

## First Lesson

### Reasons Given for the Modest Dress

Our discourse will center around the Islamic modest dress. We will discuss the modest dress from three aspects and I think that it is best if we divide it in this way.

One discussion will be a philosophical and socio-historic one about why the modest dress appeared among people, in general, because it is not particular to Islam. It existed before Islam among many of the ancient nations and it was stronger in Sassanian Iran than in any other place. What reasons have been given for this? It is possible that some of these reasons may be correct in relation to some societies? In other words, are the causes given for the development of the modest dress true in some places? Then we have to see if the reasons they have given hold true for the modest dress in Islam as well, or whether or not Islam has other reasons. We will deduce the Islamic point of view from Islam itself.

The second discussion relates to the problems which a person may find with the modest dress, the criticisms that one may make about it and the drawbacks which are mentioned. What are these drawbacks that others mention? Does the Islamic modest dress have the same drawbacks that are mentioned for the modest dress in general? Thus, the second discussion will be devoted to criticisms.

The third area of discussion relates to the Islamic modest dress itself, its history, whether or not there was the modest dress during the Age of Ignorance in Arabia and Islam confirmed it, increased it or decreased it? Or did it not exist in the Age of Ignorance and Islam established it?

Then, what is the Islamic modest dress? Here we will refer to the verses and commentaries upon the Holy Quran and traditions from the Holy Prophet and the pure Imams. The verses referred to are in two Chapters, Surah Nur and Surah Ahzab.

## The Philosophical Reason

Social commentators have often presented their reasons for the appearance of the modest dress centered around the idea that even in the first principles of nature, no covering or veil has been made to come between males and females. They say that there is no instance in nature where a curtain or veil appears between the male and female sex or for the female sex to be set aside behind a curtain and to wear a covering.

It would appear that there are five reasons given for the appearance of the modest dress. The philosophical reason centers on the tendency towards asceticism and struggling with pleasures in an effort to subdue the ego. The main source for this thought is perhaps India where a barrier was created between men and women through the pursuance of asceticism because a woman is the highest form of lustful pleasure giving. If men were to mix freely with women, according to this idea, a man would mainly pursue this and his society would remain underdeveloped in other areas. Therefore, he had to struggle to conquer his own soul by denying it enjoyment of sexual pleasures.

Other things which, like women, cause lust to arise within the human being are also struggled against such as the resistance towards cleanliness or encouragement of messiness and filth. Do not think that some people chose this because of carelessness on their part or because of recklessness or lack of concern. It was rooted in a philosophy which confirmed and even extended it.

As Bertrand Russell mentions in his book, *Marriage and Ethics*, in the early stages of Christianity, this kind of thinking developed through St. Paul when celibacy was encouraged and moved a large number of people towards the wilderness to destroy satan. Then, he says that the Church even rose in opposition to taking a bath because the body leads to sin. The Church applauded uncleanness and a smelly body took on the smell of sanctity. According to St. Paul, cleanliness of the body opposed cleanliness of the spirit and lice come to be considered as 'pearls of God'.<sup>1</sup>

Then it occurred to me that having long hair among the faqirs who, as you know, practiced asceticism and remained celibate from women, was for this very reason. They say that in the past, whether or not it is true, whoso ever shortened or cut the hair of the body, that person's sexual instincts were strengthened. Thus, with this reasoning, long hair would lessen sexual desires.

This idea existed in the past and perhaps it is true that if a person were to cut or shorten or shave all the hair on one's body, one would increase one's sexual desires. Then the Indians and the Sikhs who forbid the cutting of their hair could have been for this very reason because they were practicing asceticism.

Some have said that the reason why the modest dress was found in the world, in an absolute sense, was because the idea of asceticism appeared. Then they ask why asceticism was found or began to develop among people. They have mentioned two reasons for this.

First, because among the deprived class, there were people who carried on with women, had beloveds and then their beloveds were taken away from them, a kind of hatred for women suddenly developed in them, in particular, where women themselves conspired against them. Thus, a hatred developed against women. They essentially began to seek celibacy and asceticism and would propagate to the extent possible against women. This they developed as a philosophy of the priests.

The second reason given for the appearance of desire for asceticism is the opposite of the first. Persons who were very extreme in their sexual practices, an extent which even exceeded the limits of nature and persons who turned to drugs or stimulators or things so that they were continuously stimulated in one way or another, would suddenly turn away from sex. It can be seen in human nature that sometimes when one does something to an extreme limit, one then turns completely away from it, even if it were something pleasurable. If something is imposed, a revulsion towards it can develop. At the end of their lives, they develop a hatred for sexual activity. History more or less confirms this in the lives of sultans who had spent their lives in carnal pleasures and harems. At the end of their lives, because of the extremity of their behavior, a hatred for it developed within them. They say it produced immense exhaustion within them and created a sense of antagonism and rivalry against women.

At any rate, they say that the modest dress and the barrier between men and women was caused by the appearance of the idea of seeking asceticism. The materialists who wanted to justify asceticism and ascetic practices said that it was for one of these two reasons.

As to these two reasons, we do not say that none of these existed in the world. They could have been and these causes might have had these effects but Islam, as we will mention later, established the modest dress. It did not exist during the Age of Ignorance in Arabia. We have to see whether or not these causes have been mentioned in Islam and have been given as proof or other reasons have been given for it.

Does this precept conform with other Islamic precepts? Does the Islamic spirit of asceticism conform with the concept of asceticism which we have mentioned? We will see that Islam has never presented this point of view and, as a matter of fact, Islam has struggled greatly against this view. Even non-Muslims agree that Islam never promoted asceticism and ascetic practices. The concept that began among Hindus and extended to Christianity did not exist in Islam.

It is clear that whatever Islam brought to the concept of the modest dress this reason was not one of them. Islam has emphasized cleanliness. Rather than considering lice to be God's pearls, it said,

"Cleanliness stems from faith." The Holy Prophet saw a person whose hair was disheveled, whose clothes were dirty and he presented a bad appearance. He said, "Pleasure and taking advantage of God's blessings is part of religion."<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Prophet said, "The worst servants of God are those who are dirty."<sup>3</sup> Imam Ali, peace be upon him, said, "God is beautiful and He loves beauty."<sup>4</sup> Imam Sadiq, peace be upon him, said, "God is beautiful and He loves His creatures to embellish themselves and reflect their beauty. The reverse is also true. He considers poverty and pseudo-poverty to be enemies. If God has given you a blessing, the effect of that blessing must be shown in your life." They asked him, "How should the blessing of God be shown?" He said, "By the clothes of a person being clean, smelling good, whitening their house with stucco, sweeping in front of their house and lighting their lamps before sunset which will add to its splendor of their home."<sup>5</sup>

In the oldest books we have available such as Kafi, which has been used for one thousand years, there is a section called *bab alziyye wa tajammul*. Here Islam has strongly emphasized combing the hair, keeping it short, making use of perfumes and oiling one's hair.

In order to perform their worship better and in order to gain greater spiritual pleasures, a group of Companions of the Holy Prophet left their wives and children. They fasted during the day and performed worship at night. As soon as the Holy Prophet learned of this, he prevented them from continuing, saying, "I, who am your leader, do not do this. I fast on some days and on others, I do not. I worship a part of the night and I spend other parts of it with my wives." This group then asked the Prophet's permission to castrate themselves. The Holy Prophet did not give his permission. He said that this was forbidden in Islam.

One day three women went to the Prophet. They complained about their husbands. One said that her husband did not eat meat. Another said that her husband shunned perfume. The third said that her husband distanced himself from her. The Prophet of God suddenly became angry, threw down his cloak, left his house and went to the mosque. He went upon the minbar and cried out, "What should be done with a group of my friends who put meat, perfume and women aside? I myself eat meat. I smell perfume and I receive pleasure from my wives. Whoever objects to my methods is not from among me."<sup>6</sup>

The command was given to shorten the length of dress because the custom among the Arabs was to wear dresses which were so long that they swept the streets. Because of cleanliness, one of the first verses revealed to the Holy Prophet was,

***"And thy garments, keep free from stain." (74:4)***

Also, the encouragement to wear white clothes is, first of all, because of beauty and secondly, because

of cleanliness. White clothes show off dirt sooner. This has been indicated in the traditions. When the Holy Prophet wanted to meet his Companions, he would first look in a mirror, comb his hair, and check his appearance. He said, "God loves His servants who when they are going to see their friends make themselves ready and look nice."<sup>7</sup> That is: Wear white clothes because they are more beautiful and cleaner.

The Holy Quran says that the creation of means of embellishment are among the kindnesses that God shows His creatures and it severely criticizes those who deny themselves the beauties of this world. The Holy Quran says,

***"Who has forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of God which He has produced for His servants and the things, clean and pure, (which He has provided) for sustenance?" (7:32)***

Islamic traditions say that the pure Imams consistently debated with the Sufis and referring to this very verse of the Holy Quran, invalidated their deeds.<sup>8</sup>

The legitimate pleasures which spouses receive from each other are considered to be blessings in Islam, among the Divine rewards. It is perhaps difficult for foreigners to understand this concept and perhaps they reflect to themselves, "How strange that they call this filthy act, a blessing, a spiritual reward!" It is surprising for a Hindu or a Christian to realize how much spiritual reward there is in performing the ritual bath (ghusl) after sexual intercourse and washing away the sweat which has been created by this act.

Islam has placed many limitations on the issues but within the area that has been limited, not only does it not forbid it, but it encourages it and it has even presented the kindness and compassion of women as being among the qualities upheld by God's Prophets.

There is a tradition which says, "Within the nature of the Prophets is their love of woman..."<sup>9</sup>

The Holy Prophet straightaway forbids the seeking of asceticism and ascetic practices at the beginning of Islam, practices which may have been in imitation of monks. What a great encouragement has been given to women. In the same way that they are encouraged to limit their contacts with men who are not their husbands, they are encouraged to adorn themselves for their husbands. A woman who does not do so is even cursed; a woman must make herself beautiful for her husband. At the same time, husbands are encouraged to cleanliness.

Hasan ibn Jahm said, 'I went to see Musa ibn Jafar', peace be upon him, and saw that he has used (hair dye) on his hair. I said, 'Have you made use of henna?' He said, 'Yes. A man's use of henna and his dressing well increases the chastity of his wife. Some women lose their chastity because their husbands do not dress well for them.'<sup>10</sup>

In another tradition of the Holy Prophet, one of the reasons he gives for Jewish women committing adultery was because their husbands were so filthy that their wives sought men who were clean and well-groomed.”<sup>11</sup>

Uthman ibn Maz'un was one of the recorders of the traditions of the Holy Prophet. He wanted to put this world aside in imitation of the monks and forbid himself sexual pleasures. His wife went to the Holy Prophet and said, "O Prophet of God, Uthman fasts every day and he gets up every night for prayer." The Holy Prophet became angry and went to him. Uthman was performing his ritual prayer. The Prophet waited until his ritual prayer had ended. He then said, "O Uthman, God has not sent me to institute monasticism and asceticism. God has sent me to introduce the Divine Law which is primordial and simple and to tell people about the return to God. I perform my ritual prayers. I fast and I also have relations with my wives. Whosoever loves religion which coincides with my primordial nature must follow what I do. Marriage is one of my customs."<sup>12</sup>

Clearly this philosophy of asceticism cannot be attributed to Islam. This philosophy might have existed in some places in the world but it does not conform to Islam.

## **The Social Reason**

Another cause which has been given for the observance of the modest dress is the sense of insecurity. They say that the modest dress appeared because of the lack of security which had developed.

There were times in history when those who had power and force held the keys to everything. If people had money, property and wealth, for instance, if aristocrats had jewels, they had to hide them so that none would know what they had because whenever it became known what so and so had, powerful persons would forcibly take it away.

People who had great wealth would hide it. They would hide it so well, even from their own children that when they died no one knew where it was. They were afraid to tell their children for fear they would tell their friends, etc. and then everyone would know what they had. The person would then die and thus everything that he had remained hidden.

Lack of security was very extensive in the past. Just as there was no security in relation to wealth and property, there was no security in relation to women either. Just as men were obliged to hide their money and their wealth, they were obliged to hide their women. History records that in Sassanian Iran, the high priests and princes would seek out and take any beautiful girl that they heard about. The idea of the modest dress then was to hide women so that no other man would come to know about her.

Will Durant in his *Story of Civilization* writes about the situation in ancient Iran. Count Gobineau also wrote about the modest dress, "The modest dress which presently exists in Iran basically relates to pre-Islamic Iran and not Islamic Iran." <sup>13</sup> He believes the difference between the modest dress in Iran and the modest dress in other places is the national character of Iranians.

Thus, in ancient Iran, as history tells us, the men had no assurance with regard to their women. I read a story about the time of Anushiravan the Just who had a Major in his army and even though the major had hidden his wife, word of her beauty had spread.

One day when the Major was out of town, Anushiravan went to this wife and then he returned to his palace. The woman told her husband. The man saw that not only would he now lose his wife, but his own life as well if he tried to keep her. He let her go. Anushiravan was informed that Major so and so had divorced his wife. When he saw the Major he said, "I understand you had a beautiful garden and that you sold it. Why?" The Major said . "Your majesty, I saw footprints of a lion in the garden and I was afraid the lion would eat me." He laughed and said, "No. That lion will not be found in that garden again."

Thus, there was no security . Everyone lived in fear and because of this, they say one of the causes for the appearance of the modest dress was insecurity. Then they say that this cause no longer exists. No one takes another's wife through force. Therefore, since insecurity in this sense no longer exists, there is no reason for the modest dress. Just as people can now put their money in the bank where no one will touch it, there is security. Since security exists, there is presently no need for the modest dress.

We have to compare this with the philosophy of Islam. Was the reason Islam brought the modest dress because of this question of security? When we look at the issue, we see that neither in Islamic analyses has such an issue appeared nor does it conform with history. The modest dress did not exist among the Arab bedouins during the Age of Ignorance and, at the same time, security existed That is, at the same time that individual insecurity and aggression against women had attained the greatest extent possible in Iran and women covered themselves, this type of aggression did not exist among individuals in the tribes in Arabia. The very tribal character protected the women.

The security which did not exist among the tribes was social or group security and covering does not solve this kind of problem. When two tribes fought, they not only took the men, but the women, their children and everything else as well . Covering would not have protected the women.

In spite of the obvious differences which the Arab bedouins had with our industrialized life, it resembled our life in the sense that adultery, in particular, by married women, was rampant. But because of a certain type of democracy and lack of tyranny, no one would forcibly take the wife of another man. Yet the individual insecurity which a person in the industrialized West sensed was lacking among the

bedouins.

The covering prevents the aggression of a person who lives in one place. This kind of aggression does not exist among tribes. Therefore, we cannot say that Islamic precepts established the modest dress simply to provide security.

The Islamic philosophy for covering is other than this and will be explained later. At the same time, we do not want to say that the security of a woman against the aggression of a man is not at all to be considered. We will discuss this when we refer to the verse on garments. We also do not feel that this issue is irrelevant today and that women have total security against the aggression of men. All one has to do is to read the newspapers about the crimes committed against women in the Western world.

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1. Bertrand Russell, Marriage and Ethics, p. 30.
  2. al-Hurr al-Amili Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 1, p. 277.
  3. Ibid.
  4. Ibid.
  5. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 278.
  6. Ibid, vol. 3, p. 14; Muhammad ibn Ya'qub Kulayni, Kafi, vol. 5, p. 496.
  7. Op.cit., Wasa'il, vol. 1, p. 280.
  8. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 278.
  9. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 279.
  10. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 3.
  11. Op. cit., Kafi, vol. 5, p. 567.
  12. Ibid., vol. 5, p. 494.
  13. Count Gobineau, Three Years in Iran.

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