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Islamic Women Clothing

Have you ever seen someone walking down the street wearing a head scarf? No, not the scarf you wear when you're outside under a cold winter night. I'm talking about the scarf that covers a woman's head—including the hair—and framing the face. If you're in a place where it's not the norm to wear such a thing and you see someone wearing one then you might either look a little longer than necessary or do a double take. But whatever reaction you may have, the sight caught your attention for a moment. A moment that, when delved deeper, would give rise to questions and speculations. Questions such as: what is the point of wearing that? Where did that originally come from in history? What *is* that? So, if you thought about things like religion, veil, Arab, Islam, or Muslim then you're on the right track.

The person you've seen is actually a female follower of the religion Islam. Islam is the second largest monotheistic religion in the world next to Christianity. Its followers known as Muslims are spread around the world, mostly in Asia which has about 60% of the 1.5 billion Islamic community population, and the rest in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. You've probably heard of terms such as Christian Arabs, American Muslim, Arab Muslim, *and* Muslim Arabs. And you've most likely confused one from the other at some point, especially the last two, thinking that they're the same. Actually, they mean the same thing but it's important to understand that Arabs and Muslims are two different things. Arab is a nationality or a generic term used to describe a person living in the Arab region (Middle East), while Muslim is simply

someone who follows Islam. Arabs can take any religion (e.g. Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs) while Muslims can be of any nationality (e.g. American Muslim, Arab Muslim). You'd be surprised to know that no more than 20% of Muslims live in an Arabic-speaking world. The wrong idea of *Muslims are Arabs* and *Arabs are Muslims* probably came from the fact that the Arab region is where most religions, including Islam, originated and that the prophet Muhammad (Mohammed) who founded Islam was of Arabian descent. It is then of no surprise that some teachings of Muhammad, recorded in the Islamic holy book Qur'an, such as the proper way of clothing would come from them.

The Arabs were originally desert dwelling people of Middle East. No clear full historical accounts are known before the rise of Islam in the sixth century but one group is known to have lived as nomads in the Arabian Desert; the Bedouins. Due to the dry, hot, and sandy surroundings, the best protection they can apply on their bodies against these harsh elements were loose-fitting clothes that can cover the whole body, including the face. The earliest known female Pre-Islamic Arab clothing was described by Herodotus in fifth century B.C. as a "long flowing garment caught in with a belt," called *zeira*. Another was *izar*, a "large sheet-like wrap worn as mantle and long loin as cloth," which is a reflection of the Muslim way of placing the cloth around the waist then above the shoulders. In particular, Arabian women wore their clothes covering everything except one eye; a practice which spread to Iran, Southern Algeria, and Morocco (Stillman 9).

The founding of Islam in 610 A.D. by Muhammad in the Middle East spread throughout the region with the important exception of Israel (Fairservis 53). The clothing practices carried on from the Arabs with "new moral sensibilities by Islam." As Stillman put it, it was functionalism tempered with ideology (9). A closely related verse from the Qur'an is:

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 beauty except to their husbands...

-Qur'an 24:31

The verse goes on stating particular people to whom veiling wouldn't be necessary but the more pressing matter was this new issue of morality that comes into surface. It wasn't new for the female Arabs who converted to Islam to wear such clothing because they initially wore them for ecological reasons. However, with the Islamic faith, fully clothing themselves had a whole new meaning to it. It became a symbol. Covering the head, or veiling, became a normal thing as a sign of modesty for themselves and respect for Allah, most importantly observed during prayer just as the Jews covered their heads (Stillman 16).

At the same time, Muslim women started creating varieties of the prescribed clothing. They were enveloped in *jilbab*, a long loose-fitting coat that fulfilled the clothing requirement, including a head veil called *mandil* or *mindil*. There were three types of face veil: *qina*, a rectangular piece of fabric that covered the head and fell down like a curtain over the face; *litham*, a rectangular cloth covering the nose and lower half of the face; and *burqu*, a harness-like fabric suspended from the center front of the head band covering the face. In terms of footwear, there were two kinds: *na'l* (literally "sandal"), a sandal made from palm fibre, smooth leather, or leather with animal hair; and *khuff*, a shoe or boot made of leather (Stillman 20-21).

In 633 A.D., as Islam expanded its influence and Muslim grew in numbers throughout the region, Muslim Arabs conquered areas such as the Fertile Crescent and great empires such as the Persian Empire. They eventually overwhelmed the Middle East and the new Domain of Islam

took over three cultural zones with different modes of dress. First was Arabia, with loose flowing untailored clothes favored by Muhammad during his time. Second was the Hellenistic Mediterranean with their tunics and wraps. Last, the Irano-Turkic Central Asia with fitted or tailored clothes (coats, jackets, trousers) seemingly opposed to Arabia (Stillman 29), but whose clothing ideas appealed to the West in later centuries due to their added comfort and practicality. Because of this, bloomers and trousers were introduced for the women in 1850s as clothing reform, replacing corsets and petticoats (Winter).

Changes in Islamic Arab clothing occurred during the Umayyad Dynasty, the first Muslim dynasty after the death of Muhammad, in 661-750 A.D. when Muslim bourgeoisie indulged in clothing. Contrary to what Muhammad believed to be unnecessary, Muslims wore their clothes made from high-quality fabrics such as silk, brocade, and satin with decorations patterned on them (Stillman 31). Even the veiling of all women became a mark of “prestige and symbols of status” only the wealthy could afford. Veiling also became a lifestyle available only to women who didn’t do manual labor considering that such clothing would only hinder a laborious work. In addition, veiling was “restricted to respectable women thus prohibited to prostitute[s],” which can be attributed to Middle-Assyrian Laws (750-612 BCE) more than 1200 years before Islam was established (Shirazi). However, today, all Muslim women are allowed to veil by Islamic Law regardless of their position or status.

The transition to Western clothing was a process that began in 1830s in a non-Arab Islamic Turkey. It gained momentum in the Muslim Arab world during the latter half of the nineteenth towards the early twentieth century. It began with footwear, possibly because it was the least controversial part of Muslim women attire, when Khedive Ismail’s wife of the Muhammad Ali Dynasty (1805-1953) wore “regal tradition garb, but with high-heeled satin

shoes rather than the traditional flat-soled *khuff* or the slipper-like *babuj*” (Stillman 167).

Evidently, Islamic countries which bordered Europe and Asia like Turkey were slowly being influenced by their Western counterparts’ idea of openness and transparency. Besides that, more Islamic nations had rulers or governments that believed in secularism and modernism. So during the turn of the century in 1900’s, veiling was associated with women’s oppression under Islam. The veil was transformed from an ecological and ideological symbol into an object of political, social, and religious interests (Shirazi 4). Countries such as Iran and Turkey started prohibiting the veil in public. Iran had a ruler named Reza Shah who banned the veil in 1936 but later the rule was changed to be compulsory when the country became an official Islamic Republic in 1979. Turkey, after becoming a secular state in 1923, had a regulation in 1982 specifying female civil servants’ heads should be uncovered in public institutions. This regulation was annulled in the first quarter of 2008 thanks to Prime Minister Erdogan’s campaign of lifting it but was then retracted on that same year through the decision of the Court that veiling was against the principles of the Constitution.

The negative reaction towards the veil was not foreign in the West. In Western Europe, France, where the largest Muslim population is, banned the wearing of headscarves or any other “conspicuous signs” of religious symbols in state schools in 2004 (Borneman). Further debates about the veil went on and finally, on June 2009, French President Sarkozy moved to ban the *burqa*, a type of veil. He said, “The *burqa* is not a religious sign. It is a sign of subservience, a sign of debasement” (Bremner). In reaction, Muslim leaders from the Muslim Council of Britain warned the president that he risks fuelling hostility towards Islam (Wardrop). However, that didn’t stop Belgium from banning the face-covering veil (*burqa*) in its country. Last March 31, 2010, it officially passed the law and when approved, Belgium will be the first European country

to make the wearing of a Muslim wear illegal. Note that the ban is only for any type of garment concealing the whole face making it unrecognizable like the *burqa* but not necessarily the more common—and less controversial—veil type *hijab* or *niqab* (Charter).

Hijab (from *hajaba*) could mean different things in different places to different people. In the Muslim Qur'an, it is not clothing but a special curtain to protect privacy. This is where the term *veiling* came from. In Arabic, it denotes a modest dress for women (Borneman). Similar to the Arabic definition, in the modern era it generally means modest attire that covers the torso, hair, and limbs (Stillman 158). In contemporary feminist and political discourse, it is interchangeably used with *khimar*, a headscarf that covers the hair along with neck and bosom. Also, in a more objective description, *hijab* refers to a thing that veils, conceals, covers, protects or denies penetration between two things. But whatever definition *hijab* has, it all comes down to one thing: it is modest clothing that doesn't require the face to be covered up. Some exceptions, extended versions rather, to this rule is *yashmaq* and *niqab* (literally "face veil"), from *naqaba*, which refers to face veil or garment covering the face and body, leaving out the eyes open for the public to see (Abdul).

Although *hijab* was initially intended to frame the face, the most extreme and politicized of veil variations is called the black *burqa* (Borneman) – "[a] robe with attached head piece that tightly covers the entire head" (Fairservis 72). In Afghanistan, it is spelled slightly different—*burka*—but the function remains the same: to cover the entire head and prevent sight altogether. To better understand the extremity of the black *burqa* compared to *hijab* or *niqab*, think about sunglasses. We usually wear sunglasses as protection against the bright sunlight. Others, like high-profile persons, wear dark sunglasses to protect their identity. Now imagine that type of sunglass in the form of clothing – a long, dark cloth that covers the whole face instead of just the

eyes. That is the black *burqa*. And this practice that opposes Western ideals of “democracy, tolerance, openness, multiculturalism, [and] transparency” (Abdul) is what caused France and Belgium to ban the *burqa*.

Despite the heated debates on *burqa*, fashion designers seized the opportunity to take ideas from the clothing in question. French designers showcased a *burqa*-inspired Fall 2010 collection in Paris, a theme initiated by popular French label Givenchy in its Fall/Winter 2009 show (Paris Designers React to Burqa Ban). I had the chance to see this show on television and I was in awe of the beauty of the clothes. The designers managed to portray the potential of Muslim wear and highlighted the uniqueness of such traditional style. This industrial influence isn't only happening in the West; in the East where majority of Muslims are, Muslim clothing is steadily increasing in popularity and there is news that Malaysia is vying to be the Muslim Fashion Center in the world (Islamizing Clothes).

As Muslim apparel fires up political debates in Europe, it simultaneously “appears to be emerging as a significant sector in fashion industry” (Islamizing Clothes). Nevertheless, it is necessary to focus on why wearing the veil is essential to Islamic women. Abdul writes that the function of veiling was to define Muslim identity, perform behavior check, resist sexual objectification, and afford more respect. Simply put, veiling enables Muslim women to express themselves as followers of Islam in our society, just as the reason for wearing a cross by Christians and wearing the Jewish hat, *kippah*, by Jews. It eventually comes down to the point of which things we see are permissible in our society with our so-called Western ideals. Should we allow this practice and have the same level of tolerance for the fully-veiled Muslims as we have for the others? Or is it asking too much from us? Should we then remove this separation and

decide for ourselves what we deem right or wrong? By asking ourselves these questions, we gain a deeper understanding of this difference and we begin to realize its implications.

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