

A Spiritual Understanding of Hijāb

By Tahera Kassamali, May 28, 2021

Although originally meaning a curtain or cover, Hijāb has become a term synonymous with the head covering and garment worn by Muslim women. Hijāb is a Divine obligation, like the obligation of prayer and fasting. It is a command outlined in the Quran, attested to in the Hadith of the Prophet (s) and the Ma'sūmīn (a), practised by members of the Prophet's family, and unanimously agreed upon by all mainstream scholars of Islam. Quranic verse 24:31 tells believing women to draw their khimār over their chests. According to all major Mufasssīrūn of the Quran - Sunni and Shī'ah alike - this refers to the obligation of covering the head and chest. 'Allāmah Tabātabā'ī in al-Mīzān says that the word khimar refers to the cloth used to cover the head. It should be brought down to cover the chest. Verse 33:59 tells believing women to draw the Jilbāb over themselves. The Jilbāb is a loose outer garment. These two verses unequivocally show the dress code required for believing women.

The obligation of hijāb has many reasons behind it. Most people focus on the physical and social reasons behind it. While those are true, there is also a profound spiritual and metaphysical meaning behind the Hijāb. Almighty Allah has the most Perfect Names (al-Asmā al-Husnā) which comprise of beauty and majesty (Jamāl and Jalāl). Both the male and the female are seen as two creatures of God, each manifesting certain aspect of His names and qualities. A woman represents the beautiful qualities of Allah, manifesting Divine beauty. The Jamāl of the women is balanced with the Jalāl of the hijāb, a dignity and majesty for the beauty within her. Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his article 'The Male and Female in the Islamic Perspective' says that the Absoluteness and Majesty of the Almighty is manifested most directly in the masculine state and His Infinity and Beauty in the feminine state. Islamic spirituality necessitates social patterns, art of dress, and many other ways of life to create the balance of qualities in the genders.

Modesty is an inward quality, but the command is to manifest that modesty outwardly. Islamic sociology invokes the idea of a different private and public sphere in society. Women can relax and be unguarded in the private sphere. But the public sphere with all the different factors in it requires a more guarded entry. Hijāb does not restrict freedom to bring feminine potential to fruition. It allows society to become more productive by reducing and eliminating distraction and sexual tension between the genders.

There is hijāb for men in a different form. Men and women have been created differently, with separate roles to play on earth, thus requiring different

responsibilities. Both are expected to fulfill their roles while in the world. The soul has no gender. God's rules apply to both genders, but in diverse ways. For example, men are also required to cover parts of their body out of modesty, but not in the same way as women. Similarly, men are prohibited from wearing silk clothing and gold ornaments whereas women have no such restrictions. God has ordained different commands for men and women while encouraging both to be modest.

In Islam, the responsibility falls on each gender to protect their own modesty and to control their own desires. Whether a woman dresses modestly or not, a Muslim man is still required to observe modesty through casting down his gaze and using respectful speech and appropriate behaviour. While many people may think that hijāb is worn primarily to restrain men's illicit desires, this is a misconception. It is not the woman's duty to regulate the behaviour of men.

Western society has long seen the hijab with a derogatory lens. Along with the secularism and individualism that is an integral part of Western society, this has led some to proclaim that hijab is outdated and unnecessary. Such discussions about the obligation of hijab, or the lack of it, have left many people confused. Believing women need to be aware of the truth and discern the false premise behind such statements. Ultimately It is the choice of the audience who they will accept as an authority on the issue. Who they choose to lead them towards Allah. It is an important choice to make.