

UNVEILING THE VEIL

Hijab, the dress code of observant Muslim women, is coming under fire in Europe. Rightly or wrongly, everyone seems to have an opinion. However, it's essential that we understand this (hijab) phenomenon before we pass judgment.

Why do some Muslim women wear this “contentious cloth”? The dominant western perception is that hijab is a symbol of oppression, and that the Muslim women who wear it, do so either because they succumb to the oppression inflicted on them by the Muslim men or because they want to make a political statement in favor of “political Islam”. It was thus no surprise that while debating hijab, French politicians tried to justify their anti-hijab position by citing these arguments. They, however, went further and invented a new ‘theory’ that the headscarf creates barrier to Muslim women’s integration into the secular society. The solution, according to French politicians and intellectuals, is very simple: ban headscarves in public institutions.

There is no denying that many a time, many over-zealous Muslim parents, husbands and some puritanical Muslim governments have committed excesses in the name of applying ‘proper dress code for women’. No conscientious person can support these acts. However, to suggest that this coercion is the norm for hijab-clad women everywhere is absolutely wrong and unfounded. For, in the West (as well as in the East), there are hundreds of thousands of well-educated, professional and independent Muslim women who wear hijab. They are stating with no equivocation that their ‘Islamic’ attire is their choice. It’s purely a personal decision, and it has nothing to do with any male’s desire. These hijab-clad women are, also, asking a very legitimate question: If uncovering or being undressed can be freedom, why not covering and conservative dressing when a woman chooses it herself? They further ask: How can a state, that claims to be liberal, democratic and a champion of women’s rights, force a Muslim woman to take off her hijab? Is it not another form of oppression and a violation of her human rights?

Opponents of hijab, most often, suggest that school-going girls wear hijab because of the parental pressure. This observation ignores the fact that pressure or imposition does not work with teens on practically any matter in the West, let alone when it comes to dress or fashion. Indeed, it’s the parents’ moral influence, not the pressure that is at work. It is also not uncommon that, in a Muslim family, the mother doesn’t wear hijab, but her teenage daughter is donning it. As a matter of fact, it is self-education, strong motivation and courageous decisions that are at work behind a young woman’s wearing hijab in the West, especially since the environment is not always friendly towards her “ostentatious” sign of religiosity. In other words, for Muslim girls and adult women, donning hijab is, in most cases, an expression of a deep sense of commitment to the faith; it is a manifestation of their piety. The whole world has witnessed that these young women were the ones who took to the streets across the globe to protest against the French hijab ban.

Those who say that hijab is just a political statement, they too are misinterpreting it, for their statement does not reflect other factors for which many women wear hijab. Sure, hijab can be a political statement, and even in that case, one can rightly argue that a country which claims to be “liberal” shouldn’t have any moral justification to deny a woman’s right of expression, especially when she expresses it in a peaceful manner. Nevertheless, the Qur’an and ahadith make it clear that hijab is a

religious requirement for Muslim women, (Qur'an, 24:31 & 33:59; Bukhari, #359; Muslim, #1475; Abu Dawud, #3580) not just a symbol. While Islam enjoins modesty in conduct and dress code for both men and women, for many reasons, and especially for preventing exploitation, it has made distinction in their dress code. Thus, unlike men, donning hijab has been made obligatory for Muslim women. However, the Qur'anic text cautions both men and women that "It is not fitting for a believer, man or woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter for them to have any option about their affair; if anyone disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he or she is gone astray in clear error." (Qur'an, 33:36).

It is strange that, to oppose the hijab, today some people are claiming that the commandment of hijab in Islam is "open to interpretation" They forget that "interpretation of religions is the purview of the scholars and practitioners of religions." No matter how some non-practicing 'Muslims' or a group of xenophobic non-Muslims interpret hijab, their opinion has no value in the sight of the practicing Muslims. In the history of Islam and annals of Islamic jurisprudence, there is no record that any companion of the prophet (man or woman), imam or mujtahid has ever opposed the hijab. (Whatever disagreements the scholars had in their interpretations centered only on face covering, not on hijab). Indeed, during the time of the prophet and throughout the last fourteen hundred years, devout Muslim women of all backgrounds have been wearing hijab. It is not a new invention or innovation in Islam by any contemporary thinker(s) or group(s), as some feminists, secular fundamentalists and Islam-bashers are claiming.

Even the so-called integration theory, which France is promoting so loudly, doesn't warrant a hijab ban. For, despite many limitations, today's Britain and United States have demonstrated the ability to accommodate multi-religious and multi-ethnic communities and have presented a working model of the much-needed "unity in diversity". On the other hand, what France is adopting is intolerance and institutionalized racism. The French way is irrational and inhuman and is destined to be counter-productive because it will marginalize certain groups, especially the Muslims and Sikhs and push them towards isolationism and alienation. As former elected Parliamentarian of Turkey Merve Kavakci has rightly pointed out, "States can indeed be secular. Can or should people be coerced into being secular? Is it legitimate to demand that one leave his or her religious convictions at home as he or she walks out the door?" (*Q-News*, January 2004)

Indeed, hijab is religiously mandated attire for women in Islam, and, hence, an inalienable right which no state can take away from them on any legitimate grounds. Perhaps, the most humane approach would be that women should neither be forced to wear it nor to take it off anywhere. On the contrary, by banning hijab in public institutions, what France and some other European countries are doing is, in a way, telling their Muslim population, "You are not free to follow your religion. Your freedom to practice it is conditional upon our definition and understanding of what religion should be. Hence you may practice those parts which we approve of and agree with." Is it not an example of fascism? Alas! This is where these countries are heading today!

Furthermore, hijab, for sure, refers to covering, but it is not just a piece of cloth. Hijab-clad women claim from their experiences that hijab also refers to internalized spirituality, modesty and submission to God. They find in it many benefits: Lessons for leading a "disciplined" life and a means for preventing many social ills. One may, however, disagree with this perception, but these women's dress code shouldn't be a concern to him or her, for it is not meant for harming others.

To conclude, hijab is Muslim women's religious attire. It can also be described as a woman's chosen way of worshipping God. We must let her live it.

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