

Third Lesson

The Modest Dress Brings Dignity to a Woman

There is one issue which remains to be discussed. It is one of the criticism they have made against the modest dress which says that the modest dress deprives the honor and respect of a woman. You know that human dignity has become one of the important goals of humanity since the words about human rights have developed. Human dignity is respected and it must be followed; all human beings share in this whether man or woman, black or white, or whatever nation or creed . Every individual has this right to human dignity.

They say that the Islamic modest dress opposes a woman's dignity. We accept the right of human dignity. The discussion is whether or not the modest dress, i.e., the modest dress which Islamic precepts mention, is disrespectful to women, an insult to her dignity. This idea came into being from the idea that the modest dress imprisons a woman, making her a slave.

Enslavement opposes human dignity. They say because the modest dress was introduced by men to enable them to exploit women, men wanted to captivate woman and imprison her in a corner of her home. Thus, it is to have overlooked or insulted her human dignity. Respect, honor and nobility of a woman call for not having a modest dress.

As we have said and we will further describe later, that is, we will deduce from the verses of the Holy Quran that we have nothing which would serve to imprison a woman and the necessities of the Islamic modest dress are not to imprison a woman. If a man has duties in his relation to a woman or a woman has duties in relation to a man, the duty is in order to strengthen and solidify the family unit. That is, it has a clear purpose.

In addition, from the social point of view, it has necessities. That is, the well-being of society demands

that a man and a woman commit themselves to a special kind of association with each other or the ethical sanctities and ethical balance and the tranquility of the spirit of society, demand that a man and a woman choose a special way of relating to each other. This is neither called imprisonment nor enslavement nor does it oppose human dignity.

As we observe if a man leaves his house naked, he is blamed and reproached and perhaps the police will arrest him. That is, even if a man leaves his house with pajamas on, or with just underpants, everyone will stop him because it opposes social dignity. Law or custom rules that when a man leaves the house, he should be covered and fully dressed. Does this oppose human dignity to tell him to cover himself and leave the house?

On the other hand, if a woman leaves her house covered within the limits that we will later mention, it causes greater respect for her. That is, it prevents the interference of men who lack morality and ethics. If a woman leaves her house covered, not only does it not detract from her human dignity, but it adds to it. Take a woman who leaves her home with only her face and two hands showing and from her behavior and the clothes she wears there is nothing which would cause others to be stimulated or attracted towards her. That is, she does not invite men to herself. She does not wear clothes that speak out or walk in a way to draw attention to herself or does not speak in such a way to attract attention.

Sometimes the clothes of an individual speak. His or her shoes speak. The way she or he talks says something else. Take a man, for instance, who speaks in such a way so as to say, "Fear me," or dresses in such a way opposite to that which is customary. That is, with a traditional cloak, a beard and a turban, etc., communicates to the people, "Respect me."

It is possible that a woman wears clothes in such a manner that a human being, a respected human being, would associate among people and it is possible that she wears clothes and walks in a way which stimulates; "Come and follow me." Does the dignity of a woman, the dignity of a man, or the dignity of society not cause a woman to leave her home serious, diligent and simply dressed in a manner not drawing the attention of everyone she passes by.

She should be such that she does not distract a man and turn his attention from what he is doing. Does this oppose a woman's dignity? Or does it oppose the dignity of society? If a person says something, which existed in non-Islamic societies, that the modest dress was to imprison women, that a woman must be placed in a locked house and she should have no right of association outside the home, this does not relate to Islam. If Islamic precepts were to say that it is not permitted for a woman to leave her house; if we were to ask whether it is possible for a woman to buy something from a store where the seller be a man and they said no, it was forbidden; if a person asked, "Is a woman permitted to participate in meetings, religious gatherings?" and we were to say no, it is not permitted; if it is possible for women to meet each other?; if someone were to say all of these were forbidden, that a woman must

sit in a corner of the house and never leave her home, this would be something, but Islam does not state this.

We say this is based on two things. One is based upon that which is good for the family. That is, a woman must not do anything that would disturb her family situation. For a woman to leave her house to go to her sister's house if her sister is a corrupt and licentious person or even to visit her mother wherein the effects of the visit bring chaos to the house for a week, they say not to under such circumstances. The family must not be disturbed.

The second basis is that leaving the house, according to the Holy Quran, must not be in order to flaunt oneself, to disturb the peace and tranquility of others, to prevent the work of others. If it is not these things, there is no problem.

The Command to Announce Your Entrance to Someone's House

Now we will discuss the Quranic verses and after we clarify what traditional commentators have explained about the verses, then, with the help of traditions which have been narrated on this topic and the edicts of the religious jurists on this issue, it will become clearer. The verses relating to the modest dress are found in Surah Nur and Surah Ahzab. We will mention all of them.

We will begin our discussion with the verses from Surah Nur. Of course the verses which relate directly to the modest dress are verses 30 and 31 of Surah Nur but there are three verses before this which are more or less introductory to the modest dress and relate to this issue.

“O you who believe! Do not enter houses other than your own houses until you have asked permission and saluted their inmates; this is better for you, that you may be mindful.” (24:27)

This verse describes the duty of a man who is not mahram, to the house of another person, that is, the house of a person whose wife is not mahram to him. Of course, there are rules regarding those who are mahram and we will mention them later. Also there are some places where it is not particular to those who are mahram. It relates to what a person who wants to enter the house of another should do.

To begin with, let me say that during the Age of Ignorance before the Holy Quran was revealed, the present situation of houses did not exist with locks, etc. Doors are closed basically because of the fear of thieves. If someone wanted to enter, he would ring the doorbell or use the knocker. In the Age of Ignorance this situation did not exist. It was more like the situation in villages. People like myself who lived in the village know that there were basically no doors shut. The doors to the courtyard are always open. In many places it is not even the practice to lock the doors at night. In Fariman, a town near

Mashhad, where I lived, I do not remember the door to the yard being closed even once and there was very little theft.

History shows that, in particular in Makkah, they often did not even put doors on a house. In Islam a law was passed that a person never owns their house in Makkah. Of course, there is a difference of opinion among the religious jurists. The Imams and the Shafiis agree that in Makkah, the land cannot belong to any one person. That is, it belongs to all Muslims and the land of Makkah cannot be bought and sold. The houses belong to all the people. It has the ruling of a mosque. In Surah Hajj it says that the people who live there and the people who come from outside that area are all the same.

These rents which people collect today in Makkah neither agrees with the Shi'ite jurisprudence nor with much of the Sunni jurisprudence. It must have an international ruling. They have no right to establish limits there and not allow a person to enter. It is like the room in a mosque, everyone can have a room there. It belongs to him but he has no right to prevent others from entering. The person has no right to close off an empty room. Of course, if a person is using it, he has priority.

The first person who gave the order for doors to be placed on the houses was Mu'awiyah. This had been forbidden to be done to the houses of Makkah. This was the general situation.

It was not the custom among Arabs in the Age of Ignorance to announce that they wanted permission to enter. They felt it was an insult to seek permission to enter. The Holy Quran says in another verse, "If you go and seek permission and it is not granted, return."

This may be considered to be an insult by some but this emphasis in the Holy Quran is one of the introductory aspects of the modest dress because every woman in her own home is in a situation that she does not want to be seen or she does not want to see a person. A verse was revealed.

"And when you ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a curtain (hijab). "(33:54)

Thus, a person must first seek permission to enter and then, with the agreement of the owners, the person enters even if the other party knows that he wants to enter.

The Holy Prophet said: "In order to announce your entrance, recall God's name in a loud voice." I later realized the words 'ya Allah' that Muslims say, for instance, to enter, is the implementation of this command.

Thus, announce and how much better it is when this announcement is made by the recitation of God's name. The Holy Prophet continuously did this and he was asked, "Is this a general ruling that we should use when we enter our sister's house, our daughters house, our mothers house?" He said, "If your mother is getting undressed, would she want you to see her then?" They said, "No." He said, "Then this

same ruling holds for one's mothers house. Do not enter without announcing your entrance."

When the Holy Prophet would enter, he would stand behind the door of the room in a place where they could hear his voice and would call out, "As-salam alaykum ya ahl al-bayt" ("Peace be upon you oh household of the Prophet"). He said, "If you hear no answer, perhaps the person did not hear you. Repeat it again in a loud voice. Repeat for a third time if you receive no response. If, after the third time that you announce yourself, you hear no response, either that person is not home or the person does not want you to enter; return." The Holy Prophet did this and many stories have been narrated about this, such as when he wanted to enter his daughter's house, he would call out salutations in a loud voice. If she responded, he would enter. If he called out three times and received no response, he would return.

There is something here to note which is the difference between dar and bayt in Arabic. Dar is that which we call courtyard. They call a room, bayt. The Holy Quran refers to bayt, that is, when you want to enter the room of a person. Since the doors to the courtyards were open, the courtyard clearly did not assume an area of privacy. That is, if a woman was dressed in such a way that she did not want anyone to see her, she would not be so dressed in the courtyard. She would go into a room. The courtyard has the ruling of a room. The door is closed and it normally has high walls. Women still consider the courtyard to be, to a certain extent, a place of privacy. Now dar has the ruling of bayt because bayt basically means the place of privacy where a woman does not want a strange person to see her.

"This is purer for you." That is, the commands We give are better for you, contain goodness, are not illogical. "Know that this is good."

"And if you do not find anyone therein, enter it not until leave is given to you and if you are told 'return'; that is purer for you; and God knows the things you do." (24:27)

"There is no fault in you that you enter uninhabited houses wherein enjoyment is for you. God knows what you reveal and what you hide." (24:28)

This was very difficult for the Arabs to understand. To seek permission when they wanted to enter a house was itself difficult and then to be told to return and then to actually do so, was next to impossible. It was an insult.

In the verse, "there is no fault in you. ..", an exception arises. Does this ruling apply whenever one wants to enter anyone's home or only a person's residence. The Holy Quran says this is not a general ruling and only applies to someone's home.

A home is a place of privacy, the place of one's private life. If this were not so, there would be need to seek permission. If there is, for instance, a caravanserai and you have business, do you have to seek

permission, etc? No. Here it is not necessary to enter by seeking permission. What about a public bath? There is no need here. "There is no fault in you..." if it is not a place of residence in which you have business. "God knows what you reveal and what you hide."

From the word, 'uninhabited', one can understand that the philosophy of why a person cannot enter the home of another without announcing it first is because of the wife as well as the fact that the home is the place of one's privacy. Perhaps there are things which one does not want someone else to see.

Thus, when a person enters the privacy of another's home, the entrance must be announced. A person must, in some way, announce that he wants to enter even if the person knows that the other has allowed him to enter. He is your friend. He knows that you are going to enter. You know that he is totally in agreement with your entering. Still, you should realize that you are entering upon his privacy.

The Command to 'cast down their glance'

"Say to the believing men that they cast down their glance and guard their private parts; that is purer for them . God is aware of the things they do." (24:30)

"Say to the believing women that they cast down their glance and guard their private parts and reveal not their adornment except such as is outward and let them cast their veils (khumar) over their bosoms and reveal not their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, or their husbands' fathers or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons or their women or what their right hands own, or such men as attend to them, not having sexual desire, or children who have not yet attained knowledge of women's private parts nor let them stamp their feet, so that their hidden ornament may be known. And turn all together to God, O you believers, so you will prosper." (24:31)

In the phrase, "Say to the believing men that they cast down their glance," there are two words which we have to define. One isghadh and the other is absar. A person who might say absar, the plural of basar, needs no explanation because it means eyes but absar essentially means 'sight'. If it had said 'ain asin ghamdh'ain it would have meant 'close their eyes'. It would have had a particular meaning in this case. What does ghadh basar mean? Ghadh means 'lower', 'cast down', not 'cover' or 'close'. We see this in another verse,

"Be modest in thy walk and lower (yaghaddwu) thy voice; the most hideous of voices is the ass's." (31: 19)

This does not mean to be silent. A person's voice should be moderate. In the same way, 'to cast down

one's glance' means not to look in a fixed way, not to stare.

In a famous tradition of Hind ibn Abi Halah which describes the Holy Prophet, it is recorded, "When he was happy, he would cast down his glance."¹ It is clear it does not mean he closed his eyes.

Majlisi in Bihar interprets the sentence about the Holy Prophet thus: "He would cover his gaze and put down his head. He did this so that his happiness would not show."

Imam 'Ali in the Nahj al-Balaghah says to his son Imam Hasan, when he gave a banner to him in the Battle of Jamal 'Even if the mountains are uprooted, do not leave your place. Clench your teeth (so that your anger increases). Bare your head to God. Nail your feet to the ground. Survey the enemy's forces and cast down your glance."² That is, 'do not fix your gaze on the enemy.'

There are essentially two ways of looking. One is to look at another with care as if you were evaluating the person by the way he looked or dressed. But another kind of looking is in order to speak to that person and you look since looking is necessary for conversation. This is a looking which is introductory and a means for speaking. This is an organic looking while the former is an autonomous kind. Thus, the sentence means: "Tell the believers not to stare at or flirt with women."

On the Command to Guard Their Private Parts

In the next sentence it says,

"Tell the believing men. . . to guard their private parts." (24:30)

To guard from what? From everything which is not correct, guard against both corruption and the glance of others.

As you know, it was not the custom among Arabs in the Age of Ignorance to hide their private parts. Islam came and made it obligatory to cover this area.

It should be noted that the present Western civilization is moving directly towards the habits of the pre-Islamic Arabs in the Age of Ignorance and they are continuously weaving philosophies justifying that nakedness is a good thing. Russell in "On Discipline," says that another illogical ethics or taboo is that a mother and father tell their children to cover themselves which only creates a greater curiosity in children and parents should show their sexual organs to children so that they become aware of whatever there is from the beginning. Now, they do this.

But the Holy Quran says, "And guard their private parts," both from corruption and from the view of others. Covering one's private parts is obligatory in Islam except, of course, between a husband and wife and it is among the most disapproved acts for a mother to be naked before her son or a father before his daughter.

"That is purer for them. God is aware of the things they do." (24:30).

"Say to the believing women that they cast down their glance..." (24:31) You see that in these two verses, the ruling for a man and woman is the same. This is not something particular to men. For instance, if women were forbidden from looking and not men, there would have been a distinction that such and such was all right for men but not for women. It is clear, then, that when there is no distinction made between men and women, it has another purpose which we shall discuss in the next lesson.

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1. Tafsir ul Quran, Safi, 24:31, narrated from a tradition of 'Ali ibn Ibrahim Qummi
 2. Nahj al Balaghah, Sermon 110

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