

The Hijab as Cultural Edict, not Islamic Obligation

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The Islamic world is a vast region that reaches around the globe. It embraces a religion whose major tenets are meticulously followed and believed by its adherents; yet, within the faith there are those who do things differently and express their religiosity in dissimilar ways. This essay explores my own personal experiences with the “hijab,” or veil, and demonstrates how it is a very personal choice, which is heavily influenced by culture, society, and politics rather than religious certainty.

Perhaps the most enduring and obvious statement of Islamic faith, especially by those in the West, is the “hijab,” or head-covering worn by Muslim women. The hijab is an overt and obvious symbol of Islam, both to Muslims and non-Muslims. It is believed by many Muslims to be a requirement of the faith, and even outsiders think themselves knowledgeable enough to proclaim that it is a major tenet of the religion. Before further discussing the issue of veiling, it is important to clarify what is meant by the term “veil,” or “hijab.” Its use in the West usually brings to mind a woman completely enveloped in fabric, much like the *chador* in Iran, the *burqa* in Afghanistan, or the completely veiled women in Saudi Arabia. However, the veil can actually be several types of attire. For Muslim women, what is often considered veiled or wearing the hijab means that the hair is covered. The clothes may run the gamut of all types of garb: a long loose dress, loose pants and a blouse, or other non-restrictive clothing. The main thrust behind veiling is the covering of the hair and body with non-revealing and loose clothing. This is all about modesty and not calling attention to the female body. Males too are encouraged to dress modestly, as mentioned in the Muslim holy book, the Qur’an, “Say to the believing man that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them” (24:30-3). The hijab, however, does not necessarily connote that the woman will be covered head to toe in a shroud.

As a Muslim, living much of my life in Muslim countries, I have had a great deal of interest in the rationale for this phenomenon; however, I have discovered that there is not one simple answer for why women choose it. For me, as a non-hijab wearer, this topic was never

something discussed in my family. My father was Muslim, my mother a Southern Baptist. She never converted to Islam and my father never imposed a strict religious lifestyle on his children. My father's sisters and some of his nieces did cover their hair, but it was never even a subject brought up in our home.

My immediate family, including my parents and two siblings, in many ways had a very different life from other Libyan families. My father grew up under Italian occupation, demonstrated against colonialism and was jailed for it as a young man. He went on to study journalism at the University of Tunis in Tunisia and was one of only sixteen Libyan men who held a university degree at the time of Libya's independence in 1951. He worked as undersecretary for communications for the new Libyan government and was traveling around the United States when he met my mother in Georgia in 1957; they married that same year.

Perhaps it was his education, his travels, or his many languages, including Arabic, Berber, Italian, English, and French, which together made him the cosmopolitan open-minded man who raised us. When he married my educated southern mother, there was never any discussion about converting or changing her religion or nationality. He chose her as she was, so there was no need to ask her to change.

I have an older brother and sister; we were all born in Tripoli back in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At the time, Libya was certainly not a bastion of modernity, but my mother never thought about traveling back to the United States to give birth. Libya was her home at that point. I recall our home being a mixture of their cultures, religions, and languages. We celebrated Christmas with my mother and we celebrated all the Muslim holidays with my father and his family.

I believe that part of the lack of religious conservatism in Libya and my home at the time, was that Libya was still finding its feet after many years of colonialism. The modern world was not something to fear, but something to embrace. That, coupled with my father's international experiences and his open mind, allowed my childhood experience to be one of freedom to grow as a person first and a Muslim second. At that time, not all young women in Libya wore the hijab. I recall being in private schools that were co-educational and many of my Libyan friends were not covered, and our parents were not concerned about us studying with the opposite gender. Today, however, the separation of males and females in schools in the Arab world *has* become a "big" deal. Most governments and religious authorities insist upon it in all public schools, and many private schools also follow this policy.

My Libyan grandmother and aunts all wore the hijab – a *barakan* in Libya – when they went out, or if there were males in their homes who were not family. However, when I was a teenager not all my cousins donned the hijab. Nonetheless, in recent years, I have found that all my female cousins now wear the hijab. I know that this is not necessarily due to the pressure of our family. I am certain in many cases, for Libyan women, it was due to the strictness of Colonel Ghadaffi’s repressive regime, which outlawed many religious organizations and tried to minimize the role of Islam in people’s lives. This is often done by Arab dictators since the power of Islam to foment revolt has proven to be very strong throughout history. I feel that my cousins took the hijab more as a symbol of their own “power” to choose rather than any major encouragement from the family.

However, the influence of family is also very strong and leads some women to veil even though they do not feel personally called to it. I have personally seen this with my husband’s family, where virtually all the women are veiled, and it is family pressure that drives it. I know that I will never veil. I feel that one’s religion resides inside a person and does not require outside dress in order to be practiced. I do not feel that I need to show people what my religious beliefs are by what I wear, but rather by how I act and present myself – and even that can be misinterpreted at times.

The society in which I grew up, unfettering itself after years of colonialism, and my cosmopolitan family, are what influenced my lack of desire or need to consider wearing the hijab. I always felt my father was proud of me no matter what. I did not need to show the world I was a Muslim; he believed it was inherent, as do I. In a country where not many women spent time following pursuits outside the home, I rode horses, swam, and sang at school concerts. My parents’ personal cultural and religious values shaped me, and allowed me to grow as a multifaceted person and not a person narrowly defined by my religion. What I was able to take from both religions was what I wish more people would do today: the need to be a good person, to care about others, and to be tolerant of all differences.

My personal view of the hijab has not changed as I have grown older. In fact, as I have further researched this issue, the more I realize the entire discussion is more about culture, society, and politics than any religious edict. Therefore, when I see a woman wearing the hijab, I know not to assume that she is a certain type of woman based on that outer garb, because the hijab, although a personal choice, is also influenced by her family and the world in which she lives.