

Dress Code for Women in Islam: A Sociological Investigation

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Abstract

Dressing is a significant aspect of human life. As people's cultures are different, so also are their modes of dressing. Invariably, the way a person dresses will show outstandingly the cultural milieu in which that person fits into. Dressing implies covering that which should be covered; and by so doing, not exposing that which should be covered. This work undertakes to examine the Islamic dress code for women, as well as the repercussions of not abiding by such a code. Islam exposes its adherents to the consequences of not adhering strictly to the Islamic patterns regarding dressing. A Muslim has the guidance on how to avoid these problems from the beginning if he follows the laws laid down by Allah, who knows His creation. Darussatam presents Islamic Dress code for women as a solution to some of the most difficult problems of our time.

Key Words: Dress Codes, Women in Islam, Sociological Investigation

Introduction

There is no doubt that a woman is an object of beauty. This beauty is a very powerful force. Allah has prescribed how this beauty must be utilized so that it becomes a force for good and not an agent of destruction. Actions are judged by intentions in Islam. In this way, the intentions of men concerning the beauty of women must be constantly checked. This paper shall examine the Islamic tradition regarding how a woman should dress in order to prevent herself from being a stumbling block to her male counterparts.

UNDERSTANDING DRESSING

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines dressing as: "the act of putting on clothes" (355). A dress code in this sense refers to a prescribed pattern which women are expected to conform to.

Dressing is an integral part of human life and existence. Someone has said: “the way you dress is the way you are addressed”. One must therefore dress well because people see you before they know you. More often than not, the kind of dressing announces the kind of person who is putting on the apparel. Looking good is therefore good business. It is interesting that Islam recognizes this fact and therefore admonishes her adherents to cultivate a decent way of dressing.

ISLAMIC DRESS CODE FOR WOMEN

It is an incontrovertible fact that relevant Quranic verses lay great emphasis on the observance of the woman’s dress code. It is only by observing the Islamic dress code that modesty can be ensured. Islam stipulates certain conditions and requirements of the woman’s outer garment (Jilbab).

When the Muslim woman (Muslimah) goes out, she must wear an outer garment to cover the cloth she is wearing. The woman’s wear must be large enough to cover the whole body. In congruent with this, the Quran says:

And tell the believing woman to lower their gaze and guard their Furaj (private parts), and disclose not their adornments except only that which is apparent, and that they should draw their head-covers over their Juyub (bosoms), and that they disclose not their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their brothers, or the sons of their sisters, or their women, or what their right hands possess, or such of male attendants who have no sexual desire, or young children who have not attained the knowledge of women’s private parts. (24:31).

The woman is also expected to use the head cover or head cloth (Khimar) on her hair. This cloth covers all of the hair on the head. In this direction, a prominent Islamic scholar Imam AL-Qurtubi noted that:

Women in those days used to cover their heads with the Khimar, throwing its ends on their backs, behind their ears, leaving the neck, and the upper part of the chest uncovered, just as Christian women used to do; later on, enjoined the Muslim women to cover with the Khimar the upper part of their chests and the necks as well (4).

The Quran vividly states in the passage quoted: “And they should not stamp their feet”. This implies that the woman’s feet should be covered by the outer garment too.

The stipulations of the Quran clearly make it incumbent upon women to conceal their beauty and adornment from strangers except that which might show unintentionally; such as the ring and the lower hem of the dress. They were expected to do this so that they may be distinguished from the pagan women and the slave – women; and be safe from being harassed or molested. The cloth also is expected to be a plain one, not filled with decorations. This is clearly shown in the words: “and that they disclose not their adornment” (24:31). By extension, this implies that the garment should not be decorative, colorful, conspicuous or eye-catching. To further buttress this point, the Quran states: “And stay in your homes, and commit not Tabarruj” (self-display) (33:33). The word Tabarruj here connotes when a woman displays her beauty and ornaments to strangers or men distantly related to her; and wearing in public place make-up or anything that may provoke men to lust after her.

In Islamic mentality, the purpose of this decent dressing is to conceal the details of a woman’s body. But when the clothing becomes colorful, this purpose is defeated. In connection with this, Imam Dhahabi notes:

Among other things for which a woman would be cursed, are disclosing the fineries which she wears under her outer garment, wearing perfume in her outings, wearing a colorful outer garment, or a short cloak. Tabarruj includes all these things. Allah the Exalted hates Tabarraaj and the women who practice it (9).

Tabarruj is dreaded so much in Islam. Abdullah expressed that: "Tabarruj is so abhorrent that Allah's messenger considered it equal to shirk (polytheism), fornication, stealing and other reprehensible acts" (13). In Islam, flimsy and see-through garments make women more exciting to men. The prophet referred to such women who wear thin garments as clothed-naked women. He calls them women who "will be dressed and yet undressed". These are women who wear tight and transparent clothes, clothes that reveal more than conceal.

A woman is also expected not to use perfumes. Many prophetic traditions forbid women from using perfumes outside their homes. Abu Musa had noted that it was reported that the prophet said: "Any woman, who wears perfume and passes by people who would smell her perfume, is a fornicator" (15). Any woman who goes to the mosque wearing perfume, Allah does not accept her Salat unless she returns home and washes off the smell of her perfume. It is prohibited for a woman to wear perfumes both when she is going to mosque and when she is going to public places. AlHaithami, a prominent Islamic scholar had noted that: 'When a woman goes out wearing make-up and perfume, she commits a grave sin even if her husband permits her to do so' (9).

Significantly, the epithet "Daiyuth" literally signifies a man who knows and tolerates his wife's infidelity, or one who does not feel jealous when his wife sees out wearing perfume and makeup, exciting men's lust consciously or unconsciously.

Islam also forbids a woman wearing a man's clothing and vice versa. Abu Harairah Allah had noted that "Allah's messenger cursed the man who wears women's clothes and the woman who wears man's clothes"(15). This implies that when a woman wears a man's cloth such as pants or jeans and other men's outfits, she incurs upon herself the curse of Allah and the curse of His messenger. The curse will affect her husband if he allows her to wear such clothes because it is his responsibility to make sure she observes the Islamic dress code. Thus the Quran says: "O you who believe, protect yourselves and your families from a fire whose fuel are men and stones" (66:6). In the Islamic understanding, the man is the guardian of his family and is responsible for everything that happens within it. It is believed that whims or opinions of men. Allah knew that Muslims will be living in a non- Islamic environment, yet He decreed that men should look different from women and women from men in various modes of dressing.

The cloth a woman wears is not expected to resemble that which unbelievers wear. In connection with this, the Quran says:"Then we have made you follow a set of laws, so adhere to it, and follow not the inclinations of those who do not know" (45:18). Here, the clause, "who do not know", includes all those who oppose Mohammad, while "their inclinations" includes all the falsehood and whims the unbelievers hold as part of their religion. When Muslims follow the ways of these unbelievers, it is assumed that they are approving their religion.

Mohammad was very particular about commanding his followers to differ from the unbelievers, not only in social life, but also in acts of worship. A believer is therefore expected to heed this advice of Allah. It is believed that when a Muslim adopts the disbelievers way of life, he will also partake of the quality of their hearts. A woman should not put on anything that is conspicuous or ostentatious. A conspicuous or ostentatious garment in this sense is that which a person wears to be distinguished from others either because the garment is expensive or simply to show it off (Abdullah 18). There are other prohibitions regarding personal appearance of which the Muslim sisters should be

aware. Wearing a hairpiece, or wig, plucking facial hair, filling teeth and tattooing are prohibited by Allah's Messengers (Abdullah 18).

Veiling is also so pertinent in Islamic. A veil is legitimately defined as the dress that covers the whole body of the woman including her head, face, hands and feet. It should be long, loose and plain, not defining her shape. Veil has been prescribed for women to block the road to sin. Veiling is a source of covering the face, hands, feet and other parts of the body (Abdullah 30). The Quran says: "And they should draw their veils over their bosoms" (24:31).

The purpose of veiling is to safe guard a woman from the looks of men and provide her a pure atmosphere at home, so that she can perform her household duties properly and by so doing contribute to the development of the society. An Islamic woman is not expected to wear high heeled shoes. There are basically three reasons why this should not be done. First, it is a kind of deception because it makes the woman look taller than she is. Second, it is dangerous for the woman because it is easy to fall in them. Third, it has negative health consequences as doctors have concluded (Baz 13).

CONCLUSION

It is vital to note that right dressing is so important for the Islamic woman. A woman is expected to dress properly in order not to incur the wrath of Allah. Dressing properly makes a woman noble in her affair. Conversely, dressing improper deprives a woman of her modesty which is an integral part of faith. The dressing of a Muslim woman is therefore her identity, which distinguishes her from other woman. It is also an offence in Islam to ridicule or make fun of a woman's dressing. Invariably, whoever ridicules a woman who observes the Islamic dress code for women is being viewed as a **Kafir** or an apostate.

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