

Comparative Concept of Veil (Hijab) In World Major Religions and Western Media: A Critical Study

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Abstract: The veil and its misconception by the many feminists and Western Media have been misconceived as such people have no deeper understanding of the Holy Quran and Hadith. The text of the Quran is either not understood rightly or it is more often misinterpreted while this is to say that the (ayahs) that according to jurists are specific to the wives of the Prophet (pbuh) in the matter of veil. It is an established notion that the veil was stressed for the identity of Muslim women which is a major problem for the west nowadays. A hot debate has been underway that the unveiling of Muslim women is a struggle against their beliefs as Muslim or it is the subversion of their identity. The tide of imposing ban on veil in the west (France, Belgium, Italy and Germany) has generated a hot debate whether one cannot practice his or (her) religions according to her beliefs or is it not something ridiculous that a Christian, Jew or atheist would teach a Muslim how to practice his or her religion. The most important question that, the western believes of democratic pluralism is under threat after making such prejudicial legislations that target specific religion.

Keywords: Muslim women, Islamic Hijab, Christianity, Judaism, Veil in Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

The literal meaning of hijab is to veil, to cover or to screen. It encompasses more than just a dress code; it is concerned with moral boundaries and respect for woman. It is part of community cohesion and modest behaviour. Hijab has become interchangeable with the word scarf. The meaning is sometimes extended to cultural dress standards such as the Burqa of Kashmir and Afghanistan, shalwar kamise of Pakistan and India and the chador of Iran. However, the term veil or Hijab has been made a problem in the Western Media debates in the Muslim world. The media is creating an illustration of injustice by making many of the arguments defensive and portraying women as victims. The result of this kind of argument is that the attention is shifted away from what the veil means in Islam, which is often disputed between opposing groups because of the different views on what the veil means. Many of the arguments found in the reasons against Muslim veiling are based on their own views of how the veil is “restrictive” or “extremist”. One woman even described the wearing of the veil as “an act by a group, a kind of provocation” (New York Times). Because these opinions are often opposite of what the veil really means, one would think that arguments would dispute this. The media now portrays the fight as one of injustice, not one of religion.

In this regard to quote one of the four ayahs regarding veil in Holy Quran (Surat-un-Nur 24:30-31) that is sufficient to support the argument. “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed”. A Muslim woman is ordered not to display her beauty and adornment (Zeenah) except for ‘that which must ordinarily appear of it’: (Ma Dhahara Minha), or ‘that which is apparent.’

2. CONCEPT OF VEIL: A HISTORICAL PROSPECTIVE

Hijab is an Islamic concept of modesty and privacy. This concept is not unique to Islam, but embraced by other religions, such as Judaism (where the concept of modesty is called Tzuniut) and Christianity. The Islamic concept of Hijab is most often expressed in women's clothing. Hijab garments range from simple head scarves (called khimaar or simply Hijab) to head-to-toe cloaks such as abayas and burqas.

The historical roots of veiling in Western Europe go back to the Byzantine Empire, where veiling codes attributed high social rank to families whose women were veiled. In the middle Ages it was customary for married women to cover their hair with various kinds of coverings. Paintings of urban women in Western Europe often depict everything covered except the face and hands. At the time peasant and working-class women who did not cover were considered "loose" and fair game for assault. This non respectable depiction of uncovered women also plays out in the Muslim context where Quran says that veiling or covering indicates the high status of believing women.

"...Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not to be annoyed (molested or insulted)..." (Quran 33:59)

The first recorded instance of veiling or covering the hair for women is recorded in Assyrian legal texts from the 13th century BC. Its use was restricted to noble women. Prostitutes, slaves and poor women were forbidden to cover their hair/heads. In both the ancient empires of Greece and Rome there is evidence that points to various degrees of head coverings worn by females. Particularly in Rome it seems that head coverings were associated with prayer and devotion. While in Greece evidence determined by sculpture and pottery from that time leads many to believe that respectable woman covered their heads outside the home. As new discoveries are made our opinions about the degree and reasons for covering wax and wane but we can be sure that women's head or hair covering was not an unknown practice.

3. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Religious freedom is a basic and inalienable right founded on the inviolable dignity of the person to practice and worship according to their religious teachings. Religious freedom is not only a universal right, but it also depends upon a universal responsibility to respect that right for others, treating others as we ourselves desire to be treated. All citizens must recognize the inseparable link between the preservation of their own constitutional rights and their responsibility as citizens to defend those rights for all others. Good citizenship is a strong commitment to the civic values that enable people with diverse religious and philosophical perspectives to treat one another with respect and civility.

4. PUBLIC COMPREHENSION OF VEIL

Public expression of Hijab is a very controversial issue. It is, first and foremost, an act of worship among Muslim women. In the United States, wearing Hijab clothing is a right guaranteed by the First Amendment—as freedom of speech and freedom of religion. However, Hijab clothing has also become a potent indicator of identity, with many non-Muslims viewing it as a political statement. Some communities interpret Hijab as a sign of Islamic fundamentalism, the refusal of immigrants to integrate into mainstream society, or the oppression of women.

Governments address Hijab coverings in different ways. Some restrict wearing any religious clothing, including Hijab, in public. Two nations (Saudi Arabia and Iran) require women to wear Hijab coverings. Most nations do not have either restrictions or requirements concerning Hijab clothing.

Recently the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research conducted a poll in seven Muslim-majority countries and presented the respondents with six pictures of women in different styles of dress and asked them "Which one of these women is dressed most appropriately for public places?" The images ranged from women wearing a "shuttlecock burka" to a stylish headscarf and to no covering at all.

The poll—of equal numbers of men and women—ran from Saudi Arabia where 76 percent thought women's faces should be almost entirely covered to Lebanon where nearly half preferred the women to be uncovered.

Although the poll's aim is to gauge public opinion, a woman's dress has never been about perception, it is solely a matter of interpretation. The Quran does not call for a fashion or dress requirement, but it does ask both men and women to

observe "modesty." What gets lost in the midst of such interpretive crossfire is the core message that women should not be sexually objectified. Historically, modesty in dress has been defined by local customs that sometimes even predate Islam. For example, you don't see too many Muslim men dressed in shorts, no matter how hot the weather. And even an educated, well-dressed Saudi Arabian prince still wears a thobe (robe). It would be amusing if they did a poll of what is appropriate dress for Muslim men. The results would be perplexing.

5. BAN ON VEIL IN WEST

Throughout the world, the Islamic headscarf has been causing controversy. Media represented the ideological interests of Western nations concerning symbolic representations of Islam in public following 11 September 2001.

There were 72 stories that were published in the New York Times and Washington Post between 2004 and 2006. The stories covered the ban on Hijab in France, the debate about Niqab in Britain, and veiling by Muslim women in the USA. They show that knowledge about veiling in Western nations must include their national identities as well as their concerns about Muslims' assimilation/integration and Islamic terrorism. American newspaper media positioned France, Britain, and the USA as ideologically alike in spite of their different framings of religious freedom. Reporting supported the interests, values, and hegemony of the West with representations that created the common sense that Muslim women would not veil in public.

In Bosnia, a Muslim woman became the first mayor to ever wear the Hijab and in Russia, a rural family is protesting so that their children can go to school while still wearing a headscarf. With each new circumstance that is brought to light, opposing sides rally for their beliefs. What I am going to look at is how the media portrays each side and how that affects every day citizens who are stuck in the middle of these differing groups. By looking at the banning of Islamic veils in west especially in France, these questions of the role of media will begin to be answered.

6. BAN ON VEIL IN FRENCH

France was the first European country to ban the full-face Islamic veil in public places. France has about five million Muslims - the largest Muslim minority in Western Europe - but it is thought only about 2,000 women wear full veils. As President, Nicolas Sarkozy, whose administration brought in the ban, said that veils oppress women and were "not welcome" in France. Under the ban that took effect on 11 April 2011, no woman, French or foreign, is able to leave their home with their face hidden behind a veil without running the risk of a fine.

Headscarves are allowed at French universities - but not schools. The penalty for doing so is a 150-euro (£133, \$217) fine and instruction in citizenship. Anyone found forcing a woman to cover her face risks a 30,000-euro fine. The French Interior Ministry said, as of September 2012, 425 women had been fined and 66 had been warned for violating the headscarf ban.

This caused a great amount of uprising in France at the time because for many Muslim women, the Islamic veil was a part of their faith and ultimately, their life. Thousands of women across the world demonstrated against the new ruling, however France did not budge and secularism became the way of life at public institutions in France.

However, recently the debate has flared up again. In 2008, Fatima Afif, a French Muslim, was fired from her job at the private day-care centre "Baby-Loup" because she refused to remove her Hijab. She then protested against this, and on March 19, 2013, the French Court of Cassation declared the original ruling as "discrimination based on religious conviction and must be declared invalid." In a reaction to this, President Hollande stated that religious symbols should not just be banned in public institution but private ones as well. Currently, the UMP has tabled a bill where any private company or organization can set rules on religious symbols and/or practices.

It is under these conditions in which I will analyze how the media portrays the religious tensions, specifically Muslim veiling, in France. Below are the sources, which are specifically on the Muslim veil in France.

1. American Sources – New York Times, the Huffington Post, Fox News.
2. British Sources – BBC News, the Independent, Open Democracy.
3. French Sources – The Local, France 24.

4. Worldwide/ Other – Al Arabiya, Human Rights Forum.

Each source has different arguments both for and against wearing the Islamic veil in public. In western Media there is an obsessive fear over Islam and its clearly the hypocritical argument of a secular west specially France that is ‘blind to all religions’’. West and western media are representing a common theme of attacking the integrity of the Muslim world.

7. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SAFEGUARD OF VEILING IN WEST

Secularism: West should support freedom of religion, which should allow a person to behave in accordance with their religion.

Protecting women’s rights: Defenders of women’s rights do not actually care about their rights (other motives).

Islamophobia: Restrictions on the veil targets Muslims and represents a discriminatory view that Muslims are violent and extremist.

Political: Restrictions on the veil are just political measures and they are not really concerned with secularism.

Job Opportunities: A restriction on the veil would lessen job opportunities for Muslim women who are not willing to remove their veil.

Liberation: The veil represents women’s ability to live their faith and show their commitment to Islam.

Feminism: The veil allows women the freedom from being perceived as a sexual object.

What is interesting about these arguments is that all of the arguments supporting women wearing veils are defensive and focused on what was wrong with the opposing view rather than offering ideas of what the veil means in Islam. For example, Raphael Logier suggests that “the problem is not Islam as such, but the obsessive feeling of being besieged . . . the dread of islamisation’’. France’s other issues related to women’s rights never get the same level of public attention as the Hijab does” (The Independent).

In addition, women who actually wear the veil, they discuss how opposing views are affecting their everyday lives and questioning why the veil is viewed as disruptive to society. Below are the few examples that woman’s responses to opposing critical views.

“Many others feel that way too: We are French and we have our place to claim and our future to establish in France. I’m not a foreigner. I’m French. I want to live in France, I love this country. Even if it has trouble liking us, we are going to do what’s necessary to live serenely in France.” (Samia Kaddour – Huffington Post)

“Why does it bother people? It’s neither a demand nor a provocation,” (37 year old Frenchwoman – BBC News)

“I can’t work in public institutions, and now I can’t work in private institutions. What is my future? In my opinion, this is a disastrous law” (Algerian graduate student Souad – Al Arabiya)

In the first two examples, the women are defending their place in society and portray their decision as moderately as possible. The third example creates an idea that Muslim women are being targeted unfairly and puts them in a position of victim instead of aggressor. This way of portraying Muslim women who wear the veil is extremely significant because it demonstrates how the media is forming an argument around the veil.

8. CHALLENGES TO VEIL IN WEST: AN ANALYSIS

In the religious teachings of Jews, Christians and Muslim women modesty is an important part of their faith, influencing their daily lives in many ways such as how they walk, dress, and interact with others. All religions teachings encourage modesty primarily to channel a woman’s beauty to where it truly belongs, within her marriage. The religions take their laws of modesty very seriously and hijab is considered a way of living rather than just a scarf, wig, or veil. At one time, and as little as 100 years ago, most Christian denominations considered covering their hair and dressing modestly an integral part of their religious beliefs too. In the 21st century this behaviour is generally restricted to fringe denominations.

The first serious challenge to traditional hair covering came from the wearing of wigs. A practice that began in the French court soon swept over Europe and into the Jewish communities. The practice was at first denounced by Jewish authorities

who inveighed against what appeared to be inappropriate emulation of the ways of the non-Jews. Many maintained that the traditional prohibition against women displaying their hair was to prevent feminine attraction from giving men sinful thoughts. The wig, they claimed, could evoke the same feelings as the women's own hair. Nonetheless the wearing of wigs soon crept into Jewish communities and was eventually accepted.

Despite this many Jewish women continued to find it difficult to wear a wig instead of the more traditional scarves and veils and some wore the wig but covered it in the usual manner. The wearing of wigs as a hair covering also had a comeback in the 19th and 20th centuries when Jewish women needed to participate in secular life but did not want to compromise religious edicts. When the external pressures of the European life forced many Jewish women to go out bare-headed some found it more convenient to replace their traditional veil with a wig.

While not inexorably linked with the wearing of wigs the practice of shaving a woman's hair upon marriage became prevalent in central Europe in what is known as the early modern period Jewish law. Thus many women chose to shave their heads in order that no hair could escape the confines of her wig or scarf.

Into the 20th and 21st centuries there is widespread disregard for the practice of hair covering itself. However religiously oriented Jews continue to confront the problem. There are rabbis who tolerate the lapse of the custom with the understanding that society had changed and it is no longer considered immodest to keep one's hair uncovered but for the most part head covering continues to be problematic. Today, the majority of Jewish women do not cover their hair except in the synagogue.

9. CONCEPT OF VEIL IN CHRISTIANITY

Interestingly the Bible verses to which Christians refer to when explaining why women should cover their heads, especially in prayer or in church come to us from Saint Paul in his letters to the Corinthians. Corinth was a city situated on the peninsula of Southern Greece and was part of the Roman Empire during the time Corinthians was written. It was a cultural melting-pot of Roman, Greek, and Jewish cultures, thus it is pertinent to wonder what cultural norms were retained as the city changed hands and empires.

1 Corinthians 11:5, says that "Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved." The early Christian women veiled their heads in church and anytime they were in public and Christian women continued to maintain this practice to some degree throughout the centuries until the 19th and 20th centuries when the practice rapidly declined.

A Christian woman who becomes a nun is said "to take the veil". This is said in reference to her head covering. Nuns throughout Christian history have been recognisable by their distinctive head coverings many of which resemble Muslim hijab. In medieval times, across the western world married women normally covered their hair outside the house, and nun's veils were often based on secular styles, reflecting a nun's position as "a bride of Christ". Nuns were said to give up a secular life in order to serve God but nonetheless were due the respect and honour given to a modest married woman.

There is some evidence to suggest that veiling in Spain was influenced by the remnants of the Andalusian Islamic empire and by Muslim women from nearby North Africa. The lightweight lace head covering known as the mantilla came into use in Spain at the end of the 16th century, and was a common sight at Catholic masses throughout the world. Queen Isabella II of Spain actively encouraged its use inside and outside the church. After her abdication in 1870, the use of the mantilla became largely limited to formal occasions and at mass. Strangely enough the requirement that women cover their heads in church was not introduced into Canon Law until 1917. From then until 1983, the Catholic Church's Code of Canon Law mandated that women wear veils or other head coverings. Prior to 1917, there was no such law, though wearing hats or veils was customary for women.

Although the use of veils and scarves has diminished there are some Christian denominations where the practice has maintained its high status and is in some cases mandatory. For nearly 2000 years Orthodox women, whether they be Greek, Serbian, Russian, Egyptian, or Syrian have gone to church with their heads covered. The universal Orthodox Church has an enforced dress code based around non distraction from prayer. In Albania, Christian women often wear white veils and in Albanian Orthodox Christian church buildings, women are separated from men by latticework partitions. Many smaller protestant Christian denominations wear some sort of head covering or hijab. These include the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Hutterites. In those Protestant denominations that have no official expectation that

women cover, some individuals choose to practice head covering according to their understanding of 1 Corinthians 11. Many Catholic women choose to cover their heads to emulate the Virgin Mary. Mary the mother of Jesus covered her head and hair according to Jewish customs of the time.

10. JUDAIC CONCEPT OF VEIL

Modern Jewish women who cover their hair ascribe various meanings to the act. For some it is a sign of marriage, for others it is a symbol of piety and humility, perhaps an act of deference to the will of God. It is also thought of as a sign of modesty. In Biblical times, in the Middle East and the ancient Greco Roman worlds it was customary for the hair to be covered, at least by married, respectable and free women. The Old Testament (Torah) mentions head or hair covering only briefly but these few words have evolved into a complex hijab ritual practiced by devout Jews across the globe.

The claim that covering the hair was a biblical injunction comes from a small passage in the Book of Numbers referring to the priest uncovering or loosening a women's hair as a punishment or humiliation. It describes a ceremony that tests the fidelity of a woman accused of adultery. According to the Torah, the priest uncovers or unbraids the accused woman's hair as part of the humiliation that precedes the ceremony and can be found in the Book of Numbers 5:18.

Other orders calling for the Jewish woman to wear hijab or to cover her hair come from the body of literature known collectively as the Talmud. Accordingly women 'going about' with uncovered hair were engaging in an unacceptable act, so unacceptable that it was considered grounds for divorce. In a society so highly conscious of sexuality and its dangers, veiling was considered an absolute necessity to maintain modesty and chastity. Some rabbis even considered the exposure of a woman's hair to be as socially unacceptable as the exposure of her private parts. Thus married women were enjoined to cover their hair in communal spaces and many rabbis even forbade the recitation of blessings in the presence of a bareheaded woman.

The modesty laws found in the Talmud acted to render the woman inaccessible and unavailable to all but her husband. The covering of the hair was a warning signifying that the wearer was a respectable married woman. So although the Jewish hijab is a symbol of submission it is also a badge of honour. When a married woman covers her head it is a symbol of the greater dignity now attributed to her. Many women regard their head coverings as a queen does her crown.

In biblical and post biblical Judaism the wearing of hijab came to represent part of a women's life cycle, symbolizing the move from maidenhood to womanhood. By the middle Ages, across the Jewish world, hair covering was a firmly entrenched religious obligation. Interestingly this was the same obligation that at the time existed in both the Christian and Muslim spheres of influence.

11. VEIL IN ISLAM

Islam has strongly emphasized the concept of decency and modesty in the interaction between members of the opposite sex. Dress code is part of that overall teaching. There are several verses in the Qur'an in which Almighty Allah talks about the issue of decency and Hijab as defined earlier.

In Surah 24 known as an-Nur (the Light), in verse 30, Allah commands Prophet Muhammad PBUH as follows:

أَلَهُمْ أَرْكَىٰ ذَٰلِكَ، فُرُوجَهُمْ يَحْفَظُونَ وَ هُمْ أَبْصَارٍ مِّنْ يُّعْضِنُوا لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ قُلْ

“Say to the believing men that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them.”

This is a command to Muslim men that they should not lustfully look at women (other than their own wives); and in order to prevent any possibility of temptation, they are required to cast their glances downwards. This is known as “hijab of the eyes”.

Then in the next verse, Allah commands the Prophet to address the women:

فُرُوجَهُنَّ يَحْفَظْنَ وَ أَبْصَارَهُنَّ مِّنْ يُّعْضِنْنَ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ قُلْ

“Say to the believing women that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste)...”

This is a similar command as given to the men in the previous verse regarding “hijab of the eyes”.

This hijab of eyes is similar to the teaching of Jesus where he says, “You have heard that it was said by them of old time, you shall not commit adultery. But I say unto you, That whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.”

So if you see a Muslim casting his/her eyes downwards when he/she is talking to a member of opposite sex, this should not be considered as rude or an indication of lack of confidence — he/she is just abiding by the Qur’anic as well as Biblical teaching.

After “hijab of the eyes” came the order describing the dress code for women:

...يُؤْبَهُنَّ عَلَىٰ خُمُرِهِنَّ لِيُضْرَبْنَ مِنْهَا ظَهَرَ مَا إِلَّا رِيْتَهُنَّ يَبْدِينَ لَا وَ

“...and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur (Khumur خُمُرُ is plural of khimar خِمَارُ, the veil covering the head) over their bosoms...”

According to the commentators of the Qur’an, the women of Medina in the pre-Islamic era used to put their khumur over the head with the two ends tucked behind and tied at the back of the neck, in the process exposing their ears and neck. By saying that, “place the khumur over the bosoms,” Almighty Allah ordered the women to let the two ends of their headgear extend onto their bosoms so that they conceal their ears, the neck, and the upper part of the bosom also.

This is confirmed by the way the Muslim women of the Prophet’s era understood this commandment of Almighty Allah. The Sunni sources quote Ummu ‘l-mu’minin ‘A’isha, the Prophet’s wife, as follows: “I have not seen women better than those of al-Ansar (the inhabitants of Medina): when this verse was revealed, all of them got hold of their aprons, tore them apart, and used them to cover their heads...”

In another Hadeeth, Volume 1, Book 8, Number 368: Narrated 'Aisha: Allah's Apostle used to offer the Fajr prayer and some believing women covered with their veiling sheets used to attend the Fajr prayer with him and then they would return to their homes unrecognized.

Finally the verse goes on to give the list of the mahram – male family members in whose presence the hijab is not required, such as the husband, the father, the father-in-law, the son(s), and others.

In Surah 33 known as Al-Ahzab, verse 59, Allah gives the following command to Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him):

...جَلَابِيبَهُنَّ مِنْ عَلَيْنَهُنَّ يُدْنِينَ: الْمُؤْمِنِينَ نِسَاءً وَ بَنَاتِكَ وَ لَأَرْوَاجِكَ قُلْ، النَّبِيُّ أَيُّهَا يَا

“O Prophet! Say to your wives, your daughters, and the women of the believers that: they should let down upon themselves their jalabib.” (Jalabib جَلَابِيبُ is the plural of jilbab جِلْبَابُ “a wide dress, wider than the scarf and shorter than a robe, that a woman puts upon her head and lets it down on her bosom...”

This means that the Islamic dress code for women does not only consist of a scarf that covers the head, the neck and the bosom; it also includes the overall dress that should be long and loose. So, for instance, the combination of a tight, short sweater with tight-fitting jeans with a scarf over the head does not fulfil the requirements of the Islamic dress code.

12. CONCLUSION

Muslim women are portrayed by the Western media either as veiled victims in need of liberation in foreign lands because of a lack of free choice, or a threat to the Western societies in which they reside because of their choice to adopt traditional Islamic dress “The Hijab”. Western Media and many people over the years have mistakenly used the word Hijab as if it only means wearing a head scarf which is a very big misunderstanding. Hijab actually means covering the private parts and adornments in order to maintain modesty in all respects of life. It is a piece of cloth worn by Muslim women even Christian and Jewish women, as an expression of piety, based on interpretations of Religious scriptures directives for modesty.

It is clear that the veil to cover private parts of the body is presented as a sign of modesty. The verses of Holy Quran are putting men and women on an equal playing field. It also instructs men to guard their private parts as well. Islam is clearly

gender equal, not discriminating between men and women. It does call for modest dress, but for both sexes. They are both supposed to observe modesty.

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