



## Clothing: There Is No Dress Code for Women Beyond Covering their Private Parts, as with Men

### QUR'ANIC VERSES THAT MENTION CLOTHING

Most of us grow up assuming that the Qur'an stipulates that women must cover their hair and wear clothing that covers all skin except for the face, hands and feet. Even in cultural environments or families where this is not expected and modern clothing is the norm, the underlying belief of most people is still that the Qur'an does mandate such a dress code, but that the intent must have been for women to dress modestly, i.e. conservatively, and so what is today considered “modest” is naturally very different from what was the case in seventh-century Arabia.

Here are the verses in the Qur'an that mention clothing in one way or another, in the order in which they appear. The first cluster of verses on this topic is extraordinary in that hardly anyone ever mentions what the Qur'an tells us about the nature and purpose of clothing, which I find highly relevant and instructive.

#### Group 1: The Heights, 7:26, 7:31–33

##### The Heights, 7:26

Oh Children of Adam: We have bestowed upon you clothing to cover your shaming parts, and as a thing of beauty [literally feathers, a metaphor]. Yet the clothing of reverence—that is best of all. This is one of God's signs [or messages], that they [i.e. humankind] may remember.

The above verse clearly addresses all men and women, and comes in the middle of a description of the fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise and the lessons their descendants must learn from that. The phrase I underline above tells us that **an *attitude* of piety and God-consciousness counts for more with God than any outer act of *dressing* piously.**

“**Yet the clothing of reverence—that is best of all**” is such a powerful and unambiguous phrase that it is no wonder that one of the greatest of the classical Qur’anic commentators (Razi) had declared:

that the private parts of believers are always covered, even when they are naked, while those of the profligate are always ‘uncovered’, even when they are clothed.<sup>1</sup>

...continued in 7:31

Oh Children of Adam: bring your adornment [i.e. beautiful attire] to every act<sup>2</sup> of worship, and eat and drink, but do not be profligate. Truly He does not love the profligate.

In verse 7:31 **God articulates His desire to see us looking beautiful when we turn to Him in worship or supplication** (and to see us enjoying life with neither excessive indulgence nor waste). But who amongst us has ever been told to dress our best for prayers, whether to be performed at the mosque or at home?

And **why is all the emphasis in our societies placed on pious clothing but absolutely none on *beautiful* clothing**, despite what is said in verses 7:26 and 7:31?

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to visit one of the most famous and beautiful mosques<sup>3</sup> in the Middle East. I arrived appropriately dressed—or so I thought—in a floor-length skirt, loose long-sleeved top,

<sup>1</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (editor-in-chief) et al. 2015. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 415.

<sup>2</sup> Most English translations of 7:31 use the phrase “...to every *place* of worship” which implies when visiting a mosque, but the meaning in Arabic can be broader and so is best translated as “...to every *act* of worship”, which means wherever one may be performing the ritual prayer, even if in private at home.

<sup>3</sup> I do not wish to name any of the mosques in which I had uncomfortable experiences because I do not wish to shame any particular country or culture. Expectations regarding women’s clothing differ not just from country to country but also from mosque to mosque and it has been very difficult for me to get it “right”, as every mosque I have ever visited, whether in the East or West, has been dominated by one set of cultural expectations or another that has left me feeling either excluded, unwelcome or simply discouraged.

and carrying a shawl to place on my head before entering. I was excited to be there and was full of anticipation! The guard at the entrance assumed I was a tourist and politely told me it was prayer time and that visiting hours would resume later, and I explained in Arabic that I was in fact there for the ritual prayer. He was pleasantly surprised but then asked me if I had brought “prayer clothes” with me, and I told him I was already wearing what I would be praying in as I swung the shawl over my head. He immediately told me not to worry and to wait a couple of minutes, and sent a young boy off to fetch something. While we waited I asked him what was wrong with what I was wearing and he embarrassingly said that my skirt showed some ankle as the side buttons on the bottom of the skirt on one side stopped just that much short of covering my ankle completely. Side buttons on one side at the bottom? When had he checked out my skirt so thoroughly? I was stunned and felt humiliated, and when the guard saw the expression on my face he rushed to reassure me, ever so kindly, that he was doing this for me, *so that God would be pleased with me*. After about five-minutes of an exchange about whose responsibility I was before God, his or my own, I could feel my face burning up and was struggling to find something else to say when the boy returned and handed the guard a plastic bag, which the guard promptly handed to me with an apologetic smile, saying all was well, I could just throw what was in the bag on top of my clothes right there and the problem would be solved. I had come this far, so I told myself to stay focused on my goal of getting in and praying in that holy place, so I did as I was told. The skirt had an elastic band and just reached my knees, and when I held up the top I could see there was no point proceeding as the piece of triangular material with a hole cut out to allow for the face was so small that my face would not have gone through, and the cape-like top would not have even reached my waist. As I started to tell the guard that this outfit was clearly meant for a small girl, he promptly assured me it was alright and I could go in wearing it nonetheless. I could? What about the offending ankle that had started

all this, which the little skirt would obviously still not cover? Oh it was fine, he said, I could just keep the little skirt on top of my own skirt and throw on the tiny triangular cape over my head *somehow* and I could then march straight in. At that point I remember having an image of myself and how ridiculous I must have looked, not just felt, with part of a brown-and-beige outfit that was too small on top of a grey-and-black outfit that fit fine to three men or so, a Western woman who had accompanied me and a couple of children observing all this, and I swore to myself that *they*

could keep their mosques from now on as I would never again attempt to pray in one and would only ever enter one as a tourist. Would *they* care if they knew this was how they had made me feel? What if I was so put off that I turned away from the religion altogether—is that what they want? Would they be filled with remorse and would it suddenly click for them, how ridiculous it is that it is harder for a Muslim woman to go in and pray in a mosque than for any non-Muslim to walk in and enjoy its architecture? I did not say any of this out loud but handed the guard the child's outfit as he asked me not to leave, saying that he was obliged to do this otherwise *those inside who are in charge* would cause trouble for him. I wish I could have reminded *those inside* that the Prophet had warned: “**Do not bar the female servants of God from the mosques of God**”<sup>4</sup> but I turned away and left, feeling all of angry, humiliated, indignant, wronged, and depressed at how low we have allowed ourselves to sink.

I honestly never thought I would have another opportunity, let alone find the inclination, to pray in this mosque ever again, but some years later that is exactly what happened. A woman who was a local told me she would take me if I still wanted to go and I jumped at the opportunity. She knew of my earlier experience and wanted to make it happen for me this time. She said she would bring the required clothing and would take care of everything, which she certainly did. While we were still in the car and approaching the mosque she handed me a thick, heavy, long black cloak with snap-buttons in the front to wear over my clothes. Then she gave me two small pieces of fabric: the white one was elastic and looked like an ankle brace, while the black one reminded me of a balaclava. I stared at them in bewilderment and then heard my friend chuckle before she proceeded to grab the white “ankle brace” and force it over my head so that all of my forehead, every last hair on my head, and my neck up to my very chin were hidden and only my eyebrows, eyes, nose and mouth showed through. I immediately felt claustrophobic—it was so tight! I could feel my eyebrows pushed together, my chin squashed up and pushing my lower teeth firmly against my upper ones, my hair plastered to my head, and the material was thick and synthetic and I soon started to sweat profusely. I began to breathe deeply, telling myself to stay calm and reminding myself that if other women can do it, so can I, and that I was there for God and so had to stay focused on Him! My friend then grabbed the

<sup>4</sup>Brown, Jonathan. 2014. *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*. London: Oneworld Publications, 1.

“balaclava” and pulled it down over my head so it covered the top of my head and neck and draped over my shoulders, leaving my face exposed. She then did the same herself and when she was done, she was utterly unrecognisable to me. The situation felt surreal. Less than an hour or so after we came out and I was able to remove these constricting and all-round uncomfortable garments, my relief was indescribable.

Lest the direct instruction of 7:31 to dress beautifully be missed or obstructed, **the Qur’an then *immediately* continues with a warning:**

...continued in 7:32

Say: who has forbidden the adornment [i.e. beautiful attire] that God brought forth for His worshippers/servants, and the good things that He provides? Say: these are for those who believe during life in this world, and for them alone on the Day of Resurrection. This is how We make clear the signs for people who would know.

And to make sure there is no misunderstanding of either 7:31 or 7:32, the Qur’an again *immediately* follows both with the following verse, which also represents a succinct summary of the only types of acts that God *does* forbid:

...continued in 7:33

Say: my Lord has only forbidden indecencies, be they evident or secret, and sin, and wrongful oppression. And that you associate with God that which He has not authorised, and that you attribute to God that of which you have no knowledge.

Thus the seventh chapter of the Qur’an provides, in a small cluster of verses as just shown, the Qur’anic philosophy with regard to clothing:

- **Clothing is intended to cover one’s private parts (7:26)**, which 24:30–31 below show to mean the groin area.
- **Clothing/attire is meant to be beautiful (7:26, 7:31)**
- **But no amount or type of covering can rival the clothing of reverence (7:26)**
- **Beautiful clothing/attire is a gift from God that no one can forbid (7:32, 7:33)**

With this crystal-clear Qur'anic foundation in mind, let us proceed to look at other verses in the Qur'an that mention clothing, in the order *and context* in which they appear.

Group 2: Light, 24:30–31, 24:58–60

Tell believing men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts/chastity. That is purer for them, for God is aware of what they do (24:30).

And tell believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts/chastity, and not to display of their (natural) adornment except that which (ordinarily/customarily) appears, and to draw their shawls over their breasts and not display their (natural) adornment except to their husbands, or fathers, or fathers-in-law, or sons, or stepsons, or brothers, or nephews, or their womenfolk, or the slaves they rightfully possess, or their male attendants who have no sexual desires, or children who have no awareness yet of women's intimate parts. And let them not strut so as to draw attention to the (natural) adornment they hide. Repent unto God, all of you [i.e. men and women], oh believers, so that you may succeed (24:31).

So the first two verses above address men and women, *in parallel*, about guarding their private parts i.e. the groin area or their chastity (repeated in 70:29–30), while restricting women to exposing their natural adornment, i.e. their breasts, only to relatives, household members and children.

For shocking as it seems to us today, it was customary for women in Medina at that time to wear tunics or vests with wide openings in the front that left the breasts exposed.<sup>5</sup> Verse 24:31 above put an end to this fashion among the followers of the Prophet at least in front of “strangers”, as the verse clearly appears to accept the custom’s continuation in front of all sorts of relatives and household occupants of both sexes. **The verse instructs believing women to draw their *khimar*, a pre-Qur’anic ornamental shawl that women used to drape loosely over their heads and neck/shoulders ,<sup>6</sup> over their *exposed* breasts to cover them, in effect making it clear that a woman’s breasts are no longer to “ordinarily appear” before anyone outside of a still surprisingly long list of**

<sup>5</sup>Asad, Muhammad. 2003. *The Message of the Qur’an*. Bristol, England: The Book Foundation, 601; Abou El Fadl, Khaled M. 2003. *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 241; and Nasr et al. *Op. Cit.*, 875.

<sup>6</sup>Asad, Muhammad. *Ibid.*; Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Ibid.*, 108; and Nasr et al. *Op. Cit.*, 875.

related and unrelated men *and women* the verse makes an exception for.

This is an extraordinary accommodation by the Qur'an, despite its declared disapproval of breast-baring, to prevailing customs and what was then considered by society as acceptable flesh to show in broad public.

Oh you who believe [men and women]: let those whom you rightfully possess [domestic staff and slaves] and pre-pubescent children ask permission (before entering) at three times: before the dawn prayer, when you undress for the mid-day heat, and after the night prayer. These are your three times of nakedness [literally "intimate parts", *'awrat*]. There is no blame on you or on them at other times if you go about attending on one another [i.e. without seeking permission first]...(24:58)

And when your children reach puberty let them ask permission (to enter) as those before them had done [i.e. at all times]...(24:59)

Then the two verses above proceed to address men and women *together*, with regard to not exposing their *full* nakedness at home to the rest of the household.

As for elderly women who do not seek marriage, they bear no blame if they discard their clothes without flaunting any (natural) adornment [i.e. breasts], though to refrain [i.e. from exposing their breasts at all] is better for them. For God is all-Hearing, all-Aware (24:60).

Finally, verse 24:60 picks up where 24:32 left off by taking an even more lenient position on baring the breasts by elderly women who are past their sexual phase, although the Qur'an adds that it is nonetheless better for them to keep their breasts covered even then.

But most interpretations render "adornment" (*zeena*) in these verses of Chapter 24 to mean much more than a woman's breasts or even groin area despite no less than three instances in 24:31 that *literally* identify the topic as "breasts", "private parts" and "intimate parts". Overall, such interpretations extend "adornment" to a woman's very shape and/or almost all of her skin and hair and/or even any ornamental jewellery<sup>7</sup> she may be wearing, rather than simply the natural adornment of a woman's breasts, despite:

<sup>7</sup>Nasr et al. *Op. Cit.*, 876 and Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 596.

- The explicit reference here to drawing the shawl *over their breasts* and only showing otherwise what skin would ordinarily appear in the course of daily life;
- The explicit reference to both men and women guarding their *private parts*;
- The explicit reference to children who have no consciousness yet of *women's intimate parts*;
- The reports about *the chest-bearing women's fashion* of the time that continued late into the Prophet's mission;
- And the very *definition of clothing/attire* (which includes jewellery per 35:12) in the Qur'an as something intended by God to be beautiful, to be encouraged and never forbidden, and therefore necessarily visible (Group 1 verses of the Qur'an's Chap. 7 above).

Last but not least, it is conspicuous that few discussions of women's clothing and the Qur'an ever seem to mention the fact that men's clothing is also mentioned.<sup>8</sup> When the above five verses of Chapter 24 are looked at together, both the meaning of "private or intimate parts" and the Qur'an's equal expectation of what men and women's clothing must cover becomes crystal clear: **both men and women are expected to cover their private/intimate parts, i.e. groin areas, and women would ideally also cover their breasts in broad public.**

The last verse where clothing is mentioned appears in the following cluster:

Group 3: The Confederates, 33:57–60

Those who harm God and His Messenger (Muhammad), God has cursed them in this world and the next, and prepared for them a humiliating punishment.

And those who harm believing men and believing women undeservedly, they have burdened themselves with the guilt of slander and evident sin.

Oh Prophet: tell your wives and daughters and the womenfolk of the believers to cast their cloaks upon themselves. That makes it more likely that they will be recognised and not harmed. And God is ever-Forgiving, ever-Merciful (33:59).

<sup>8</sup> Barlas, Asma. 2015. *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 158–159.

If the hypocrites and those whose hearts are diseased and those who sow fear in the city do not cease, We will surely spur you against them, and then they will be your neighbours in it for only a short while.

The above four consecutive verses show a clear concern by God for the safety of Muhammad and his followers, and the women in particular, from the actions of the “hypocrites” and those with “sickness in their hearts” and who “sow fear/cause alarm”. Verse 33:59 flows very naturally here, and in all the years I had been reading it had never given me pause of any kind, so I was surprised to learn that it is held up alongside the equally sensible 24:31 above as “proof” that the Qur’an imposed a uniform upon women. And in due course I came across, in my readings, the events of the time that add colour to this verse as formulated: apparently when women went out into the wilderness to relieve themselves they would often be harassed by men of other communities who would later deny knowledge of their identities, hence the instruction to adopt the cloak when venturing out to discourage assailants by making it harder for them to claim they had mistaken Muhammad’s followers for the womenfolk of their enemies.<sup>9</sup>

In summary:

- **The only three verses in the Qur’an that say something specific about women and clothing (24:31, 24:60, 33:59)** simply tell us that women’s groin area and ideally breasts also must be covered, and indicate a way for Muslim women at the time to identify themselves upfront when alone in the wild to ward off hypocritical sexual assailants.
- **One verse says something specific about men and clothing (24:30)**, telling us that they must cover their groin area.
- **Two other verses in the same cluster (24:58–59) address men and women with regard to clothing**, telling both not to be naked within their own homes around household staff and family members.

### WHAT OF HIJAB?

So what of *hijab*, the head-dress many women today wear and which comes in different styles and colours that cover varying degrees of the hair and neck?

**The Qur’an mentions the word *hijab* eight times** (once in derivative form)—**without it ever having anything to do with the head or hair**. In Arabic, the word *hijab* means barrier, obstacle, screen or partition, i.e.

<sup>9</sup>Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Op. Cit.* (2003), 143 and 240; and Nasr et al. *Op. Cit.*, 875.

something that comes between two things to separate them from one another. Here are those verses, within their contexts.

The Heights, 7:44-46

And the inhabitants of the Garden will call out to the inhabitants of the Fire: We have found what our Lord promised us to be true, have you also found what your Lord promised you to be true? They will say “yes”, whereupon a voice among them will proclaim that God’s curse is on the evildoers,

Who bar others from the path of God and would make it crooked, and who do not believe in the Hereafter.

And between the two there shall be a barrier (*hijab*)...(7:46)

Thus the above indicates there will be a *hijab* between those in Paradise and those in Hell.

The Night Journey, 17:45

And when you read the Qur’an, we place between you and those who do not believe in the Hereafter a hidden partition (*hijab*).

In other words, there is a *hijab* between believers in the Qur’an and non-believers in the Hereafter. This is an interesting statement, as it does not distinguish between believers in the Qur’an and non-believers in the Qur’an as such, but rather forges a wider alliance among *all* those *who believe in the Hereafter*.

Mary, 19:16-17

And mention Mary in the Book, when she withdrew from her family to an eastern place

And sought seclusion (*hijab*) from them. Then We sent her Our Spirit, who appeared to her as a perfectly fashioned human being.

So Mary placed a *hijab* between herself and her family when she left them for a place of retreat.

The Confederates, 33:53

Oh you who believe: do not enter the Prophet’s dwellings for a meal unless you have been given leave, nor arrive at an improper time [i.e. too early]. But if you are invited then enter, and after you have eaten disperse rather than linger for conversation, for that harms/inconveniences the Prophet, but he is too shy to tell you. But God is not shy of the truth. And if you ask

any of them (the Prophet's wives) for something, ask it from behind a curtain (*hijab*), for that is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. And it is not for any of you to harm/inconvenience the Messenger of God, nor to marry his wives after him: surely that would be an enormity in God's eyes.

The context of 33:53<sup>10</sup> above is the following: guests at the wedding celebration of Muhammad and Zaynab (the ex-wife of Zayd) had overstayed their welcome in Zaynab's house, causing some annoyance as the Prophet even went out and came back more than once to find them still there. The main transmitter of this event was Muhammad's servant Anas bin Malik, who also said that when the guests finally left and he went to fetch the Prophet, upon returning the Prophet loosened a curtain while standing on the threshold of Zaynab's chamber for privacy and then recited this just-received verse to him. The verse is soon followed in 33:55 with an identification of those persons that the Prophet's wives need not bother with a curtain for, namely male blood relatives and their women-folk, *and their own domestic servants and slaves, presumably because the men among the latter would never aspire to engage their mistresses inappropriately*. It is also known that the apartments of the Prophet's wives were practically extensions of the mosque in Medina, with an endless stream of visitors pouring into whichever apartment Muhammad was spending time in on a given day, leaving no room for domestic privacy or comfort.<sup>11</sup>

Sād (unknown meaning but aka David<sup>12</sup>), 38:30–33

And upon David we bestowed Solomon: how excellent a servant [i.e. of God's]! He was ever-turning [to God] in repentance.

When the noble, swift-footed horses were presented to him in the evening

He would say: Truly I have come to love the love of good things because of<sup>13</sup> the remembrance of my Lord—until they became hidden from view [literally behind a *hijab*].

Bring them back to me! And he would set about stroking their legs and necks.

<sup>10</sup>Nasr et al. *Op. Cit.*, 1035 and Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. 1994. *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 90.

<sup>11</sup>Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>12</sup>Nasr et al. *Op. Cit.*, 1101.

<sup>13</sup>Most translations of 38:32 imply that Solomon loved the good things *more* than the remembrance of God, but I have translated it here as *because of* the remembrance of God because it is clear in these verses that the Qur'an is giving an example of "how excellent a servant" of God's Solomon was, and not the other way round. See also Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 788 and Nasr et al. *Op. Cit.*, 1109 on this interpretation.

Solomon's horses became invisible when they were concealed by a *hijab* of either darkness, distance or partition, in this case.

Clearly Spelled Out, 41:5

And they said, Our hearts are shrouded from what you (Muhammad) call us to and there is deafness in our ears, and there is a barrier (*hijab*) between us and you. So do (as you will), as shall we.

Again, there is a *hijab* between those who were open to the Prophet's message and those who were not.

Consultation, 42:51

And no human being shall be spoken to by God save by divine inspiration or from behind a partition (*hijab*), or He sends a messenger to reveal what He will by His leave. Truly He is the Exalted, the Wise.

The above is about God never speaking directly to any human being but always either through a *hijab* of some sort, or through a messenger or prophet.

Those who Defraud, 83:15

No: on that day, they are debarred (subjected to a *hijab*) from their Lord.

In other words, the evildoers are separated from God by the *hijab* they have themselves set up through their bad deeds.

As the above verses demonstrate, ***hijab* in the Qur'an never refers to a head-dress, but is always either a physical or metaphorical barrier between two things.**

THE PUSHBACK OF JURISTS: STRETCHING THE MEANING  
OF (NATURAL) "ADORNMENT" AND A COUPLE OF SPECIFIC  
INSTRUCTIONS, AND BACK TO THE EVER-FLAWED WOMAN  
OF ALLEGED *HADITH*

Simply put, **jurists from the ninth century onwards:**

- **gradually expanded the meaning of a woman's (natural) adornment over and beyond the breasts (24:31);**

- converted the “cloak” verse from a security-via-identification measure into a divine command for all Muslim women at all times (33:59);
- and to varying degrees extended an ordained “elite” practice of separating the Prophet’s wives from most men to all Muslim women (33:53).

This three-fold approach<sup>14</sup> is, in essence, how a “dress code” for women was arrived at by jurists seeking to derive regulation from the Qur’an, which was always their primary objective as we saw in Part I.

- On the expansion of the meaning of (natural) adornment (24:31):

Surprisingly, the vast majority of early jurists *do* appear to have paid attention to the sentence “...*not to display of their (natural) adornment except that which (ordinarily) appears.*” in verse 24:31, although they applied their leniency to Muslim bondwomen/slaves and servants who had to work for a living but not to freewomen, on the basis of the former’s need for practical mobility *and even custom*.<sup>15</sup> And there was an interesting variation among them as to what they thought appropriate for an active woman to wear: some jurists argued that a Muslim slave need only cover the area between her navel and knee so that the breasts and all else could remain exposed, others argued for covering chest-to-knee and down to the elbows, while the majority agreed that a female slave or servant need not cover her hair even during prayers.<sup>16</sup> I find this extraordinary, a little-told nugget that indicates that **even the zealous jurists thought that the lifestyle of the time and place is what determines what is appropriate for a woman to leave uncovered.**

By contrast, most jurists were far stricter when it came to free and higher-society women: most were in favour of a free Muslim woman covering everything but her face and hands, some made additional allowance for the feet and forearms, some pointed out that the Qur’an’s intent was only to have women cover their breasts (which they had not always done as explained), while some even wanted to cover up one eye!<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. *Op. Cit.*, 90–93.

<sup>15</sup>Abou El Fadl, Khaled M. 2001. *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses*. Maryland; Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 126 and 132.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 131 and 133.

Either way, what is striking about the above is that **there was a clear over-thinking of what (natural) adornment (*zeena*) means in 24:31 and 24:60. This is surprising: after all, there are two mentions of “private” and “intimate” parts (*furooj*, *‘awrāt*) and one mention of “breasts” (*juyoob*) in 24:31 itself.** But in the jurists’ general bid to regulate every aspect of life, they would overlook this Qur’anic definition and eventually fold in everything from a woman’s skin to her hair—**although none of them ever claimed that the Qur’an speaks of the hair, as indeed they could not have done.**

Equally striking is the implication that **women’s attire had *not* been regulated during the first few centuries after Muhammad’s death,** with this juristic debate flourishing in earnest from the ninth century onwards. In fact,

...*hijab* in its multiple meanings was made obligatory for Muslim women at large...during the first centuries after the expansion of Islam beyond the borders of Arabia, and then mainly in the Islamicized societies still ruled by preexisting (Sasanian and Byzantine) social traditions. With the rise of the Iraq-based Abbasid state in the mid-eighth century of the Western calendar, the lawyer-theologians of Islam grew into a religious establishment...and it was they who interpreted the Qur’anic rules on women’s dress and space in increasingly absolute and categorical fashion...

For the later scholars of Islam, the female face veil would be a hotly debated item; not, however, in the context of individual choice,...but within the parameters of the *hijab* as legally-prescribed ‘concealment’...This restrictive position [i.e. concealment of all including face and hands] was later heightened and emphasized by, for example, Khafafi (d. 1659)....<sup>18</sup>

An inevitable conclusion from these historical facts is that **for the first few centuries of Islam there was no dress code or *hijab* requirement of any kind for women even while praying in mosques,**<sup>19</sup> so that women during that time would have prayed there in whatever they typically wore *or did not necessarily wear*, such as the yet-to-be-made obligatory hair-covering.

<sup>18</sup> Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. *Op. Cit.*, 93–94.

<sup>19</sup> Barlas, Asma. *Op. Cit.*, 55.

- On converting a security-via-identification measure on “cloaks” into a universal divine rule (33:59):

As strange as the expansion of what (natural) adornment means is the over-thinking of what the Qur’an meant by “...to cast their cloaks upon themselves”, especially since the verse continues with “*That makes it more likely that they will be recognised and not harmed*” (33:59), not to mention the surrounding verses.

But it is precisely by ignoring the continuation of the verse that jurists were able to take an incident-specific Qur’anic recommendation intended to protect women from hypocritical assailants at the time and turn it into a universal law.

**The over-thinking of (natural) “adornment” despite the definition given by the Qur’an right there within 24:31, and the over-thinking of “cast their cloaks upon themselves” despite the explanation given by the Qur’an right there within 33:59, in fact reinforce one another, with the ever-expanding interpretation of the former justifying the increasing coverage of the latter.**

- On extending, to varying degrees, an ordained “elite” practice of separating the Prophet’s wives from most other men to all Muslim women (33:53):

Once verse 33:53 had instructed that non-household men or relatives only address the Prophet’s wives from behind a curtain (*hijab*), perhaps it was inevitable that Muhammad’s wives would soon take this “curtain” with them outside the home. Thus we know that when travelling on camels the howdahs or litters strapped to the backs of the animals on which they sat now had curtains, and they now added a face-veil to their usual attire when out and about.<sup>20</sup> This occurred in the last two to three years of Muhammad’s life.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to know that most of the traditional Qur’anic commentaries state that the *hijab* separation was applied only to the Prophet’s wives.<sup>22</sup> **Because as the Qur’an itself tells us in a cluster of verses in Chapter 33, the Prophet’s wives are not like other women:**

<sup>20</sup>Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. *Op. Cit.*, 94 and 170 and Lings, Martin. 1988. Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources. London: Unwin Hyman Limited, 241.

<sup>21</sup>Lings, Martin. *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>22</sup>Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Op. Cit.* (2003), 239.

The Confederates, 33:6

The Prophet is closer to the believers than they are to themselves, and his wives are their mothers...

after which they became known as the Mothers of the Believers.

...continued in 33:30-31

Oh wives of the Prophet: if one of you commits a proven indecency, her punishment would be doubled, and that is easy for God (to do).

And whoever among you submits to God and His Messenger and does good, We will bring her double her reward: and We have prepared for her a generous bounty.

The above two verses clearly express the *greater* burden of responsibility that the Prophet's wives bear in God's eyes relative to other women.

...continued in 33:32

Oh wives of the Prophet: you are not like other women. If you are reverent then do not be acquiescent in speech, lest he whose heart is diseased seek more. And speak honourably.

This verse is explicit that the wives of the Prophet in fact bear a *unique* responsibility. It reportedly addresses the behaviour of lukewarm converts to the new religion who would frequently approach the Prophet's wives with increasing demands that they were reluctant to take to Muhammad himself, in an attempt to take advantage of the women's kindness.<sup>23</sup> The Qur'an proceeds to articulate what this unique responsibility includes in the next two verses.

...continued in 33:33-34

And be solemn in your homes and do not flaunt [your natural adornment] in the manner of the previous Age of Ignorance. And perform the prayer and give the alms and obey God and His Messenger. For God wishes to remove all defilement from you, oh People of the (Prophet's) Household, and to purify you thoroughly.

And remember/relay what is recited in your homes of God's verses and wisdom. God is truly Subtle, all-Aware.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 187.

In the above, the same expression (*tabarruj*) used earlier in 24:61 in relation to older women preferably not flaunting their breasts before the broader public is again deployed here and re-linked to the pre-Qur’anic fashion of women wearing open-breasted vests addressed in 24:31. Verse 33:33 here makes clear that while the Qur’an was tolerant of this pre-existing fashion among older women in public and among all women before male relatives and household members only, this “ignorant” fashion, as God de facto labels it, was not becoming of the wives of the Prophet, period.

And we have already seen another verse elevating the Prophet’s wives above other Muslim women, which comes a little later in the same chapter:

The Confederates, 33:53

... And if you ask any of them (the Prophet’s wives) for something, ask it from behind a curtain (*hijab*), for that is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. And it is not for any of you to harm/inconvenience the Messenger of God, nor to marry his wives after him: surely that would be an enormity in God’s eyes.

The above ban on marrying the Prophet’s widows was unusual for the time and served to reinforce, along with their new title of Mothers of the Believers, the unique status that the Prophet’s wives held in God’s eyes. The Prophet was in fact explicitly forbidden by the previous verse (33:52) from further marriages or from divorcing one wife to take another, further underscoring the elite treatment the Qur’an was now detailing regarding Muhammad’s wives.

In sum, no one can legitimately claim that the Qur’an imposes a dress code on Muslim women aimed at hiding their shape, any non-groin part of the body, hair or face. **Apart from covering our private parts (ideally including a woman’s breasts) and urging us to wear beautiful outfits in general, the Qur’an is neutral on clothing for women and men alike.** If we truly care about what it tells us, we would leave women to dress as they choose without constantly judging them, one way or the other. In this regard, one of the most reassuring sights for me is that of a woman in a headscarf and another without (often in the same family)—and dressed completely differently—hanging out together socially, a sight I have seen and experienced thousands of times throughout my life in many countries in restaurants, parks, on the street and in homes.

THE PUSHBACK OF ALLEGED *HADITH* ON WOMEN'S  
CLOTHING: THE MODESTY-REDEFINED  
AND FAUX-FITNA COMBO

As ever one is confronted with one or more allegedly supporting “*hadith*” for every controversial rule that the jurists put forward, no matter how out-of-sync with the inexorable beauty of the Prophet’s soul and character it may be. So although the so-called *hadiths* that are negative about women are relatively few as previously mentioned, at least one of them manages to take on the subject of women’s private parts.

Thus the Prophet allegedly said “A woman has ten private parts: when she marries, her husband covers one of her private parts and when she dies, the grave covers the rest.”<sup>24</sup> Next to such a claim, demanding that women cover up entirely seems downright merciful! As one scholar put it: “The logical conclusion to be drawn from this tradition is that for a woman to be thoroughly modest, she ought to be dead and buried.”<sup>25</sup>

This bizarre claim actually reminds me of a news report I read a year ago about a popular Middle Eastern singer who had turned religious and given up her music in the process, while also donning conservative clothing and a headscarf. After some time she came out of retirement, repurposing her gift towards her faith by releasing a devotional song dedicated to the Prophet on the occasion of his birthday commemoration. She publicly expressed her joy to be back, saying that God had finally answered her prayers and reconciled the conflicted feelings she had been living with, and posted pictures of her new look, including one in a beautiful pink-and-white turban covering her hair and another in an elegantly wrapped cream-and-navy headscarf. While her fans had been shocked at her announced retirement, most online commentators now applauded her move and/or expressed support, but a few were critical—and not because they were aggrieved fans. One man called a woman’s voice a *‘awra* (intimate part), and claimed that even if the singer had used her voice to chant the call to prayer itself, God would still curse her! A woman expressed astonishment that the singer was being applauded even though she was obviously continuing to be sinful and suggested she needed guidance, not praise. For these critics, the singer connecting with her faith and changing her entire lifestyle as part of her commitment was not enough because in

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

modern times, it seems that some of us have fallen under the influence of a truly strange, anomalous claim that a woman is only thoroughly modest when she can neither be seen *nor heard*—quite literally.

In any case while the early jurists had discussed women’s clothing in the context of modesty and covering the “private parts”—however they may have defined the latter—much modern talk, by contrast, is of women being a source of *fitna*,<sup>26</sup> i.e. discord, divisiveness, schism etc., as discussed earlier in Part II. In other words, **women’s clothing is today discussed by many jurists as if it were a public safety measure!**

Thus we hear of supposed *hadiths* attributed to the Prophet such as: “(The whole of) a woman is a private part (*‘awra*) and so if she goes out, the devil makes her the source of seduction”; “I have not left in my people a *fitna* more harmful to men than women”; “Women are the snares of the devil”; and so on.<sup>27</sup>

Surely no one who has read the Qur’an can possibly believe that the messenger whom God chose to bring it to us could possibly have said such things.

## COLOUR IS GOOD

An Asian man once asked me why black seems to be the dominant colour for Muslim women’s conservative clothing in many parts. I suspect he was asking because though he came from a country that is virtually completely Muslim, women’s attire there had always been colourful and local in style until recently, when gradual changes had begun to seep in—noticeable ones, as the black outfits in question are highly incongruent with the history, culture and landscape of the place and so easily stood out.

I do not know why black is the typical colour for women’s cloaks and shrouds in the Middle East any more than I know why Afghan women’s all-covering outfit called the burqa always seems to be blue. But I have learned that black was not worn traditionally by the young Muslim community and that Muhammad and his followers tried to wear colourful and beautiful clothes despite their poverty.<sup>28</sup> This applied to men and women, and it was interesting to stumble upon references to the Prophet being

<sup>26</sup> Abou El Fadl, Khaled *Op. Cit.* (2001), 123.

<sup>27</sup> Abou El Fadl, Khaled *Op. Cit.* (2003), 236.

<sup>28</sup> Oliveti, Vincenzo. 2002. *Terror’s Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences*. Birmingham, England: Amadeus Books, 41.

dressed in the colour saffron,<sup>29</sup> to the turbans of three of his Companions having been yellow, red and green,<sup>30</sup> and so on.

But my favourite anecdote on colour relates not to clothes, but to Aisha's hair:

**“Take half of your religion from this red-haired one,” Muhammad told his followers as he pointed to Aisha.<sup>31</sup>**

Even if this incident occurred before verse 33:53 came along to instruct men to speak to the Prophet's wives only from behind a curtain (I do not know if it did or not), it is obvious that Muslim women at the time did not purposefully cover their hair as some might imagine. Since neither the “curtain” verse nor any other mentions women's hair at all anyway, it is no surprise that women were not obliged to cover their hair when praying in a mosque for at least three centuries after the Prophet's death, as already mentioned.

<sup>29</sup> Kahf, Mohja. 2000. Braiding the Stories: Women's Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era. In *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb, 164. New York: Syracuse University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Lings, Martin. *Op. Cit.*, 182.

<sup>31</sup> le Gai Eaton, Charles. 2008. *The Book of Hadith: Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad*, from the *Mishkat al-Masabih*. Watsonville, California; Bristol, England: The Book Foundation, xxviii.

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