

Issues/Discussion Forum

Veil is Anti-Qoran

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As Muslims are facing increased threat in several countries, like the unending public lynching and the recent open call for genocide by the Hindutva militia in India, some sections of them are shrinking into their shells. Hijab or veil is one expression of this shrinking phenomena. This uniform, often black, loose covering over one's dress, known as *pardah* in south Asia and *hijab* or *abaya* in west Asia, has been spreading fast among Muslim women in the recent years. Even in places like Kerala- the southern Indian coastal state where the Islamic theology first landed on the subcontinent- where it was unheard of thirty years ago, one can see the public spaces dotted with black veil wearing women, and occasionally those who cover even the face.

The veiling of women is a great challenge that Islam faces today next only to the escalating Islamophobia. Veil comes from a grotesque distortion of the Quran and it reflects a world view that cripples the Muslim societies in its move forward and a marked departure from the historical period it had been a society seeking and generating knowledge. It is surprising that the veil has reached, though limited in scale, places like Jakarta where I could not find a woman wearing it in any form in the late 1980s, much like Kerala. The proscription of veil in public places in countries like France and Switzerland creates a new level of distrust between their Muslim societies and the respective States.

It is therefore interesting to see what exactly the Quran says and does not say about the veil. This is important especially since Muslims call themselves the 'people of the book', meaning they follow this single book on religious matters. However, the Quran says nothing about the veil. It does not even use the word hijab (veil) anywhere to mean any form of dress. The Quran's view is the opposite of veil. It asks men and women to 'wear your beautiful apparel' in chapter 7 verse 31, and in the next verse it asks the reactionary men as to who has given them the right to forbid the beautiful things god has given men and women, which also marks a negation of asceticism. A few verses earlier in the same chapter the Quran says that god has bestowed raiment upon men and women not only to cover their nakedness but also as an adornment. Interestingly, even this dress is not taken as too serious a thing, let alone an obsession, as the verse says, 'but the raiment of righteousness is the best.' The focus of the Quran is righteousness and virtue, not any kind of dress. And yet, dress has come to become the defining factor of identity for a section of the Muslim society. Iran has made hijab mandatory for women, though interestingly women were penalised for wearing it by the Shah

regime in the 1930s. After long years of hijab imposition Saudi Arabia has recently lifted the ludicrous requirement of hijab.

The Quran advises the women folks to wear a ceremonial cloak (*jilbab*) as a mark of social honour when they travel outside (chapter 33, verse 59). This is similar to what Arab men also wear, which was exported to Europe during the latter period of crusades and subsequently turned into a ceremonial attire for city mayors and students at convocations, and found its way to several colonies including India. Can god be so insensible as to suggest women to wear hijab/abayaya/purdah and a cloak over it? Orthodoxies and patriarchy are devoid of logic and reason.

A standard practice of the hijab champions has been to remorselessly contort a Quranic verse that asks women to cover their bosoms, and to follow etiquette when they have visitors.

The Quran asks women to cover their bosoms (24.31) as women were not covering bosoms in non-winter months in many societies those days, not only in Arabia but in Kerala too where the simple right of covering the torso was given to 'lower' caste Hindu women against a 'breast tax' imposed by the local king until a century and a half ago when this tax was abolished. The catch is here, while the Quran asks women to cover the bosoms with any piece of cloth the pathological distortion says that they are asked to cover the bosoms with their 'face cover', falsely suggesting that the Quran mentions about such a despicable covering of the human face, which amounts to blasphemy. The patriarchy even makes the asinine argument based on the later part of the same verse that the Quran dictates women not to display their ornaments in public, criminally undermining that the reference is only to the inner ornaments worn under the cloth- like the waist chain- and categorically exempting ordinarily worn ornaments. These men have scant respect for the book they claim to be holy.

While the West African women of various faiths wear beautifully styled, colourful head gears and most south Asian women still wear a graceful, flowing shawl on head, the recent practice of wrapping the head with a scarf that almost looks like a bandage is devoid of any sense of aesthetics. It is hard to imagine how Muslim women have got such a practice of head gear.

The obsession with covering the body of the female is not exclusive to Muslims. In rural north India married Hindu women cover their head and face, not only in public, but also in homes where other men like a father-in-law are present. This is a practice known as *Ghoonghat*. Religions, nearly all, consider the female hair as a kind of sex organ to be covered at least during worship as in churches of some denominations and in gurudwaras, while the burden of head cover in Sikhism is otherwise on men. The secular state too had the obsession with the female dress, it was not too long ago that some US beaches had policemen

with measuring tapes to measure the length of the shorts worn by women to make sure that they follow the prescribed minimum length.

Religious people do not actually care what the scriptures say even as they hold it solemn but follow what they have been conditioned to believe. The lynching and hate campaign in the name of beef is happening in India when Manusmriti, the vedic law book, in its section called *Mamsavidhi* says if a person who is officiating or a guest at a sacred function does not eat meat, he will be reborn as a beast twenty one times as a punishment. That is the case with hijab too. Even as Muslims claim they have a single book, they actually follow the several books by central Asian chroniclers who claim that their works are the sayings and deeds of prophet Mohammed, collected from hearsay a good three centuries after the death of the prophet, many of which are incompatible with the Quran and often negating the Quranic teachings. However, even in this body of *Hadith* one cannot find a reference to the veil as a religious mandate.

It is important that Muslims reclaim the Quran, discarding the distorting interpretations by patriarchal men. That will be a key step in the struggle against Islamophobia.

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