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Qur'an Dress Code as the Basis of Egalitarianism in Islam

The article claims that the specific dress codes, common for certain Islamic countries, are the consequence of the pre-Islamic traditions and patriarchic interpretations of the Qur'an and hence are not in accordance with one of the basic goals of every religion – correcting erroneous social structures. Even though we can conclude from the Qur'an regulations, presented in the first part of the article, that the strict dress code was not set in order to give women a subordinate position, nevertheless some of the practices of covering which are common today and which are presented in the second part of the article, are set by the Qur'an. Therefore the article in its third part emphasizes the need for re-reading of the Qur'an and for re-establishing the primary aims of the Islamic religion.

Key words: dressing, covering of face, covering of hair, hijab, niqab, chador, burqa, Muslim women

While in the West we are used seeing nuns and brides covering their heads with veil, it is less common to observe women who use it in their everyday lives. Meeting a woman who covers her , or even face, almost inevitably, unless it is a fashion trend, implies a meeting with other culture and religion. In most cases this is Islam. It is even assumed that covering of hair and face is a novelty in Islam and in the Qur'an there does not exist a single (explicit) rule about covering the face. Therefore the aim of this article is to shed some light on the background of this phenomenon and to present citations from the Qur'an which refer to covering of females, but also of males. Since these customs are now common in the Islamic countries and since there are many inconsistencies in the Western media regarding the names of these outfits – for example, the name 'hijab'

is used for something that is actually 'niqab' – one of the aims of this article is to explain these dilemmas. By presenting different types of outfits and their names, this article will also point to the heterogeneity of the Islamic world which, among other things, is observable in the different ways of dressing. At the end, the article will discuss the current debates on the significance and function of clothing: from the common Western attitude that uncovering of oneself in the Islamic world is one of the most vivid signs of resistance to the existing social order and the position of women in a given society, to the opinion that chador is to the Iranian women the only way they can enter the public sphere.

Origins of covering hair and face in Islam

Covering of hair and face in Islam is being explained in different ways, but the most commonly accepted explanation is that it is not a novelty introduced by Islam, but simply a continuation of the pre-Islamic customs. Due to the harsh conditions of nomadic life, the pre-Islam Arabs wanted to protect their women from the eyes of strangers, who presented potential enemies. Numerous attacks, abductions and rapes were a constant threat, so it seemed best to protect their women with veils and other coverings.

Moreover, the Muslim women looked up to the women of Persia and Byzantium (Rippin 2000:271) and changed the whole aim of covering of their bodies: while the first covered themselves to clearly distinguish themselves from the women of lower social strata, Muslim women, who met them during the prayers, started covering themselves to display belonging to the common faith – Islam (Esposito 2003:105). Their covering emphasized uniqueness of faith, while rich Byzantine and Persian women covered themselves to mark their separateness from the women of lower social position. By imitating women of Persia and Byzantium, some Muslim women started to cover their faces, even though the obligation of body covering was not mentioned anywhere in the Qur'an. This hypothesis of body covering as the pre-Islamic tradition could be confirmed by the writings of Tertulian who in his *De virginibus velandis* stated that the Arab women should be role models to the Christian women since they covered not only their heads but also their faces and preferred living in the semi-darkness rather than openly displaying their faces (Tertulian: XVII/4).

Qur'an regulations and Hadith on covering

In the Qur'an, we can find only three explicit rules on dressing: in the chapter on the methods for the prevention of fornication (Qur'an 24:30-31), in the ayet which speaks of the identifiability of the Muslim women (Qur'an 33:59) and in the ayet containing dressing instructions for the older women (Qur'an 24:60).

a) Protection of women

The saying goes that Mohamed did not prescribe covering for women in order to deny them freedom, but because he wanted to protect his wives and other Muslim women from the already mentioned assaults, abductions and rapes. We can ascertain that from the Qur'an 33:59, where it is stated that the covering with veils is necessary so that Muslim daughters and wives could have been easily recognized and therefore spared from harassment. In spite of the 'good intention' which can be recognized in this establishment of a 'safe territory', such a discourse is today hardly acceptable for women and men alike. It implies that men are incapable of restraining their urges and that men are by their nature 'hunters' lurking on their prey. Such an attitude is degrading not only for women, who are becoming objects and are forced to live in a kind of mobile isolation, but also for men, who are thus becoming creatures of diminished intellectual capacities.

b) Moral raising

In the chapter which outlines methods for the prevention of fornication, we first find the instruction to the men to avert their eyes and preserve their sex organs (Qur'an 24:39). (Chebel 1995:104-105) Even though the emissaries had to wear clothes which covered their bodies from shoulders to wrists and ankles, commonly the minimal area of male body that had to be covered was from the belly to the knees. This at the time primarily referred to the men who were too poor to afford themselves the whole 'suit' (Patel 2003:82). In time, commonly accepted attitude was that every orthodox Muslim man should wear a mustache and a beard as the signs of highly valued masculinity. Having beard meant following God's regulations and its hygiene was equally important as the hygiene of body and clothing. The beard was also believed to have aphrodisiac effect on women (Chebel 1995:104-105).

This instruction intended for men was important for two reasons: because of its existence and because of the possible comparison with the instructions intended for women. This address to men suggests that the above mentioned claim that all men were considered hunters should be softened and that according to the Qur'an, men were actually obliged to control their urges. The same was true for women: strength or weakness of both women and men was not in their strong or delicate physique, but in the moral raising above the physical body.

In the paragraph which was intended for women (Qur'an 24:31), we could notice that neither women, nor men, were allowed to look in the eyes of strangers and should not allow certain parts of their body to be visible. Since infidelity was considered to be one of the gravest sins in Islam, anything that could lead to it was virtually banned. Therefore Islamic teachings condemn pornography, pornographic literature, vulgar jokes, intimate physical contact, hugging, kissing of men and women who are not married, nudity, provoking clothes and the like (Haverić and Haverić 1991:39). Special place here is taken by – the look. According to the Islamic law, the look is the first step to infidelity. And since men are thought to be more aggressive, the Qur'an firstly

orders them to avert their eyes and preserve the shameful parts of their bodies, says Ishmael A. Patel (Patel 2003:80). But right after that, the Qur'an addressed the women, too, and the attitude was slowly accepted that women generally presented a temptation and that men should avoid them. This was confirmed in *hadith* which warned men to keep away from having conversations alone with other men's wives, because it was not possible for a man to be alone with a woman with whom he was not related without wanting her or thinking the forbidden thoughts (Memic ed. 1984:135).

The prescribed coverings for women, as signs of religiousness, are not important only for this life, but also for the after life. In Muslim's *hadith* it is stated that in heaven there will be no place for women who dress scantily, those who flirt or walk provokingly (El-Munziri ed. 2004b:446-447). The function of clothes is not only covering of the body, but it is important from eschatological point of view as well; it is not only a custom, but ethical or even theological system (Al-W. Bouhidba 2004:37). Chastity reflects proper religiousness which in the broadest sense includes submissiveness, restraint in posture and behavior, avoidance of excessiveness and modest and discreet appearance. This is, according to Ismael A. Patel the way of life the Qur'an brings you up into and whose ideal is the Prophet Mohamed (Patel 2003:79). A woman who covers herself demonstrates her belonging to the group, her submissiveness to the Creator and the Islamic upbringing.

The interpreters generally agree that this ayet, as well as the previous one referring to men, asks for modest behavior and dressing firstly in order to make the female believers submissive and modest and, in the same time, to protect their impeccable moral. Even though at the first sight it might appear differently, the original intention of ayet 24:31 is (was) not to subordinate women, but to prevent interaction between men and women which could lead to improper behavior. Segregation and dress codes became a norm in order to limit contacts between sexes, because according to the Islamic beliefs this was the main incentive for fornication, which destroys the society and shatters moral (Doumato 2001:170). During the meeting between a man and a woman who are not related, there is always a danger that the physical desire might arise, since the Satan is always present at such meetings. In one of the *hadith* we can even read that a woman appears in the Satan's form and that therefore a man, when he sees (another man's) woman has to return to his own wife, in order to reject what he feels in his soul (El-Munziri ed. 2004a:681, Memic ed. 1984:135).

Subordination of women in Islam is therefore not the consequence of the Qur'an regulations, since, in principle, the Qur'an testifies on the equality between men and women. Nevertheless, the Qur'an served as the basis for the subordination of women and in everyday life the rules on covering women and their isolation have spread (Schimmel 2003:27). The women were becoming more isolated and the opinion that the women were the seductresses whom the men should avoid was spreading. Some interpreters claimed that this was partly a consequence of the Christian view on woman as Eve (the seductress) who seduced Adam (Wadud 1999:25), even though there was no mentioning of any kind in the Qur'an of Eve's responsibility for the Original Sin.

c) Exception – older women

Finally, in the Qur'an we find a somewhat different instruction intended for older women. It says that it is not entirely inappropriate if older women, who do not intend to marry any more, do not strictly follow the prescribed dress code, as long as they remain restrained in their clothing and do not display any ornaments. In spite of this rule it is still considered better if they remain virtuous and do not take off their clothes (Qur'an 24:60), since women have an important role in preserving the family honor. This is obvious from the fact that the honor of the daughter reflects the honor of her father's family (Koehane 1988:107-117), and therefore it should not surprise us that women emphasize their virtuousness even at an older age. Only in this way can the mothers and grandmothers be the role model to their daughters-in-law and granddaughters, to whose shoulders the burden of preserving the family honor will eventually fall.

d) Girls during puberty

In one of the so-called 'weak' (daif) hadith, we read that it is inappropriate if a woman displays her body after entering puberty, i.e. after the first menstruation. According to this hadith, it is allowed to have uncovered only the hands up to the wrists and the face (Navodi Syed 2005). This hadith is questionable primarily because it is not authentic (sahih) or at least good (hasan) hadith and hence it should not influence the Sheryatic Laws even though in some countries the complete covering of women has become an everyday practice (Navodi Syed 2005). Even though the Muslims are usually unanimous on the attitude that the clothes should be long, non-transparent and loose so that the female shape would not be emphasized, the attitudes differ on the question whether the face, the palms and the feet should be covered (Salleh 1993:114).

Different dressing customs

During different periods, there were different interpretations on the exact type of clothing which was prescribed to the Muslim women and today the types of clothing highly differ in terms of shapes, fabric and colors. Different types of clothing are found in Morocco, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan or with Muslim women in Europe. In order to understand these differences, we will shortly present here the main types of head coverings, dresses and coats worn by the Muslim women.

a) Head coverings – hijab, al-amira, shayla and niqab

The most recognizable piece of clothing with Muslim women is a scarf. While in the West all our scarves look alike, the Muslim women recognize at least three types of scarves: hijab, al-amira and shayla. They all cover hair and neck and leave the face open. However, unlike hijab, which is made of one piece, al-amira consists of two pieces

which are usually worn together: a tube-like scarf worn close to the head, covering hair and partially the forehead, and a wider and more loose scarf which is placed over the first one, reaching up to the shoulders. A common head covering is also shayla which, just like hijab and al-amira, does not cover the face. Shayla resembles what we call in the West simply a scarf. If wide enough, shayla can be tied together in the similar way as hijab or it can be just lightly placed over the head, wound around the neck once or twice, with loose ends falling freely. A close fitting cap is usually worn under the scarf which prevents the hair to fall down over the face and to which the scarf can be bound.

As mentioned before, the custom of covering the face also became common in some regions. However, since non of the above described head covering do not cover the face, hijab, al-amira and shayla are then combined with niqab. Niqab, mostly worn by Saudi women is primarily intended for covering of the face. Even though the niqab usually leaves the area around the eyes uncovered, some Muslim women also wear the so-called 'total niqab'. In that case, the area around the eyes is also covered and gloves are also part of the total niqab.

b) Dresses – abaya and jibab

Abaya and jibab are dresses usually worn together with hijab, al-amira and shayla. Abaya is a long and comfortable, never tight, dress worn mostly in the Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Jibab, a long and wide dress is quite similar to abaya, but with a different upper part which looks more like a male jacket than a women's dress since it usually has a collar. Furthermore, jibab is not necessarily composed only of one part, but it can be composed of two or more parts – can be worn with trousers or with a long skirt and over a blouse or a shirt. Jibab is commonly worn in Jordan, Palestine and Syria, but it can be also found in Libya and Algeria.

c) Coats – kimar, chador and burqa

Kimar is a long, bell-shaped coat covering hair, neck and shoulders. It usually falls over the hips or reaches down to the knees. Chador, which is mostly worn by post-revolutionary Iranian women, is very similar to kimar. The only difference is that chador is longer and usually reaches down to the knees. Burqa, the most rigorous female outfit of the Islamic world is specific for Afghanistan. A thick fabric covers the whole body, including face and a limited visibility is allowed through a textile web covering the area around the eyes.

Attitudes towards body covering

In terms of clothing, the imposed violence was the strongest when the Talibans came to power in Afghanistan and ordered women to wear burqas or in Iran where, after

the Islamic revolution, a moral police was established. Azar Nafisi wrote about the streets of Teheran filled with cars called the Blood of God. Their task is to check whether women are wearing scarves in the proposed way, whether they wear make-up or are accompanied by men who are not related to them (Nafisi 2004:31). In this and the similar cases we can rightly ask the question whether the regulations on women dressing are in complete disagreement with the respect of human dignity and autonomy of women. In spite of that, we have to be careful not to engage in generalization and stigmatization and proclaim all Muslim women subordinate and voiceless. The fact remains that some Muslim women simply decide to wear traditional clothes and thus express their cultural and religious identity. Therefore it would be wrong to advocate the complete abolishment of wearing of hijab in the name of democracy and human rights, since thus we would violate the basic principle of democracy – freedom of expression and religion. On the other hand, the uncritical promotion of multi-culturalism is also unacceptable, because it negates the subordination and violence against women.

Of course, it is not easy to set boundaries and it is difficult to judge from the outside whether it is a case of free will or whether it is acceptance of the established norms. However, it is important to emphasize the fact that wearing the prescribed Islamic clothes is not always a sign of female subordination. This can be clearly seen from the example Azar Nafisi described in her book *Lolita in Teheran: Biography in Books*. Her grandmother refused to leave the house for months when, during the 1940ies, they demanded from her to uncover her body, while Azar Nafisi herself felt humiliated and embarrassed when she was asked a few decades later to cover herself (Nafisi 2004:157). But, is Azar Nafisi so much different from her grandmother? It seems that we are actually talking about a very similar reaction to the imposed – covering or uncovering. This is the example of two women who were denied their right to decide for themselves on what do they want or do not want to wear. The fact is that female clothes/coverings have become a power issue. Even though some Muslim women emphasize the religious character of the scarf and claim that it primarily reflects the desire of the Muslim women to abide to the laws of Islam, it is clear that, in case when wearing of the prescribed clothes is impossible to avoid, clothing is understood both as a symbol and a political statement. In the moment when the law providers prescribe a uniform and when there is no choice, we can say that the lives of women are subordinate to the interests of the institutions which they cannot influence themselves. What mostly disturbed the post-revolutionary Iranian women was when they were ordered to wear chador and their grandmothers when they were ordered to take off their scarves, was coercion and the impossibility to choose freely for themselves. From that point of view, there isn't a big difference between Iran, where chador is obligatory and women live in fear from punishment for the possible breaking of the rules and Turkey, where women in the public institutions are forbidden to wear scarves. Forceful and total negation of tradition is equally violent as the strict, obligatory dress code.