

Understanding Hijab

By Saulat Pervez

Over the course of centuries, perhaps more so as secularism grew and multiculturalism became widespread, hijab has gained much symbolism. Interestingly enough, it has come to simultaneously represent both freedom and oppression to different groups of people.

For those who favor it, it is a liberating experience, an external expression of their love for God and/or a required tenet of Islam that must be fulfilled by each and every woman. For those who oppose it, it is a public manifestation of one's religion in an increasingly irreligious world, a threat to progress and/or a relic of an unnecessary, obsolete practice. In the middle, we have a sea of people who ignore it, view it with a detached objectivity and/or look upon it with curious ambivalence. In short, everyone seems to have an opinion about it, from "feel the power" to "let others be" to "down with hijab". From a practicing Muslim's perspective, though, there's more to it than just the symbolic value. Like Islam, hijab is a way of life, something the impact of which cannot be quantified and whose impression cannot be underestimated.

Introducing Hijab

How do we introduce hijab to our young girls? Is it thrust upon them when they reach puberty, or are they allowed to accept it out of their own will? Do we educate them about it, or do we simply demand acceptance? Do we give them time to sensitize themselves and provide opportunities for them to experience hijab in a positive way? Lastly, do we all of a sudden realize the importance of religion for our children when they begin to grow up, or do we make it a part of their lives from their infancy in a beautiful way?

The approach is extremely important. Maintaining a friendly attitude with our children and establishing an atmosphere where disagreements and dialogues are allowed become the building blocks for a firm foundation, one that lasts through hardship and ease, through rebellions and adaptations. Furthermore, they will not truly practice Islam unless they see us do it with eagerness, with earnestness and without discrepancies.

Internalization of hijab is the key, but it does not come automatically. It has to be nurtured and cultivated, often long before the need for a girl to actually wear the headscarf.

Impact

I once met three sisters who lived in Jeddah. Raised in Saudi Arabia by non-practicing parents, they were quite accustomed to wearing their black gowns and covering their hair and even faces when they stepped out of their home. Interestingly, as soon as they reached another house, they would take it all off, even if strangers were present. The same behavior occurred at home when company was around. For them, hijab had a meaning and use only if you were on the street, to them, hijab had no personal, private impact. They had been socialized into this behavior.

It so happened that one by one they went to England for higher education. They unanimously claim that it was there that they found and began to practice true Islam, an Islam full of meaning and personal impact. They experienced their religion firsthand in the company of other people who were enthusiastically interested in learning about God's teachings and who didn't share their cultural baggage. They, then, pondered the why to many things, including hijab. They returned to Saudi Arabia, and they now embrace their external garments (to the initial mystification of their parents) armed with an understanding of the purpose of the once routine and meaningless act.

For these three, as their iman grew, hijab became a manifestation of their newfound identities. Interestingly, hijab's actual impact is much more. For instance, common sense tells us that in itself hijab, the cloth, does not bring modesty and spirituality to one's life; it must be the other way around. Similarly, once adopted, it may represent someone's transforming religiosity, but we should remember that veiling on its own is not the end of the journey. It may be somewhere near the beginning or the middle, depending on when it is embraced, but never the end. In reality, along with its symbolic significance, it becomes a tangible reminder, not just in terms of a code of modesty, but also as a personal pledge to continue to strive toward spiritual excellence. Therefore, a curious duality is at work; veiling becomes a lasting decision, not just as a reflection of our beliefs, but also as a commitment toward change.

This determination does not come without obstacles. After all, no matter how strong one's beliefs are, wearing hijab has a price. Along with the respect with which many view it, come questions like "What's with the kerchief?" and the rude behavior one may encounter at the bank, school, grocery store, mall, etc. These events remind one that hijab is a loaded statement. In fact, even among the Muslims, muhajjabahs are sometimes pigeonholed.

Saulat Pervez graduated from Rutgers University majoring in journalism. She is a staff writer of the Message International.

Impression

A few years ago, I was a guest at a wedding in Buffalo. The wedding included a Christian-style nikaah ceremony, a toast and dancing. Clad in my hijab and modest clothing, I clearly stood out as "different." During dinner (which was not halal except for the sea food and vegetarian option), someone on our table asked my husband if I was a vegetarian since I had refused all meat and taken pasta. The first time someone bothered to address me directly was halfway into the evening. One of the women asked me casually, almost as an after-thought, "So, what do you do?" She could see that even during the event, I was quite busy with my two small children.

When I replied that I am a writer, I suddenly became the center of attention as everyone threw various questions at me. At that point, while relishing the idea that this was my chance to present a positive image of hijab, I couldn't help but wonder if my worth as a human being depended upon whether I pursued a profession or not. This incident has stayed with me ever since, and similar ones have occurred since then. For example, recently when a fashionable lady tried to make me feel inferior because of my modesty, but then suddenly developed a keen interest in me when I mentioned to someone that I teach.

On the other end of the spectrum are those Muslims who praise sisters excessively for wearing hijab and simply being religious. Even as you sit there and politely smile in return, a question pricks the mind: Am I really extraordinary for following Allah's commands? The answer, of course, is no. Indeed, while muhajjabahs may be viewed as abnormal or extraordinary in a secular society, they really are quite normal and ordinary in the sense that they are trying to live up to the norms that Allah has set for all women. In doing so, they live in this modern world without sacrificing their Muslim identities. Yet, this does not mean that they are bystanders in a fast-paced world. In fact, they actively participate in their surroundings, be it as 'domestic engineers' raising responsible families whilst playing active roles in organizing community events or as professionals excelling in a variety of fields, ranging from medicine and information technology to education and public affairs.

So, what's so strange or amazing about hijab? Nothing really. After all, this unique balance of combining the sacred with the secular is truly the quintessence of Islam. Aren't we taught that ours is a religion that instructs us to be God-fearing and practicing while living in this world? This is exactly what many Muslimahs are able to achieve by both veiling and contributing to the environments around them.

Full of impact and impression, hijab, then, goes far beyond the one-dimensional symbolism attached to it by both Muslims and non-Muslims. >



Muhajabah (those who wear hijab) live in this modern world without sacrificing their Muslim identities. Yet, this does not mean that they are bystanders in a fast-paced world. In fact, they actively participate in their surroundings, be it as 'domestic engineers' raising responsible families whilst playing active roles in organizing community events or as professionals excelling in a variety of fields, ranging from medicine & information technology to education and public affairs.