

Behind the Veil (Part 1)

What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you see a woman in a hijab? Chances are you feel bad for her. You might even think she's oppressed and forced to confine herself behind the veil. In all probability, you could be right about this for a large section of such Muslim women. But is that the only way to look at veiling as a practice?

The all-male Islamic clergy generally prescribes veiling as a custom in which "good" Muslim women should engage; a proposition most men within the community agree with. The clergy often defends this cultural practice by arguing that men are particularly vulnerable to corruption through unregulated sexual contact with women. They contend that the purpose of the hijab is the regulation of such contact. Hijab is a general term for modest dress code but there are differences in the form of veiling depending on your location. Therefore some women cover only their hair with a headscarf or hijab, while others cover the whole face with just a slit for their eyes which is called a niqab. Similarly, there are other forms of the veil such as burqa, chador, khimar, shayla, abaya etc. Some countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia have therefore enforced the veil by law, in some form or the other, due to the belief in the regulation of contact between men and women.

In fact, Saudi Arabia is among the strictest countries when it comes to Islamic laws and women. Whether or not these rules are true to what was meant in the Quran is another matter altogether; however, they believe that what they are enforcing on the citizens is what is required of them as good followers of Islam. Therefore women have had a number of restrictions on their freedom and up until this year, they were not even allowed to drive. The only way for them to travel was to be accompanied and driven by another man or to take a taxi with at least one other woman.

This, of course, in addition to all women being veiled at all points of time outside their home. In order to deal with this situation, women have begun to start using designer niqabs in order to still be stylish while being restricted to veiling. In this manner, they are adhering to the laws of the country but are also taking control of their freedom in some way by making their own personal decisions in terms of fashion. They are left with no choice but to do this since they could be fined, imprisoned or killed if they tried to defy the law and do away with the veil altogether.

In such cases, the feminist movement has brought to light the backwardness of the veil. Some Muslim feminists across the world have highlighted the historical fact that veiling as a practice was evident long before the rise of Islam in parts of Arabia and the ancient Near East. Others have pointed out the verses in the Quran that refer to "men who guard their modesty and women who guard their modesty" (S. 33: 35). They have also pointed out that although the veil is enforced in certain countries, the Quran clearly states that there is no compulsion in religion (2:256).

For many, the veil is a mechanism for patriarchal control. They often cite the discourse of how it did not originate with Islam and is thus not a religious symbol, but rather a political one. For them, it's a tool used by men to keep the women from living life on their own terms. However, it is important to note that the same piece of clothing may actually be a symbol of faith for others. For a large number of Muslim women, the veil is not really a backward practice at all.

(to be continued)

- Zoe Vandrewala