

The Transmutation of the Hijab from Islamic Obligation to Fashion Statement: The Disempowerment of the Muslim Woman

February 1st marked the annual 'World Hijab Day' where activities took place in dozens of countries to raise awareness amongst non-Muslims about the Hijab and what it represents. But perhaps this is also a good time for us as Muslim women to reflect on our view towards the Hijab and what this Islamic dress is all about.

There is no doubt that over the past decade or two, the Hijab has undertaken a huge transformation within many societies from a garment worn purely as an Islamic obligation to one that has entered the realm of fashion and beauty. From the YouTube, 'Hijab beauty bloggers' who seem to present never-ending permutations of how to don the headscarf to look ever more fashionable and beautiful, to the headscarf-wearing models appearing on the catwalks of New York and London and cover pages of fashion magazines, to the Western actresses and singers adorning the dress enticed by its attractive designs, to the burgeoning of the so-called 'Modest Fashion Industry' presenting ever more glitzy, glamorous and extravagant forms of what they term 'Islamic fashion wear' – it's pretty evident that the Hijab has become a fashion statement for many. Sydney based Hijabi fashion blogger Wiwid Howat, for example, commented that, *"The more common site of the Hijab on the catwalk, Instagram, etc. indicates that the Hijab is starting to be considered as an accessory more than a religious symbol."*

Unsurprisingly, major fashion brands and clothes companies, such as H&M, Dolce&Gabbana, Tommy Hilfiger and Oscar de la Renta, have stepped into this market, producing their own so-called "modest-wear" range of headscarves and abayas. And why wouldn't they? There's a lot of money to be made from cashing in on this 'new-girl in town' fashion industry which is set to be worth an estimated \$368 billion by 2021.

Many have labelled this transformation of the Hijab from religious symbol to fashion icon as a furthering of the 'empowerment' of Muslim women. But is it really? The Hijab itself is often presented by many Muslim women as a symbol of 'empowerment' - that it reflects the rejection of the objectification and sexualization of women, the rejection of the pressures to conform to societal expectations of beauty and image, and the rejection of the physical and financial exploitation of women by the multi-billion beauty and fashion industries. However, the disfigurement of the Hijab from a garment worn purely as an act of religious devotion to one that has become a fashion accessory has unfortunately taken the Muslim woman down a downward slope of disempowerment.

The wearing of forms and styles of 'headgear' that is palatable and molded according to Western liberal tastes does not break barriers or misconceptions to aid the acceptability of the true Islamic dress. It simply adds another trend to fashionwear. The beautification of the Hijab and marketing of modesty do not raise the status of the Muslim woman. It rather pressures her to enter the minefield of chasing after superficial expectations of beauty set by others that causes women to feel self-conscious about their image, and be financially exploited by them in the process. And the parading or exhibiting of beautified Muslim or non-Muslim female models donned in a headscarf on a catwalk or the pages of magazines is not an act of empowerment. It's the same old objectification of women for profit, by dressing them up to look as attractive, desirable and sexually provocative as possible to increase sales and revenue for companies – all of which degrade them and reduce the value of

women to their looks and scale of beauty. The display of semi-clad, beautified women wearing a headscarf on the catwalk in New York Fashion Week 2016, epitomized this.

This disempowering, disfigurement of the Hijab from a religious dress reflective of the modesty of the Muslim woman to that of a fashion statement that aims to enhance her beauty in society has evolved based on a number of flawed premises. Firstly, there is an erroneous belief that has lulled Muslim women into a false sense of self-reassurance - that Islam allows her to define or interpret modesty in dress in whichever way she desires: that 'modesty is in the eye of the beholder' and its 'all about choice'. According to this principle, all forms of 'headgear' or 'modest' clothing – from turbans, bandanas, see-through dupattas and 'half-way' headscarves which expose the hair, neck or the ears, to figure-hugging and translucent clothing which cover the surface of the body but reveal what is underneath - have been endorsed as acceptable Islamic dress.

It's strange that the fulfillment of other Islamic obligations, such as how one prays, fasts, pays zakat and performs the Hajj are not seen as being 'in the eye of the beholder' or left to 'an individual's choice' but rather are understood to be clearly defined by the Islamic texts and should be carefully followed as such. Well, the Islamic dress is no different, for Allah (swt) does not prescribe an obligation and then leaves it open to people's personal whims and desires as to how to fulfil it. Indeed, the form of the Islamic dress has been detailed explicitly, completely and comprehensively by the Islamic texts.

In Surah An-Nur in the Qur'an, Allah (swt) says, **﴿وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَى جُيُوبِهِنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوْ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولِي الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَى عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ﴾** ***“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their private parts, and that they should not show their Zeenah (charms) in public beyond what may be apparent; hence let them draw their head-coverings (khumur) over their necks and bosoms (juyub). And let them not display (more of) their charms to any but their husbands, their fathers, their husbands fathers, their sons, their husbands sons, their brothers, their brothers sons, their sisters sons, their womenfolk, their concubines, such male attendants as are beyond all sexual desire, or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness.”*** [An-Nur: 31] The Prophet (saw) said, **«إِنَّ الْجَارِيَةَ إِذَا حَاضَتْ لَمْ يَصْلُحْ أَنْ يَرَى مِنْهَا إِلَّا وَجْهَهَا وَيَدَاهَا إِلَى الْمَفْصَلِ»** ***“When a girl reaches puberty (indicated by starting the menstrual cycle), it is not right that any part of her be seen except her face and the two hands up to the wrist.”*** [Reported Abu Dawud].

These Islamic evidences detail the obligatory form of the Islamic dress of the woman, or the parts of her body (Awrah) that the Muslim woman must cover in the presence of a non-Mahram man (a man to whom marriage is permissible in Islam). They specify explicitly that all parts of the woman's body, except the face and hands, so even a single thread of hair, must be concealed in front of a non-Mahram man. In the Qur'anic verse above, **﴿إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا﴾** ***“Beyond that which is apparent”*** refers to the face and the hands because they are the body parts that were shown by the Muslim women in front of the Prophet (saw) and to which he consented by his silence. This is agreed upon by the majority of the classical scholars of Islam such as Aisha (ra), Ibn Abbas, Imam Malik, Imam Shafi, Imam Tabari, Qatada, and Mujahid. In his tafseer of the verse, the re-known scholar Imam at-Tabari (RM) said, ***“The strongest and most accurate view is that which says that the exemption refers to the face and hands. This is the strongest and most accurate opinion because all scholars are unanimous that everyone who needs to pray must cover the awrah in his/her salat. A woman may reveal the face and hands in her salat, while she must cover the rest of her body.”***

In the verse, Allah (swt) orders the believing women to draw their khumur (plural of khimar -head-coverings) over her necks and juyub. 'Juyub' refers to the neckline of the woman's dress or the upper chest. Women at the time of the Prophet (saw), prior to the revelation of the verse, used to cover their heads with the khimar, throwing its ends upon their back but in the process leave their necks, ears, and upper part of the chest bare. However, in the verse, Allah (swt) commanded them to cover those parts as well with the khimar. Imam ibn Kathir (RM) said regarding the verse, *"Draw their khumur to cover their juyub means that they should wear the khimar in such a way that they also cover their chests so that they will be different from the women of the jahiliyyah who did not do that but would pass in front of men with their chests uncovered and with their necks, forelocks, hair and earrings uncovered."* Hence Allah (swt) orders the woman to cover her head, neck, and chest with her khimar. To cover these parts of the body also means that the clothing should not be transparent or translucent such that the skin can be seen underneath it, as this would not fulfil the obligation of concealing the awrah.

Furthermore, when the woman leaves her house and enters the public life, Allah (swt) has obligated her to wear the jilbab – a one-piece outer garment which covers and conceals her home clothes and drapes down from her neck to the floor. Allah (swt) says, **يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِّأَزْوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلَابِيبِهِنَّ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَنْ يُعْرَفْنَ فَلَا يُؤْذَيْنَ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا** ***“Oh Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (Jalabeeb) all over their bodies.”*** [Al-Ahzab: 59] In addition, in one hadith narrated by Umm Atiyya (ra), she said, “The Messenger of Allah (saw) ordered us to bring out the young women, the menstruating women and veiled women for the two Eid festivals. The menstruating women were to keep away from prayer yet witnessing the goodness and the dawa (address) to the Muslims. I asked, ‘O Messenger of Allah, what about the one who does not have a Jilbab?’. He said, «تلبسها صاحبته من جلبابها» ***“Let her use the Jilbab of her sister.”*** [Reported by Muslim]. In this hadith, the Prophet (saw) states clearly that wearing a jilbab is the condition that a woman must fulfil in order to enter the public life as he did not give permission for the one who does not have a jilbab to leave her home, rather he orders her to borrow one from her Muslim sister. This is the indication (Qarina) that the command for a woman to wear the jilbab when entering the public arena is an obligation.

The classical scholars of Islam have confirmed the form of the jilbab. Allamah ibn Al Hazam writes, *“In the Arabic language of the Prophet, Jilbab is the outer sheet which covers the entire body. A piece of cloth which is too small to cover the entire body could not be called Jilbab.”* The scholar Alusi, author of “Ruh al-Ma’ani” states, *“the jilbab is an over garment which a woman puts over her ordinary clothes. Ibn Abbas says, “Alusi interpreted jilbab to mean a long and loose gown which covered a woman’s body from her neck to feet.”* Hence, in the public life, it is not sufficient for the woman that she wears the khimar (headscarf) accompanied by a skirt and blouse or shirt and trousers or any form of dress that simply covers the awrah but does not conform to Allah (swt)’s command of the khimar and jilbab. If she leaves the home without these two pieces of clothing, regardless of whether her whole awrah was covered, then she would be sinful in the eyes of Allah (swt).

The Islamic texts therefore detail clearly and explicitly the form of the Islamic dress, rather than leaving it to subjective interpretation of ‘women’s modesty’.

Supporters of this transmutation of the Islamic dress to a fashion statement, and those who celebrate Hijab-wearing Muslim women entering the modelling industries also argue that modesty and public expression of beauty can be fused – that they are not mutually exclusive. This is a rationally and Islamically flawed argument and a contradiction in terms. The observing of modesty is based on preventing the open expression of one’s sexuality, while

the beautification of women seeks to enhance or bring attention to their sexuality. Why else is there an uproar in Western states and claims of 'sexism' or the 'sexualisation of women' when a company requests its female employees to wear lipstick and high heels?

In Islam, **guarding one's modesty and public beautification of the woman are definitely mutually exclusive** for there are clear Islamic rulings obliging the former and prohibiting the latter. Allah (swt) says, ﴿وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَعْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ﴾ **“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their private parts, and that they should not show their Zeenah (charms or adornment) in public beyond what may be apparent.”** [An-Nur: 31]. He (swt) also says, ﴿وَالْقَوَاعِدُ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ اللَّاتِي لَا يَرْجُونَ نِكَاحًا فَلَيْسَ عَلَيْهِنَّ جُنَاحٌ أَنْ يَضَعْنَ ثِيَابَهُنَّ﴾ **“And women of post-menstrual age who have no desire for marriage - there is no blame upon them for putting aside their outer garments [but] not displaying their adornment.”** [An-Nur: 60]. And He (swt) also says, ﴿وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ مِنْ زِينَتِهِنَّ﴾ **“And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment.”** [An-Nur: 31].

These verses clearly prohibit the open display of Tabarruj (beautification) - the revealing of the beauty and charms of a woman to non-Mahram men. In addition, the Messenger of Allah (saw) said, «صِنْفَانِ مِنْ أَهْلِ النَّارِ لَمْ أَرَهُمَا قَوْمٌ مَعَهُمْ سِيَاطٌ كَأُدْنَابِ الْبَقَرِ يَضْرِبُونَ بِهَا النَّاسَ وَنِسَاءٌ كَاسِيَاتٍ عَارِيَاتٍ مُمِيلَاتٌ مَائِلَاتٍ رُءُوسُهُنَّ كَأَسْنِمَةِ الْبُخْتِ الْمَائِلَةِ لَا يَدْخُلْنَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يَجِدْنَ رِيحَهَا وَإِنْ رِيحَهَا لِيُوجَدُ مِنْ مَسِيرَةِ كَذَا وَكَذَا» **“Two are the types of the the people of Hell whom I did not see: people having flogs like the tails of the ox with them and they would be beating people, and the women who would be dressed but appear to be naked, who would be inclined (to evil) and make their husbands incline towards it. Their heads would be like the humps of the bukht camel inclined to one side. They will not enter Paradise and they would not smell its odour whereas its odour would be smelt from such and such distance.”** [Reported by Muslim on the authority of Abu Hurayrah (ra)] The words “*dressed but appear to be naked*” refer to the revealing of the adornments and beauty of the woman, while the words, “*Their heads would be like the humps of the bukht camel inclined to one side*” are talking about revealing the beautification done to their hair, such as treating and heaping it around a turban or headscarf or anything similar until it became like the hump of a camel.

Hence, Islam clearly prohibits the beautification of the woman in the presence of non-Mahram men – whether in private or public. This includes the wearing of make-up, tight clothes that expose the figure of the woman, and even khimars and jilbabs that are beautified in such a manner that they attract men's attention towards the beauty of the woman. The reality of Tabarruj or the beautification of the woman is that it can incite the sexual desire in men and hence harms the cooperation of men and women in society. This, rather than empowering women to have a productive and safe public life, disempowers them and can make them prone to the sexual advances, harassment and even assaults by men.

Furthermore, the Muslim woman should be the one characterised with the concept of Hayah - a heightened feeling of unease and shyness towards anything – whether in dress, behaviour, speech or otherwise - which may compromise her modesty, chastity or bring attention to her sexuality due to her high regard for her honour and the Command of her Creator (swt) to guard it from any harm. Indeed, the Prophet (saw) said, «إِنَّ الْحَيَاءَ وَالْإِيمَانَ قُرْنًا جَمِيعًا، فَإِذَا رُفِعَ أَحَدُهُمَا رُفِعَ الْآخَرُ» **“Indeed hayaa (modesty) and Iman are Companions. When one of them is lifted, the other leaves as well.”** [Al-Bayhaqi]

In fact, Hayah is one of the main distinguishing features of Islam, for the Prophet (saw) said, «إِنَّ لِكُلِّ دِينٍ خُلُقًا، وَخُلُقُ الْإِسْلَامِ الْحَيَاءُ» **“Every way of life has its distinct characteristic. And the distinct characteristic of Islam is Hayah (modesty).”** [Abu Dawood]. For the Muslim woman, having Hayah should also be coupled with the Order of Allah (swt) to avoid any action or situation which could constitute ‘Shubha’ – areas of uncertainty or that which is close to the Haraam. This is in order that she does not fall into disobeying her Rabb inadvertently, or creates suspicion regarding her Islamic character. The Prophet (saw) said, «إِنَّ الْحَلَالَ بَيِّنٌ، وَإِنَّ الْحَرَامَ بَيِّنٌ، وَبَيْنَهُمَا مُشْتَبِهَاتٌ، لَا يَعْلَمُهُنَّ كَثِيرٌ مِنَ النَّاسِ، فَمَنْ اتَّقَى الشُّبُهَاتِ، فَقَدْ اسْتَبْرَأَ لِدِينِهِ وَعَرْضِهِ، وَمَنْ وَقَعَ فِي الشُّبُهَاتِ وَقَعَ فِي الْحَرَامِ، كَالرَّاعِي يَزْعَى حَوْلَ الْحِمَى، يُوشِكُ أَنْ يَقَعَ فِيهِ، أَلَا وَإِنَّ لِكُلِّ مَلِكٍ حِمَى، أَلَا وَإِنَّ حِمَى اللَّهِ مَحَارِمُهُ» **“Both halaal and haraam are evident but in between them there are doubtful things and most of the people have no knowledge about them. So whoever saves himself from these doubtful things, he would save his religion and his honour. And whoever indulges in these doubtful things would fall into haraam like a shepherd who grazes (his animals) near the hima (private pasture) of someone else and at any moment he is liable to fall into it. Oh people! Beware! Every king has a hima and the hima of Allah on the earth is what he declared as haraam things.”** [Reported by Muslim on the authority of an-Nu’man b. Basheer] Consequently, the Muslim woman will strive to be diligent in her dress and appearance, ensuring that her clothes are loose and far away from anything which could constitute Tabarruj.

It’s clear that the transformation of the Hijab in many societies, from a religious obligation and symbol of true modesty to a fashion statement and forms which are palatable to Western tastes and trends of beauty, has not been a positive one in the eyes of Islam. Nor did it truly empower Muslim women in the true sense of the word, for empowerment can never arise through the emulation of a foreign culture which itself has created many problems for women due to their objectification, sexualization and obsession with image and beauty. The true empowerment of the Muslim woman comes from her diligent fulfilment of the expectations of her Rabb (swt) rather than the superficial expectations set by others; it is through her manifestation of Hayah and Taqwa (God-Consciousness) which rejects and shuns any violation or exploitation of her honour; and it is by being the one who works for the true benefit of humanity by establishing the Deen of Haqq in authority in this world – rather than the one who is consumed by the superficialities of this life.

So as Muslim women, if we really want to create greater awareness about the Hijab amongst non-Muslims, it should surely start by ensuring that we embrace the correct understanding of what this unique Islamic dress truly represents.

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