

Islamic Hijab: its Form and Meaning

Woman was greatly afflicted in two ways which were the main source of different evils, sufferings and injustices that happened to her during history.

Firstly, woman was considered as a humiliated being owned by men in order to achieve their sexual enjoyment, and at the same time, she was not more than a factory to produce offspring. She was compared to a vessel for holding embryos. Other descriptions regarding woman were: considering her as a devil in human form or the source of disobedience in the existence.. etc. The natural results of all these views was only to humiliate enslave, usurp her rights and prevent her from participating in general life.

Indeed, the history of woman is filled with pictures of torture, sufferings and injustices which afflicted her as we will explain in the following pages of this study.

Secondly, woman was viewed as an instrument used for sex, enjoyment and material profit. This outlook about woman came into existence with the birth of modern European civilization. If the old outlook on woman was to consider her as a degraded and humiliated creature, treating her with repression by confiscating her freedom, the modern *Jahiliyah* deals with her from the point of giving rein to sexual freedom.

Different means are used including education, schools, cinemas, some philosophies' legislation, the internal systems of political parties in Europe and the West in order to implant this outlook and deepen it. It passed many rounds on its way to in spreading sexual disturbance which led not only to the destruction of woman's personality, but also the destruction of the family and the loss of human values in those societies. Among the phenomenon of these afflictions is to undress women and push them towards libido without caring for ethical and legal barriers.

All these injustices, sufferings and the destruction of her personality, which happened to her during human history, came about in two ways: The *Ancient Jahiliyah* way and the *Modem Jahiliyah* way.

Woman has not been so lucky, during history, to receive a message that protects her dignity, balance

and respect for her position in society other than the Islamic message, the message of the Almighty Allah, Lord of the worlds. Thus, *hijab*, adopted by this great message, is one of the confirmations of the Divine Care for this honoured creature as we will see.

Two Concepts on the Hijab of a Woman

Regarding the *hijab* of a woman and its relation to general life around her, two main concepts appeared over the centuries which involved the term *hijab*.

The Pre-Islamic Concepts of Hijab

Ancient *Jahiliyah* cast its burden on history before the appearance of Islam and women experienced a major portion of the injustice of those times. Then a harsh and rigorous picture of *hijab* existed in which woman was deprived of her rights to the extent that under the pressure of this miserable and ignorant civilization she was considered only a commodity to be bought and sold. She was deprived of her human values and transposed to a material thing used by men for enjoyment or sometimes used as a slave.

Whatever has been said concerning the allegations which led men, in these ancient societies, to confiscate the existence of woman completely, whether being imposed by economic, sexual or spiritual causes, the fact remains that the exploitation of a woman and deprivation of her rights, the confiscation of her humanity reached a point where it became difficult for modern man to imagine.

The injustices which poured on women alternated between the phenomenon of the *harem* and *wa'id* and what is between them of unjust concepts and attitudes became numerous.

Some considered woman as a satan wearing the skin of a human in order to serve man alone and achieve his enjoyment through her as Ancient *Jahiliyah* believed.

Still others considered her body as a body of human and her soul as a soul of an animal. This view was prevalent in Europe before its Industrial Revolution.

It is for you, our dear reader, to imagine the immense tragedies which happened to woman while she was considered a satan or an animal or a commodity to be sold like any other material.

These are some true examples of woman's sufferings that were practically experienced and depended on such unjust illogical ideologies.

The Holy Qur'an mentions some of the suffering of woman under the burden of *Jahiliyah* society of the Arabs and which was strongly condemned by Islam.

"And when a daughter is announced to one of them his face becomes black and he is full of

wrath. He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that which is announced to him. Shall he keep it with disgrace or bury it (alive) in the dust? Now surely evil is what they judge."(Holy Qur'an, 16:58-59).

"And do not kill your children for fear of poverty; We give them sustenance and yourselves (two); surely to kill them is a great wrong."(Holy Qur'an, 17:31)

"And When the female-y buried alive is asked, for what Sin she was killed,..." (Holy Qur'an, 81:8-9)

A Prophetic tradition says:

*"A man named Qais bin Asim al-Timimy came to the presence of the Prophet of Allah (s.a.w.) and said: 'I buried all eight of my daughters during Jahiliyah (the pre-Islamic period of ignorance)..."*¹

The pre-Islamic history of ignorance of the Arabs is illustrated below:

"Burying female children was carried out in different miserable conditions; the infant was buried alive! They used diverse ways in practising this custom. If a girl was born to one of them, they kept her for six years. Then, her father ordered for her to be perfumed and beautified on the pretext of taking her to one of her relatives! A well was already prepared for her in the desert. When she reached the well, her father told her to look at it and then pushed her into it and threw dust and soil over her!

"Others used this way: The mother, during the time of her delivery, went and sat over a pit. If the newborn was a daughter, she dropped her into the pit and filled it with dust. If it were a boy, she would take him home!

"Those who did not want to bury their daughters, kept them humiliated until they reached the age when they would be able to shepherd. Then they were dressed in a woollen robe and sent to the desert to shepherd camels!

"Those who did not prefer to send her to shepherd, used other means to humiliate her personality by using wickedness against her. "For example, if the girl grew up and wanted to marry and after her marriage if her husband died, her guardian would come and dressed her in a special garment which meant that she had no right to marry anyone unless her guardian agreed. Thus, she was forced into marriage against her will! If her guardian did not want to marry her, she would be imprisoned until she died and then he would inherit her. If she wanted to save herself from this state, she had to give some ransom to free herself.

"Others set women free on the condition that she should not marry anyone except with her guardian's permission or she should pay a ransom. Others imprisoned widows and kept her for one of their children until he grew up and married her.

"Concerning a female orphan, they kept her with them and prevented her from marriage with the hope of

marrying her when their wives died or made her marry one of their children wishing for her wealth and beauty..."²

The Greeks considered woman as an unqualified person who had no right to practise any lawful disposals.³

Even some Greek philosophers regarded the confinement of the name of woman inside the home like the imprisonment of her body. Yosteen, the famous Greek orator said: "We take wives only to give birth to our legal children."

"Concerning the Romans, the Roman woman was considered as a cheap property possessed by man. They treated her as they wished. A meeting was held in one of the assemblies in Rome in order to discuss women's affairs. In the end they decided that she was only an existence without a soul and she did not inherit the life of the Hereafter. She is only a filth and she should not eat meat nor should she laugh or talk. It was obligatory for her to spend her time in serving and obeying.

"Some members of the Roman Assembly for Educators adopted a law which forbids woman from possessing more than a half ounce of gold. She should wear clothes of different colours and should not ride a coach more than a mile outside Rome except in the case of some general festivals."⁴

European history speaks about Greece and says that a Greek man sometimes collected hundreds of women in his home. ⁵

The ancient history of Iran also mentions events and numbers similar to those of Arabian *Jahiliyah* and old European civilization. If there is any difference between the two, it is only in details. For instance, consider the following: "In Ancient Iran no one secured his women against others."⁶

"Khosrow Parviz (a Sassanian ruler) possessed about 3000 women in his harem and was never satisfied sexually. Whenever he desired to replenish his harem, he would write letters to his governors wherein he would describe the perfect and beautiful women he wanted. They, then, sent him any women who fits his description."⁷

In Europe, in its middle ages, it was believed that:

Woman represented not only the spring of disobediences and the source of all evils and corruptions; but also the origin of human tragedies. She was the cause of the misery for inhabitants of the earth. The Christian's attitude towards women was explicitly explained by one of the first popes called Tirtoliyan in the middle ages. He gave the distorted opinion of Christianity about woman, "She was the entrance used by Satan to enter man's soul. She was the reason that man was pushed towards the prohibited tree (meaning the tree in the Garden of Eden), violating the law of God, and disfiguring the image of God, that is, woman."⁸

The British philosopher, Herbert Spenser, says in his book, *Describing Sociology*, about the status of

woman in the Middle Ages:

*"In fact, in Britain, the wife was sold during the 11th century and the courts, belonging to churches in this century, legislated a law which the husband had the right to transfer or loan his wife to an other man for a limited time."*⁹

Indeed, these disgraceful attitudes against woman were followed by fearful actions, imprisoning her at home and veiling her from life, historically called the veil of woman, i.e. to veil her from participating in life and preventing her from enjoying her legal natural rights.

This kind of black ideological veil *hijab* of woman, in Ancient *Jahiliyah*, and in all the world including Iran, India, Egypt, Europe, and Arab lands is the one which showed this figured picture of woman to the callers of freedom of woman. *Hijab*, which Islam calls for, is unlike the *hijab* of the period of the harem, *wa'id* and slave trade from which women suffered.

The Islamic Concept of Hijab

Surely, the concept of *hijab* adopted by Islam differs completely from the *hijab* which was introduced by the civilizations of *Jahiliyah* including the miserable social phenomena which were existed in the palaces of some Ummayyad and Abbasid rulers concerning the exploitation of women in order to achieve their own enjoyment.

Even the term *hijab* did not enter the ideological life of Muslims except recently. Whatever has been said about woman, the fact remains that Islam's aspiration for protecting her through shaping a special dress for her shows Islam's honuor and respect for her and her dignity, cleanliness and purity.

In Islam and its right message, there never exists any law or regulation which prevents woman from participating in the aspects of life nor imprisoning her at home like the civilization of the period of *Jahiliyah*. Even this word *hijab* is newly used in Islamic thought.¹⁰

In addition to the special dress worn by woman while moving outside her home – as we will explain later on – Islam also uses the term *sitir* (screen) for this action.

Islam made it obligatory for both men and women to cast down their eyes for others than their wives, husband or harem. On one hand, Islam makes it obligatory for woman to wear *hijab*, on the other hand, it imposes certain obligations for men too.

If a special dress is limited for woman to hide the fascinations (beauties) of her body; on the other side it also imposes that men lower their eyes to women others than their *mahram* women in addition to guarding their private parts.

In agreement with this new use of the word *hijab* as a definition within and Islamic context, it is correct for us to say: Islamic veil includes both men and women; but its essence differs in the form that

preserves morals, protects virtue and respects woman in daily life. Islam has nothing to do with imprisonment, or preventing woman from exercising her natural right and there is no insult or degradation for woman in its criteria and schemes.

It is honour for Islam that the establishment of its civilized practice was a conviction for the end of the movement of exploitation and enslavement which was practised by men against women in the period of *Jahiliyah*, which blackened the history of man before the rising of the blessed mission of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.).

The Islamic *hijab* is defined briefly as the shape of a modest dress in addition to the limitation of the relation between men and women other than the non-*mahram* (one who is marriageable) women and placing her in a pure legal frame entwined with chastity, respect and giving rights.

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1. Majma' al-Bayan, Sheikh Tabrasi, vol. 5, Irfan Printing House, Saida, 1937, p.442.
 2. Dhilal al-Qur'an, Shahid Sayyid Qotb, vol. 8, p. 479. Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-Arabi, 1971, Beirut.
 3. Al-Mar'afi Jami' al-Adyan wa al-Usur, Muhammad Abdullah Maqsud, p. 38, Quoting it from the book Woman During History, p. 41.
 4. Ibid., quoting from the book The Right of a Husband Upon His Wife and the Right of a Wife Upon Her Husband, Taha Abdullah Afifi, p 12-13.
 5. Nidham Huquq al-Mar'a fi al-Islam, Shahid Sheikh Murtadha Mutahhari, p.269, 1st edition, 1404 A. H., Tehran.
 6. Mas'alat al-Hijab, Shahid Murtadha Mutahhari, p.49, 1st ed., 1407 A. H. Tehran.
 7. Ibid., p, 87 quoting from the book Iran During the Sassanian Period
 8. Majalat al-Ifaf No. 9, p.25.
 9. Al-Mar'a fi Jamii' al-Adyan wa al-Usur, Muahammad Abdullah Maqsud, p.48.
 10. Mas'lat al-Hijab, Shahid Murtadha Mutahhari.

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