

## BEHIND THE VEIL: OPPRESSION OR ASSERTION

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Article History: Received: 22.03.2023 | Accepted: 08.04.2023 | Published: 12.04.2023

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ/12.1.1620-1627>

### ABSTRACT

*Veil* is an abstract concept that cannot easily be contained under one meaning. As a material object, the veil is a fabric which comes in different forms, depending on the person's cultural beliefs and practices. As an internalised act of modesty, the meaning of the veil is in the veil; the internal meaning is what gives meaning to the external, and only when the internalised modesty manifests itself through the external representation, can a Muslim believer truly represent the true meaning of the garment. As a global topic, Islam and women continue to impact upon academia, media, and the public. It is essential to give Muslim women the chance to represent their complex identity. Veiling has a distinct pragmatic purpose in different aspects of women's life. The objective of the paper is to distinguish between what women say about the reasons for veiling and their understanding about what the veil communicates about woman's identity to society.

**Keywords:** Veil, Violence, Silence, Oppression and Assertion.

Is hijab really a symbol of liberation when millions are oppressed into wearing it? One must see objectively how the hijab, niqab, and burqa are related to dignity. These are symbols of oppression of the unwilling, and the atrocities faced by Muslim women who do not keep their proper place as per the notion of Muslim society. Muslims opposing the hijab must face arguments about personal choice from hijabi women, but it is not about freedom of choice at all. It is about hijabi women wanting to preserve the roles, responsibilities, obligations, and limitations of women in Muslim society. This results in pressure on all women to fall into line. It is not a problem for the women who wear hijab because they think it is perfectly right for women to know and occupy their proper place. So, the millions of women who are forced into the hijab, face not just the men who command it, but also the women who agree with those men, and dress it up as a freedom of choice.

Muslim women wear veil because they believe that God commands it and that it pleases Him to have her wear it. 'God pleaser hijabi' appears in two terms, saying she wears veil either because she 'chooses' to, or because she feels she "just has to" as it is a religious

obligation on her. Muslim woman has learnt from a young age that veil is a requirement. Without Veil, she believes she is not complete in her faith. She will fight tooth and nail for the right to wear the headscarf, depending on it always, calling it a 'human right.' She says she wears it because it is her choice and everyone around her is wearing it, her mother, her friends, her aunts, her cousins, and the women in her neighborhood. She has grown up with the fact that she must wear it because that is what good Muslims do, and more importantly, it is what is expected.

Veil is a symbol of piety and it can be a sign of inner strength and fortitude. A woman wearing veil becomes a very visible sign of Islam. While Muslim men can blend easily into any society. Muslim women are often put on the line, and forced to defend not only their decision to cover, but also their religion. Nevertheless, women who wear veil insist that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages conjured up by media-bias or general ignorance. To women, it is a question of religious identity and self-expression. There are different types of headscarves:

1. The Hijab is one name for a variety of similar headscarves. It is the most popular veil worn in the West. These veils consist of one or two scarves that cover the head and neck. Outside the West, this traditional veil is worn by many Muslim women in the Arab and the world beyond.
2. The Niqab covers the entire body, head and face; however, an opening is left for the eyes. The two main styles of niqab are the half-niqab that consists of a headscarf and facial veil that leaves the eyes and part of the forehead visible and the full, or Gulf, niqab that leaves only or narrow slit for the eyes. Although these veils are popular across the Muslim world, they are most common in the Gulf States. The niqab is responsible for creating much debate within Europe. Some politicians have argued for its ban, while others feel that it interferes with communication or creates security concerns.
3. The Chador is a full-body length shawl that is closed at the neck by hand or pin. It covers the head and the body but leaves the face completely visible. Chadors are most often black and are most common in the Middle-East, specifically in Iran.
4. The Burqa is a full-body veil. The wearer's entire face and body are covered, and one sees through a mesh screen over the eyes. It is most commonly worn in Afghanistan

and Pakistan. Under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan 1996-2001, its use was mandated by law.

Muslim women wear veil with the function of distinguishing themselves from non-Muslims, reminding them of their Islamic faith, and concealing them from the public view of males. In many of the more traditional Muslim societies women try to remain outside the public sphere of men devoting themselves to child rearing and taking care of the home. The Islamic tradition of veil frees women from being perceived primarily as sexual objects. The veil liberates a Muslim woman from this insidious oppression. She need not concern herself with her hair or make up before she goes out. Underneath her veil, she can remain as she wishes to. Since a Muslim woman is invisible behind her veil, she can be appreciated only for her intellectual qualities. Thus, the importance of her physical appearance becomes subordinate to her intelligence and personality.

All the attention on the veil brings immense charges on Muslims because their faith means so much more to them than what women wear on their heads. But the veil in its many manifestations gives rise to disagreement among Muslims. And their contemporary debate about it, while not yet widespread, raises fundamental questions relating to free will, women's status in society, and even how to interpret Islam's holy book, the Quran. Pickthall holds that the 'purdah' system is neither of Islamic nor Arabian origin. It has nothing to do with the religion of Islam, and, for practical reasons, it has never been adopted by most Muslim women:

So long as it was applied only to the women of great houses, who had plenty of space for exercise within their palaces and had varied interests in life; so long as involved no cruelty and did no harm to women, it may be regarded as unobjectionable from the Islamic standpoint, as a custom of a period. But the moment it involved cruelty to women and did harm to them, it became manifestly objectionable..., which enjoins kindness and fair treatment towards women, and aims at the improvement of their status. (111)

For Muslim women, their hijab is a symbolic boundary that they draw around themselves so others can distinctly see them as Muslims versus the "others" situated outside their religious community, so that others know how to treat them. Symbolic boundaries include symbolism, rituals, gestures, and discourse. Religious communities can often build boundaries between themselves and the "public." Hijab allows Muslim women to keep their adornments private. Symbolic boundaries can have a negative connotation too. Muslim

women, wearing the hijab, become the symbol for all things negative about Islam. It is important that we hear the voices of the women to understand their motives behind the identity they choose to display to others so publicly. The appearance can be communicated both verbally and non-verbally through discourse as well as visual cues such as grooming and dressing. Appearance also conveys our identity to others and opens the identity with certain groups while discarding association with others.

Shanna Bukhari is a 24-year-old model who became the first Muslim to represent the UK in the Miss Universe contest in 2011. She strongly believes that Muslim women should be allowed to have a western lifestyle, regardless of how strict their religion and culture is. Shanna Bukhari is an example of how Muslim women interpret their lifestyle choices. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism has once again sparked a debate about the intersections of religion and gender, resulting in women's further marginalization in the Pakistani society. Like many, other post-colonial theocratic societies, there is a rise in feminist voices in Pakistan which are trying to resist and counter patriarchal social structures and made interpretations of religion to oppress women. Initiated by the military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq the process of Islamization in Pakistan strengthened the male fiction of the society and marginalized and silenced the women by denying them their due space and rights.

Now the time is changing as Muslim women have got the courage to fight injustice. Gayatri Spivak, through her cultural and critical theories, tried to challenge the legacy of colonialism. She raises the issues of marginal subjects such as the place of the subaltern women in the society and their empowerment. Spivak in her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In this essay, she indicates the limitations of the subalterns, by asking the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" By 'Subaltern' Spivak means the oppressed, subjects or more generally those of inferior ... (283). Spivak's writings reflect the background of women's struggle and oppression in the third world countries. Spivak's writings on feminism have an iconoclastic effect as she challenges the basic assumptions of feminism in general. All women are not the same and there are a lot of variations existing even among women with regard to class, colour and creed.

The will and aspirations of the European women are more or less liberated from their patriarchal dominance whereas women from the third world countries are struggling to cope with the European women. It is very difficult to create a universally agreeable female gender and the time has now come for the people to respect the differences within the gender. Spivak is not against feminism but her arguments strengthen the fundamental principles of feminism.

Feminism needs to concentrate on this variation that exists among women and help them to achieve their personal goals. The concept of the 'Other' via universal phenomenon in which the self claims to be the subject and all the rest come under the category of the 'Other.' The term 'Other' is highly relative and it goes on changing its significance according to the context. There is a supremacy of male domination over women in the society. The dominance of patriarchy has been achieved through historical forces. From time immemorial, the male folk go out for work and they are the bread winners of the family. Women are confined to the four walls of their houses, looking after their children and household duties. They never go out for anything and as a result they lack vigour, vitality, exuberance, and mobility. The historical factor has paved the way for the treatment of women as 'the other.' In her book, *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir speaks about the concept of the 'other' as:

The category of 'the other' is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality that of a self and the other. This duality was not originally attached to the division of sexes, it was not dependent upon any empirical facts. It is revealed in such works as that of Granet on Chinese thought and those of Dunezil on the East Indies and Rome. The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. (13-29)

No one can suppress a section of society permanently because the spark of revolt can catch fire sooner or later. The Supreme Court has declared instant 'Triple Talaq' as unconstitutional and it is a big success for Muslim women in India. It can be a great success in other Muslim nations also if Muslim women show courage to come out of their veil and choose their own way of life. This judgment is a victory for Muslim women. They came out and supported it in big numbers.

The Muslim women are demanding Quran-based laws because Allah has given equal rights to them. Today, Muslim women are largely aware about their roles and rights. They have got the courage to fight injustice. They have demanded arbitration has to be mandatory in divorce proceedings. This applies to men as well as women. The same thing is written in the Quran's verse 4: 35, "And if you fear dissension between the two, send an arbitrator from his people and an arbitrator from her people." The Quran says clearly that if a husband and wife have a problem with each other, then they must sit together and solve their problem. And

if they do not solve the differences, then there is a minimum three-month period for separation. If you do not follow this process, then you cannot get talaq. The practice of instant triple talaq is not mentioned in the Quran.

The Supreme Court of India in a major verdict on August 22, Tuesday, 2017 set aside the practice of instant divorce through triple talaq among Muslims, saying that the practice is void, illegal and unconstitutional. In view of different opinions recorded by a majority of 3:2, the practice of talaq-e-biddat... triple talaq is stayed aside, a five-judge constitutional bench said in a 395-page order. While Chief Justice J S Kheha and Justice S Abdul Nazeer were in favour of putting on hold for six months the practice of triple talaq and asking the government to come out with law in this regard, Justices Kurian Joseph, R F Nariman and UU Lalit held it as violative of the constitution. The bench, made up of judges from different religious communities – Sikh, Parsi, Muslim, Christian and Hindu, had heard seven pleas, including five separate petitions filed by Muslim women challenging the prevalent practice of triple talaq in the community. These Muslim women challenged triple talaq in which the husband pronounces talaq thrice in one go, sometimes even by phone or a text message, to get divorce. Triple Talaq is neither integral to Islam, nor a majority versus minority issue but rather an intra-community tussle' between Muslim men and deprived women.

The Muslim women have also challenged the constitutional validity of other practices like nikah halala and polygamy among Muslims. The court has taken up the main matter on its own as a petition titled 'Muslim Women's Quest for Equality.' It is only through the personal tragedies of a series of Muslim women – Gudiya Imrana and their more famous predecessor Shah Bano, that an entire community has constructed in the national imagination. In 1985, 62-year-old Shah Bano was granted maintenance by the Supreme Court under section 125 of the criminal procedure code. Then in 2005, Gudiya's personal dilemma was subjected to the worst kind of public scrutiny led entirely by the media. She made a great "oppressed Muslim woman" story. This heavily pregnant woman was dragged to television studios, where anchors had lined up a primetime selection of bearded conservative clergy to make predictably regressive pronouncements about whether she should continue to live with her second husband Taufiq or with the first one, Arif, a prisoner of war.

In the same year, Imrana's case was witnessed. She was raped by her father-in-law but subjected to a so-called fatwa stating that she should marry the rapist. Imrana's fatwa stirred the conscience of the nation and made for another media best-seller. Ironically, the fatwa was issued at the behest of a local reporter, from a Noida-based Urdu paper, the Rashtriya Sahara

and not at the urging of Imrana's family. Imrana's story began in that patriarchal institution called the Jati panchayat. In routine large number of judgements on women were made-cut off her nose, parade her naked, stone her, excommunicate her if she breaks their arbitrary rules. Call it Jati panchayat, call it fatwa-it was the same cultural practice taking different institutional forms and the only problem was the practice.

There is a sweeping consensus among Islamic religious scholars around the world that Muslim women are required to, or at least should, cover their head with scarf. So, the head scarf or some type of head covering is widely viewed as mandatory in Islam. Other coverings worn by Muslim women also fall within the category; these outfits can be regarded as either optional or compulsory. Often, they are said to be required on either religious or cultural grounds, categories that overlap in most Muslim categories. Non-Muslims tend to regard veiling as a sign of women's repression. That is true in highly patriarchal societies like Iran and Saudi Arabia, where women have second-class status and are required to cover both head and body when outside the home. But many Muslim women, including most in the US, voluntarily opt to wear the head scarf out of religious commitment. They believe they are following God's wish, and reject suggestions that their head covering means they have less autonomy at home or on the job. This is an especially strong sentiment in Muslim countries where people feel their Islamic identity is threatened by the global spread of Western culture. For many, women in these countries, being "authentic" means wearing the headscarf. Other reasons for veiling involve less freedom of choice. Some women, especially in developing countries, say they put on the veil to avoid harassment and stares from men, especially in crowded spaces such as public transportation systems.

More commonly, there is family pressure from fathers, husbands, or brothers who want their female relatives to be seen by society as a "good girl" or "good woman." These men are responding to their society's prevailing norms, which pressure that veiled women are obeying Islam's prohibitions on dating and extramarital sex. Generally, Islamic Religious scholars cite two verses in The Quran to support their consensus that Muslim women must, or should, cover their hair. The first is Verse 33:59, addressed to the Prophet Muhammad and his family:

"O Prophet! Tell Thy wives and daughters and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): That is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested."

Verse 24:31 states, "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 there off; that they should draw their veil over their bosoms.”

All these illustrations bring it closer to the fact that Muslim women need the right to life, security, jobs, education, and sufficient calorie intake, in addition to liberation from draconian practices like ‘Talaq-ul-bidat.’ There is a need for gender equality, gender equity and gender justice because Muslim women have always been the victim of veil, forced marriage, honor crimes or violent abuse. Moreover, saving women is now a global undertaking in which participants are both Muslim and non-Muslim.

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