected to reveal more and more of themselves.

The dress code in Islamic countries

The Islamic dress code is practised by Muslim women in Islamic countries. For example, in Afghanistan women wear the *burka*. While in Saudi Arabia, women are compelled by law not only to cover their hair, but also their faces and hands, and they are instructed to wear a black cloak known as *abaya* to cover their bodies. Saudi Arabia is one of the most "fundamentalist" Islamic nations in the world, and it supposedly implemented Islamic law to ensure peace and justice.

In Turkey, though roughly two-thirds of Turkish women are said to cover their heads, the scarf is banned in Parliament, government offices, universities and secondary schools. In Turkey, women should have the choice to put on *hijab*. A Turkish woman Merve Kavakoi was ousted from parliament for wearing an Islamic head scarf, and stripped

of her citizenship in mid May 1999. The campaign to oust her from the Parliament was led by the new Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit. His Cabinet decided to strip her of Turkish citizenship as soon as the new Government was formed. Turkey's secular establishment sees the head scarf as the flag of "political Islam" and "fundamentalism." Kavakoi was one of the three women who was elected in the parliamentary election. Although the dress code specified in the parliamentary by laws does not mention anything about head scarves, women are forbidden from wearing the *hijab* in state offices. *Hijab* is also banned in universities and government run hospitals. Thus, the devout are forced to choose between a government job and obeying Islamic edicts, between education and faith.

Egypt unlike Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran does not require women to wear a veil. Those who choose to cover up wear a wide range of styles from elegant scarves to full length gowns live and work side by side with unveiled women and their male colleagues. But in recent years, more and more Egyptian young women are choosing the veil. Many of them seem to consider the veil as a sign of modesty while others say they want to avoid harassment. But many who have decided to wear the veil say it is not always an easy choice, even in a predominantly Islamic country like Egypt. In Egypt, Nerin Salem, a former co-pilot at a charter airline showed up for work wearing a tight head scarf and her flying uniform was sacked. "The veil doesn't obstruct me from doing anything. It's not up to anyone to either prevent women from wearing the veil or enforcing that women wear the veil" Salem said. She's fighting her former employer's decision in court. The company justified its move saying she was not wearing the correct uniform because the veil was not part of the official dress of

blue trousers, white shirt and a pilot's cap.⁵

In Iran, the *chador* was forbidden under the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah who was brought to power with the help of the United States and sought to modernise the country. After the Shah was exiled during the Islamic Revolution in the 1979 the *chador* became a required wear for all Iranian women.⁶

Thus, the *hijab* which is often little more than a piece of cloth but sometimes encompassing a full length veil has become a measuring stick the West uses to determine the degree of modernity and the potential for political pluralism in Islamic countries.

Status of muslim women wearing the Islamic dress in the West

The issue of Muslim women wearing traditional head scarves in public is getting quite a bit of attention in Europe and North America.

It often comes as a surprise to Western feminists that the veil has become increasingly common in the Muslim world, and is often worn proudly by college girls as a symbol of identity. Dr. Laila al Maryati, President and spokeswoman for the Muslim Women's League in California says that the word "veil" does not even have a universal meaning. In some cultures, it refers to a face covering known as *niqab*. In others, to a simple head scarf known as *hijab*. Other manifestations of veil include an all encompassing outer garment like the ankle length *abaya* from the Persian Gulf states, the *chador* in Iran or the *burka* in Afghanistan and the *dupatta* in Pakistan.

Though the United States is not a Islamic country, it is supposed to be the "land of freedom" and it is interesting to see how Muslim women are treated. For example, many American Muslim women are discriminated against because they cover their heads. Rose Hamid, a

company employee was promptly fired by her company because she began wearing a head scarf. Arjum Smith, another American Muslim faced the same problem as Rose Hamid when she was fired from her job at The Gap because with her head scarf she was considered an "undesirable" sales lady.⁷ This discrimination, even if unintentional is rampant and the US people just don't treat you the same, once you start covering your hair. They try and cheat me out of change. They think I'm a foreigner and I have been here for a long time. I wear American clothes, but I wear a scarf. The scarf changes everything says Tayibah Taylor, editorial director of Sisters, a Magazine of Dialogue among Muslim women. It is wearing of the head scarf by Muslim women that the Americans perceive as a sign of oppression and tyranny.

In the United States. after the September 11, 2001 attack, the traditional form of Muslim dress has become a target for some angry Americans. Some women had their scarves ripped off or had cigarette lighters thrust at their heads. In Pittsburgh, women wearing the *hijab* were taunted at bus stops.⁸

In the U.S.A. many American Muslims cringed when they heard about Sultana Freedman, a woman from Florida who maintained that removing her veil from her driver's licence photo violated her religious beliefs. Although she lost her law suit against the state in an Orlando court, the controversy promises to contribute negatively to the atmosphere of misunderstanding that already permeates in American society.⁹

Again in Oklahoma, in the U.S. a 11 year old girl was sent home from a public school because her head scarf contravened the dress code. In this case, the Justice Department filed a complaint against the

Muskogee Public School District saying officials were wrong to suspend a 11 year old Muslim girl for refusing to remove her head scarf. The complaint seeks to force the school to change its dress code policy to "ensure there is no discrimination on the basis of religion."

Meanwhile, in Britain, at the end of October 2003, committal proceedings took place in the case of Hazel Dick, a 42 year old science teacher from Peterborough, who has been charged with religiously aggravated assault after allegedly forcing a Muslim pupil to remove her *hijab*, a charge which she denied.

In France, which is a home to Europe's biggest population, a row broke out after the decision to ban the wearing of the *hijab* in schools and public buildings. The French establishment claimed that the head scarf is not merely a religious symbol, but a form of politics, that was unacceptable to a secular society like France. When French President Jacques Chirac made a proposal on December 17, 2002 that head scarves and other conspicuous religious symbols be banned from state schools to take effect with the new school year in September 2004 to protect France's secular foundations, thousands of people mainly Muslim women marched enmasse in Paris shouting "The veil my choice." Most of the demonstrators shouted in rhyming slogans "I chose the head scarf, not my brother or husband." In February 2004, the lower house of the French parliament adopted by a crushing majority to approve the law banning head scarves. The Senat, the upper house of the parliament approved the law by a similar majority in March 2004.

France of denying Muslims human rights also encourages other countries to adopt a law that bans girls from wearing traditional head scarves in public schools.

Thus, the battle over the *hijab* is not only happening in France, but

in countries like Germany with about 3.5 million Muslims. In fact, the state of Hesse on February 10, 2004 proposed legislation to prevent Muslim civil servants from wearing the head scarf. Similarly, Batavia and Baden Wurtemberg are proposing to introduce legislation similar to France.

In Germany, an Afghan born teacher was barred from wearing a head scarf at work in Stuttgart school. In September 2003, Germany's highest court decided that the school authorities had acted illegally, and that in future federal states should have the final say in such cases. In the case of Fereshita Ludin, a German citizen of Afghan heritage, raises sensitive questions about religious expression in government institutions. She has been denied a teaching job, and her plight is challenging nation's struggle with non-discrimination at a time when the country is growing wary of immigration and the role of Islam in Europe. The court's split decision did not directly answer the question of whether female government employees have a right to wear head scarves for religious reasons. The court urged the state to pass such a law, a move certain to instigate public debate on religious tolerance toward the nation's nearly three million Muslims. There is a very heated debate in Germany over Muslims.¹⁰ This is one of the many instances of the contentious issue being raised in Western Europe.

Muslim women in *hijab* are regularly told by Canadians, "This is Canada, You're free here. You don't have to wear that thing on your head." Nur, a university student discovered one day that this view of *hijab* can lead people to be quite hostile. At university one day, a woman angrily approached her, asking why Nur was dressed like that, bringing herself so much attention and bringing "backwardness" to Canada, when feminists had worked so hard for the cause of women

for the last twenty years.¹¹

In Sydney, Australia many women are choosing to wear the *hijab* or head scarf to show pride in their religion and encourage others to understand Islam. At a time when the wearing of the veil has come under intense attack in some European countries, Muslim women in Sydney are taking up the practice in unprecedented numbers.

Similarly, American Muslims fear the French edict could be a signal of their future here, where their Muslim identity is rapidly emerging in public, just as it has in Europe over the last decade. An increasing number of American Muslims women and school girls are deciding to wear the head scarf called *hijab* in schools, government offices, shopping malls, universities and restaurants. For many Muslims the head scarf is a religious symbol and a religious obligation.

Is wearing the head scarf a political or a religious issue?

The recent ban on wearing the head scarf by Muslim women in public schools in France has become a venomous attack against Islam and particularly on Muslim women. Although during the parliamentary debate, the government insisted that the law to ban the head scarf in public schools was not an attack on religious freedom and certainly not an attack on Islam. It seems that it was intended to reinforce the principle that France is a secular country which permitted all religions but encouraged none. But the law as it currently stands attempts to define head scarves as "ostentatious" or constituting an act of provocation, proselytism, or propaganda. There is disparity in the way in which religion is viewed in France. When Muslims wear the Islamic dress, it is described as political, but when Christians celebrate

displaying Christmas tress, decorations and nun's costumes it is tolerated by French secular elite. Therefore, the prompters of religious tolerance single out Islam as the exception to the rule. The banning of the *hijab* for Muslim women and the tolerance shown to Christianity and Christian festivals not only demonstrates the duplicity of the West, but it also reveals how secularism has been protected and maintained by France as a Western country.

While in Germany, on April 1, 2004 the parliament of Baden Wurttemberg in Stuttgart adopted a law that bans the wearing of Muslim head scarves by female teachers in state schools. Similar measures are making their way through in three of Germany's 16 states. These bills tend to prevent religious fanaticism spreading among Germany's 3.2 million Muslims. Unlike the French parliament's ban on pupils in state schools wearing religious symbols which was adopted in early 2004, the Baden-Wurttemberg law bans head scarves while specifically allowing the display of Christian symbols. "Because of its layers of meanings, the head scarf has no place in our schools" Annette Schawan, the state education minister, argues. The veil she said, is a political statement that stands for the oppression of women and Islamic fundamentalism.

Germany differs from secular France in knowing no strict separation of church and state. State schools regulated at the regional level may be instructed to teach Christian or Western values. Yet the state is also bound by a duty of neutrality meaning that it must treat members of all religions equally.

Therefore, banning the *hijab* has nothing to do with protecting Muslim women, but aims at protecting secular values and the separation of religion from political affairs. Thus the Western attack upon the

Islamic dress is seen as a force upon the Muslim community to adopt secular values and to reject the values of Islam.

Commenting on the head scarf issue, Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council of American Islamic Relations in Washington said: "A nation cannot claim to uphold the principles of liberty and equality while denying the religious rights of its citizens."¹² While the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt an organisation founded in 1928 had this to say: "The secular philosophy on which the French president based his decision to support this proposal, considering the *hijab* a religious symbol, is not correct. The Islamic *hijab* is a religious duty."¹³ In other words, for many in the Muslim world, women are required to wear the head scarf in obedience to God.

But in countries where majority of women cover their heads voluntarily such as Egypt and where it is mandatory in Iran and Saudi Arabia, the West assumed women are captives of their male dominated, medieval societies. But many Muslim women whether they are doctors, lawyers, or housekeepers in the United States or abroad say they prefer to wear a head scarf for many reasons including a belief that maintaining modest dress offers more equality in sexually obsessed societies.

Conclusion

Muslim women regaining their true identity and role in society, are wearing *hijab* and embracing the concept of liberation for women. In fact, they have the rightful place that Islam had endowed upon them fourteen hundred years ago.

It is an honour for a Muslim woman to obey the Almighty Allah and adhere to the rules of the Islamic dress. She should not feel

pressured to adopt the Western or the Eastern view of dress in public or private life. Islam should be the yardstick by which a Muslim woman measures her actions and not traditions or Western cultures.

France, after imposing a controversial ban on religious symbols in state schools, from September 2004 expelled two girls on October 19, 2004 for wearing Muslim head scarves. In Paris, Education Minister Francois Fillon said about 70 girls around France risk expulsion by refusing to bare their heads despite warnings from school officials.¹⁴

The wearing of head scarf by Muslim students in French schools could have been respected by the French government as a religious belief and practice of students as long as it did not disrupt the school routine nor pose a threat to discipline, I suppose the feeling still persists among non Muslims that Muslim women wear the *hijab* simply because they are slaves to traditions or seen as a symbol of oppression.

For many pious Muslims, the head scarf is neither a religious symbol nor a political tool. To deny them this right, in their view is to stand in the way of their religious salvation. There are dozens of testimonies from Muslim women across the world giving their reasons as to why they prefer to wear the head scarf. For most of them, the veil symbolises the subjugation of women in Islam. Others, including converts to Islam in countries ranging from the United States to Japan, have similar arguments to justify the reasons for wearing the head scarf. In their view, the wearing of the veil liberates women from the sexual gaze of men. In Suharto's Indonesia, dress was regarded as a sign of ignorance and backwardness and actively discouraged in schools until the early 1990s. But today Indonesian women have taken to wearing head scarves together with full make up and a variety of fashionable clothes. In contemporary Iran, where wearing the *hijab* is

enforced by law, many younger women have taken to wearing the smallest possible piece of cloth on their heads.

The dress code does not hinder Muslim women from doing anything productive in their lives. In fact, they hold a variety of jobs under necessity, none of which are devalued nor hampered due to their dress. In early October 2003, Iran's first public officers joined the force. In Iran, despite the *chador*, women vote and a woman is a deputy speaker of the Parliament. It should be noted that Islamic countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh have already had Muslim women as head of states.

The issue of the head scarf in France has become in large part who controls women. The question arises whether they are subject to French laws and the deeply held principle of church-state separation or to their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Is it necessary for French Muslim women living in a democratic country to owe service to their religion or to their nation? Although the head scarf is harmless, it is seen as an impediment to the assimilation of Muslims into French society and especially to the social equality of women.

I personally feel that people should be allowed to practice their religion unimpeded by government, specially if it does not impede the activities of the state. I suppose when France imposes a ban on wearing the *hijab* in public schools, some girls may not go to school or in a spirit of rebellion more and more would take up wearing scarves.

The ban on head scarves in France might look specifically French because the tradition of secularism is much stronger there than in most European countries. The battle over the *hijab* is not only happening in France but in some of the states in Germany such as Bavaria and Baden-Wurtemberg.

The ban on head scarf is likely to be counter productive precisely because the head scarf has so many different meanings, both to those who wear it and to others around them. Girls whose parents force them to wear it are likely to be withdraw their children from French public schools and send them to single faith schools.

In my opinion, schools should respect religious beleifs and practices of students as long as they do not disrupt the school routine or pose threat to discipline. To seek a ban on religious symbols in schools is not the right policy. I wonder why people say nothing about the veil when worn by Catholic nuns but criticise vehemently the veil worn by Muslim women, regarding it as a symbol of terrorism and oppression.

Footnotes

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