

AN ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF VEIL: PAKISTANI SOCIETY IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: *This paper attempts to analyze different interpretations of veil with special reference to the religious and cultural aspects. It highlights how various factors play an important role in determining the practice of veil in a particular context. The main aim of this paper is to examine the leading factors regarding the practice of veil among Pakistani females, as both, religion and culture overpowers the society of Pakistan. This paper comprises of review of literature on veil from religious and cultural point of views. In addition, it deals with the different interpretations of the religious text regarding the veil practice and highlights the conflicting viewpoints among different scholars in this respect. Further, this paper explores how cultural norms and values play pivotal role in maintaining the practice of veil and the way in which the veil practice changes and is interpreted in different cultural contexts. It also encompasses an analysis in the light of different studies on veil in order to determine what are the leading factors behind the veil practice in Pakistan and how these factors change from area to area and person to person, also the way in which religion and culture influence the practice of veil in the Pakistani society.*

Key words: Veil, Cultural norms, Hijab, Burkha, external and internal decoration, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Writing about veil or "Pardah" is not an easy task. It needs deep scrutiny of the available literature on the topic to grasp more and more information as veil has always remained a very controversial issue among the scholars. There are various factors which lead to the practice of veil in Pakistani society.

This paper however, attempts to discuss two major aspects in this respect. These two aspects include religious and cultural domains. As far as first aspect is concerned i.e. the religious interpretation of veil, there has been done fairly large work on this specific topic. This encompasses mainly two groups. One group is led by Contemporary Muslim Feminists while second group is led by Orthodox Muslim Scholars. Both these groups are mainly concerned with the interpretation of the sacred Islamic text i.e. Quran and Hadith.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research Question

My research question is that how various factors and forces influence the practice of veil in Pakistani society?

Literature Review

In order to understand this concept more in detail the works which are indispensable to study include Fatima Mernissi's book "The veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam" published in 1991. Another important book in "Questioning the veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women" by Marnia Lazreg which was published in 2009. In addition "Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Practical Interpretations of the Quran" written by Asma Barlas published in 2002 is also a very significant book regarding the religious interpretation of veil.

All the above mentioned books discuss the short comings of the interpretations of the Quran and Hadith. Moreover, the main claim of these books is that Islam is not sexist rather Muslim scholars made it like this through their misinterpretation of the sacred text. These authors also have elaborated many Ahadith in detail that under which

circumstances the Prophet (PBUH) uttered some particular Hadith or for whom or why and whether it was for some specific group of Muslims or for all the Muslims.

In addition, Fatima Mernissi's discusses the biographies of the transmitters of Hadith as well, that in which circumstances they revealed specific Hadith and what was their status in the society at that time. So, after going through all these relevant books we can see that all the authors of these books analyze this debate back in the early years of Islam. Further, they also try to distinct the specific and the common commandments.

On the other hand, the Orthodox Muslim scholars for instance Abul Ala Maududi adheres to another stance in his famous book "Pardah and the status of Women in Islam" published in 1939 and has been severally reprinted up till now. The main claim of Abul Ala Maududi in his book is that all the commandments regarding veil as revealed in Quran and Hadith are still mandatory to be followed. He mainly focuses on female sexuality, as a source of disturbance and "Fitna" in the society. Thus he proclaims very strict rules and regulations for Muslim Women.

Further, this paper deals with the second aspect of the interpretations of veil i.e. cultural aspect of veil with special reference to Pakistani society. For the purpose of elaborating this very aspect I have mainly discussed the four important texts. The first one is an article of Anjum Alvi under the title of "Concealment and Revealmnt: The Muslim Veil in Context" published in 2013. In her article she discusses the concept of "Pardah" in Punjabi society and gives insights of her fieldwork in a Punjabi village. Likewise, a very important book as the working women of urban middle class is written by Jasmine Mirza titled as "Between Chaador and the Market." This book was published in 2002. In this book the author discusses the lives of working women in Lahore that how they adopt veil in their daily lives.

Moreover, two other significant studies consist of the opinions of female students regarding veil. One of these studies was conducted by Zhou Yun in 2010, in a secular

educational institution in Islamabad (NUML University) under the title of "Behind the Muslim Veil: A Qualitative Analysis of Pakistani Female Students' Views."

While the second one is Saba Ahmed's book titled as "Transforming Faith: The Story of Al-Huda and Islamic Revivalism among Urban Pakistani Women" published in 2010. Saba Ahmed wrote her book after the completion of her fieldwork in Al-Huda centre, which imparts religious education among females.

Hence under the prism of all mentioned literature I will try to elaborate the concept of veil or "Pardah" regarding its different religious interpretations and its implications in a cultural context with particular reference to Pakistani society.

Religious Interpretation of Veil

Interpreting some religious text has always remained a very hard task for the scholars. The reason behind is that the religious texts are not very clear sometimes and these might not be in the native language of the interpreter. Same is the case with Islam as the main sources of Islamic texts are Quran and Hadith which are in Arabic language. However, Arabic language is not the language of many Muslims.

Although we know that Quran is the "Divine Word" and was directly revealed to Prophet (PBUH) from Allah Almighty and even till present it is in its original form without any changes. However, there are number of verses in Quran which are not clear to the ordinary Muslims. Hence these verses need further interpretation in order to understand them. Moreover, there are many words in Quran containing different meanings in different conditions, so they are not strict to only one absolute meaning. Likewise, the people who are unable to understand Arabic mainly rely upon the translations of Quran for understanding the divine message.

Similarly, Hadith is the second source of Islamic text which consist of the sayings and teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). However, collecting Ahadith and writing them in a codified manner was initiated almost two hundred years ago after the death of Prophet (PBUH).

Therefore, when these teachings and sayings of Prophet (PBUH) transferred from one generation to another generation many false Ahadith were also included. So, with the passage of time it became a hard task to distinguish between the true and false Ahadith.

Above mentioned issues gave birth to huge controversies regarding religious interpretations of different commandments, and veil or "Hijab" is one of them. In this very part of my paper I have tried to examine how different scholars see the verses and Hadith about the veil and the way they construct their interpretations in this respect.

For understanding this phenomenon in detail here I am presenting the translation of few verses from Quran in which commandment of veil is revealed, "Tell the believing woman to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons or brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they

hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed." (24:30-31)[1]

"O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their (jilbab) over their persons (when abroad): That is most convenient, that they should be known, and as such and not molested... Truly, if the hypocrites and those in whose hearts is a disease Desist not; we shall certainly stir thee up against them" (33:59-60) [2]

According to Marnia Lazreg the first verse has many words which are not very clear for example *modesty* and *adornment* because these are very elastic concepts and are unable to be interpreted in one specific manner. In her view, this verse also does not talk about covering of face and head rather it only commands for the covering of private parts of women. She also states that modesty is not a virtue which can be legislated. As modesty have different meanings in different societies and in different contexts. One might be more modest in one's affairs and deeds without veiling and someone may show no modesty even if veiled. [3]

However, in the opinion of Asma Barlas there are two models of verses regarding veil in Quran, one specific and other general. But mostly conservatives do not make distinction between them. She argues that both the verses were addressed to the Prophet (PBUH) and these are not universal mandate for all the Muslim men to force Muslim women to comply with them.

In addition, the purpose of both the verses is not the same. In second verse veil was revealed to serve the purpose of identity. As in the early times of Islam slavery existed and commandments for the slave women and free Muslim women were different. Hence in this verse Muslim women are ordered to take veil when abroad so that they can be recognized as Muslim women. Barlas further elaborates that this verse also not orders to cover their face, head and feet. She claims that there is no verse in Quran regarding face veiling and women perform the holiest ritual of "Hajj" with their faces uncovered. So in her view the main focus of the first verse is to guard private parts of the females in the public and not commanding them to hide their faces. [4]

Now to view Maulana Abul Ala Maududi's famous work "Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam" the translation of the verse on veil from his book is as follows:

"(O Prophet), tell the believing men to restrain their eyes (from looking at the other women) and guard their shameful parts, this is a purer way for them, surety, Allah knows full well what they do. And (O Prophet), tell the women to restrain their eyes (from looking at the other men) and guard their shameful parts, and not to display their decoration except what is unavoidable. They should draw their over garments close on to their breasts, and should not display their decoration except before their husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law, sons, step sons, brothers, nephews (sons of brothers and sisters), their own women, male attendants lacking sexual urges or boys who are not yet conscious of the feminine secrets. Moreover, (tell them that) they should not stamp the ground in walking so as to reveal their hidden decorations (ornaments, etc, by their jingle)" (24: 30-31) [5]

So according to Abul Ala Maududi the first command of restraining of eyes is equally valid for males and females

while enjoying someone's beauty with eyes lead towards the evil intentions. He also states that it is impossible to never see a woman or a man while living in present day world. Hence it is allowed to see someone once but casting a second look or staring somebody from opposite sex without genuine reason is not permissible, as it is likely to lead to some evil results.

Moreover, Maududi claims that covering of face and hands is also required because it is the face which is the central part of women's beauty. He interprets that the external decoration which means "veil" is used for hiding the internal decoration of the women. However, in certain conditions a woman is allowed to uncover her face and hands.

In the favour of face veiling however, Abul Ala Maududi presented many references from the books of famous Muslim Ulemas. For instance, Ibn Jabir-al-Tabari, Alamah Neishapuri, Imam Razi and Qazi Baidavi. So according to him the practice of face veil was even present in the time of the Prophet (PBUH) and it continued in the coming generations. He strictly criticizes the people who are against the face veiling and head covering. He states that these people are influenced by western ideas and under that influence they misinterpret religious texts to discard veil, which is completely against the spirit of Islam. [6]

As far as the second source of Islamic text, "Ahadith" are concerned with respect to the practice of veil, Fatima Mernissi has discussed it in a very comprehensive way. She elaborates that collection of Ahadith and writing them in a codified manner was started very late and there exists a gap of approximately two hundred years between the death of the Prophet (PBUH) and Imam Al-Bukhari's (194-256 hejra) collection of Hadith in the form of a book.

Although Imam Al-Bukhari was very recognized and well versed scholar in the history of Muslims but when he started his work of collecting of Ahadith there were many false Ahadith in circulation. Imam Al-Bukhari collected six lac Ahadith and when the method of verification was perfected he retained as authentic only 7,257 Hadith while all the rest of the Ahadith were rejected as false ones. So, if thousands of Ahadith were false at the time of Al Bukhari then how many Ahadith might be false in the present times? [7]

Hence, Mernissi discusses that it is also necessary to give the detail of the biographies of the transmitters of Ahadith and also to give the account of that specific occasion and event when some particular Hadith was stated by the Prophet (PBUH) and for whom and why. So, all such questions are required to be answered all along the text of the Hadith in order to understand Ahadith profoundly and in their real sense.

She also gives examples of few Ahadith which are about women and were misinterpreted by the companions of Prophet (PBUH). It is elaborated as below.

"One can read among Al-Bukhari's "authentic" Hadith the following one: "Three things bring bad luck, house, woman, and horse." [8] She claims that Al-Bukhari did not give other contradictory views about this Hadith in his collections. She quotes that "They told Aisha that Abu Hurayra was asserting that the Messenger of God said: "Three things bring bad luck: house, woman and horse." Aisha responded "Abu Hurayra learned his lessons very badly. He came into our house when the Prophet was in the middle of a sentence. He only heard

the end of it. What the Prophet said was: May Allah refutes the Jews, **they say three things bring bad luck: house, woman and horse.**" [9]

Thus this example illustrates that there can be many authentic Ahadith which are misinterpreted or are incomplete. On the contrary, Imam Zarkashi, born in (745 Hejra) recorded and wrote all objections of Aisha regarding different Ahadith in a book which is devoted to Aisha's contributions to Islam. [10] Hence, it is very hard to establish the authentication of Ahadith regarding woman and veil as; the Muslim scholars have different stand points about the authenticity and interpretation of Ahadith.

Cultural Interpretation of Veil: Pakistani Society in Context

Although cultures are different from each other in their manifestations, customs, traditions and values but are equal as there is no hierarchy among cultures like no culture is inferior or superior to the other. So, this section will attempt to analyze the construction of the concept of veil in Pakistani society in its cultural perspective. As veiling is not only linked with the religious commandments but it is also heavily influenced by the cultural practices.

This very section of this paper will explore the different cultural contexts of Pakistani society like rural and urban and it will also highlight the causes which act as the driving force behind the practice of veil. First of all to shed light on the work of Anjum Alvi, she did her fieldwork in a Punjabi village and she has given the inside details of the concept of concealment and revealment in Pakistani society, she states that veil is linked with the concept of shame and honor in Punjabi society. This concept of shame and honor is not only restricted to the female veiling but is present in all the spheres of village life. People always try to conceal those things which they consider as part of their shame *sharam* and honor, and women are one of them.

As far as "Purdah" is concerned it takes different shapes in different spheres. In their homes women are very relaxed in the matter of veil likewise in their village they take "Palla" or "Chadar" and their mobility is not restricted. But, when they go to bazaar or market they observe full veil and take "Burka" or "Nakab" which also include the face veiling. So, in the light of this observation veiling is not always same rather it varies from place to place.

On the other hand, concept of concealment or to hide something from others is attached with various other practices. However, sometimes women hide things even from another woman to protect their shame. For example, at the time of first menstruation a number of girls know nothing about it as their mothers never told them about that, because they think that it is a matter of shame and one cannot talk about it.

People also observe the concept of "Purdah" in the design and way of the construction of their houses. As all the windows open inside the courtyard and no window opens in the street. The purpose behind is of course, to separate the private life from the public life. Moreover, veil practice is also attached to the age patterns, Young teenage girls are supposed to observe veil strictly but after marriage this restriction gets bit relaxed and female mobility increases when they get more

older. However, when females become mothers they enjoy much more freedom and restriction of veil almost disappears. Similarly, people take their women as symbol of their honor and shame. This value is highly strict in the holy families like Sayyids and Pirs. These families never allow their women to go in the public as they are symbol of their honor. In addition, if such families do not find a suitable match for their women in their peer group they never give their daughters in marriages to the other casts. As, they consider it a matter of disgrace or (baysharmi) for them. Therefore, sometimes they marry their women to Quran in order to conceal their honor and shame.

On the other hand, people try to hide their poverty and needs from others because showing one's needs to others or asking for money or other favors is taken as an act of dishonor. [11] So, under the light of these observations it can be said that in Pakistani Punjabi society the concept of veil is not restricted to the female veiling or *Purdah* only, rather it has various different interpretations in different contexts. Moreover, it is not directly linked to the religion rather it is derived more from the customs and the values of the particular culture. While the main driving force of the practice of veil is the concept of honor and shame which is observed in every sphere of the village life.

Now discussing another part of Pakistani society in the light of the work of Jasmine Mirza which she presented under the title of "Between Chaadar and the Market" a case study of lower middle class urban working females of Lahore, shows that the construction of veil concept and causes behind its practice are totally different in the urban sphere of life for the working women.

She interviewed many working women and presented their views regarding veil in her book. If we analyze it in detail we come across the reality that the main force behind the veil or "Purdah" for working women in public places is the behavior of the males of the society. As a number of women told that they had never observed veil before, but when they started working they constantly became the victims of sexual harassment in streets, bus stops, in transport and at their offices as well.

Often people stop them, abuse them, say obscene things to them, trace them and even try to give lift on their bikes or cars. So according to these women, they always become the focal point of unwanted attention. So, due to this sexually objectified behavior on the part of men they adopted veil which increases their mobility and saves them from unwanted attentions. Besides that, many women expressed their views that when they started veil or "Purdah" they felt more secure and safe as they could move freely in public sphere and they become less attractive for males while the incidences of the sexual harassment also decreased. [12]

Hence in the above mentioned observation the interpretation of veil in the urban culture of Lahore is totally different. There, it is neither linked with religion nor attached to the concept of honor and shame. Rather mainly it is the male's behavior in the society which compels women to adopt veil. Hence veil is used as a tool against the objectification and sexual harassment.

Moreover, it increases the females' mobility in public life as they feel more safety with veil in the public sphere. It also

increases the job opportunities for females because they get permission from their homes to work in some cases, if they observe *purdah* which protects them from unwanted attention and abuse from the male section of the society.

Thus the practice of veil in its apparent perspective may be same in different contexts, but the causes and interpretations of veil always differ from each other. On the other hand, functions of veil are interpreted differently under different settings. Here I am mentioning the examples of two educational institutions in Islamabad. One is secular in its outlook (NUML University) and other is imparting religious education among females (Al-Huda). Two different studies were taken in these institutions to get the acquaintance of the opinion of females about veil.

The first one is conducted by Zhou Yun in NUML University, where she asked various questions to the veiled females that why, how and when they adopted veil and what were the main functions of the veil for them? Many of the girls responded that the main function of veil for them is protection and safety from unwanted attention and staring from their male counterparts. They told that mostly they are teased and receive disrespectful comments. Likewise, few of them stated that veil is source of respect for them because women in veil are considered more respectful and honorable in our society.

However, some other girls also expressed their views that the adoption of veil is a symbol of love and care of their fiancé' so they happily veil themselves as in this way nobody else can see them except their fiancé' or husbands. They also consider veil or dopattas as a part of their culture and identity. They expressed that they will never discard it even if they have been to some other country. [13]

On the contrary, the interpretation of veil is very different in Al-Huda's teachings as illustrated by Saba Ahmed in her work "Transforming Faith: The Story of Al Huda and Islamic Revivalism among Urban Pakistani Women". She states that Al-Huda is attracting a large number of females from middle and the upper middle classes. However, according to Dr. Farhat Hashmi the leading scholar of Al-Huda, the main purpose or function of veil is the prevention from "Fitna" which is female sexuality. Therefore, it is necessary for females to dress up in the manner that no one can see them with the worst intentions. In her view females are not only responsible for their own behavior, but they are also responsible for the male's behavior in the society.

As if females go without "Purdah" in public and wear revealing clothes they can prove to be a source of in sighting sexual emotions of males which ultimately leads to the drastic consequences. So, for females disciplining their sexuality is the way for becoming pious individuals.

Moreover, veiling practice of Al-Huda students is heavily influenced by the religious texts which are taught to them frequently. So, the religious ideology is the main source of their veil practices.[14] Likewise Dr. Farhat Hashmi also strongly supported the concept of face veiling in the response of the scholars who claim that Quran does not talk about face veil and that Quran only talks about preventing the "Zeenat" or beauty of the females. Hashmi claims that female's hair and face is the central point of women's beauty so these

should be hidden. "Women are required to cover their entire bodies except their hands, from all *na mehram*". [15]

CONCLUSION

To conclude this whole debate in the light of all mentioned factors we can say that there is no one prime cause or reason behind the practice of veil in Pakistani society rather, there are many different factors which become the decisive force behind veil.

In this regard, the two major factors are religion and culture. However, the main contested point among the people is indeed, their interpretation. As far as religion is concerned it is divided between different sects and schools of law. So there exist many interpretations of the same verse or Hadith simultaneously. This very cause is the biggest bone of contention among the religious scholars. As I have discussed this very phenomenon in the first part of this paper. The difference amongst the religious scholars about veil is visible in Pakistani society. Therefore, we observe different patterns of veil practice in Pakistan. For instance, some religious scholars emphasize on face veiling while others do not consider it obligatory under the light of the commandments of religious texts.

On the contrary, the stronger factor regarding the practice of veil is cultural one which encompasses the cultural norms and values of the society. However, again in this respect Pakistani society is not homogeneous rather it is heterogeneous. So, cultural practices, customs, traditions and values are not same but these vary from area to area.

Hence if the concept of shame and honor is a driving force behind the veil practice i.e. Punjabi village as part of their norms and values it might not be the case in urban Lahore, where the social behavior of males in society regulates the veiling pattern among females.

Moreover, the personal likings and adoption of veil are the other interpretations of veil regarding females. But mostly women reach their decision of veil under the influence of religion and most significantly culture. Anyhow, sometimes both these factors play an equal role towards their decision of adopting veil.

So, it is merely impossible to interpret practice of veil in a one particular domain as veil is a multidimensional practice which has different aspects to consider and various different factors which play their role to determine veil practice in certain specific context.

Hence in the nutshell, to understand the practice of veil in a real sense we need to see it in its particular context, conditions and social spheres in which it is practiced only then we can comprehend the real determining factor behind the practice of veil in a specific context

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