

Reviewing and understanding the clothing norms in Islam

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ABSTRACT

Modesty is considered as a central part of Islam. Modesty not only in terms of behavior but also in the way of dressing is demanded in the religion. Islam has certain rules/norms regarding the clothes of its followers. The norms on clothing are governed by the verses given in the Quran, their interpretations and are also based on the *Sunnah/Hadith* (teachings of the Prophet). Muslim leaders, Imams, scholars and others around the world have interpreted these norms in several ways according to their understanding of religion. This paper reviews those injunctions based on which the clothing of Muslims around the world have taken a distinct shape. The paper is an attempt to review and compile the guidelines or norms given in the Quran and other basic requirements of men's as well as women's dress according to the dictates of the *hadith* (*Sunnah*).

Key Words : Islam, Muslims, Quran, *Sunnah/Hadith*, *Awra*, Dress/Clothing

INTRODUCTION

Clothing is an important factor of human civilization. Dar (1969) stated that clothes are an important medium between the person and the outer world and is the most efficient means of communication. Clothing displays a symbol of status, occupation, sex, and religion. Many religious organizations consider dress as an important symbol of religious identification. It can also be used to gauge the person's commitment to his religious value system. Islam is one such religion which considers modest dressing as one of its important aspect and has certain norms regarding the way of dressing for its followers. Many Muslim men and women dress for the purpose of showing their devotion to God. The word Islam itself means "submission"-not to the religion, but to the guidance and will of God. Therefore, a Muslim literally is "one who submits," and their Islamic dress displays that commitment. This commitment is guided by the norms given in Quran (religious book of Muslims), although, a particular design of dress has not been described. The other source of guidance in Islam is *hadith* (the doings and sayings) of the Prophet, who is regarded as a guide and a human role model. Muslims often follow the pronouncements of Muslim leaders, Imams and scholars around the world, who have interpreted these norms in several ways according to their understanding of religion but the individuals who want to study the religion for themselves are free to do so. There are several interpretations about the "correct" practice of Islam in everyday life, including how Muslim men and women should dress. Many choose to adopt practices that are *Sunnah* (meaning

“encouraged” in religious law as well as “following the path of the prophet Muhammad”) and evade practices that are *haram* (“forbidden”). This paper will review the verses of Quran and the details of *hadith* that relates to clothing and will attempt to enumerate the basic requirements of dress.

METHODOLOGY

This review paper is based on various scholarly articles, papers, books, conference proceedings, discussion papers and other compilations. The findings of multiple sources have been integrated in to facilitate a profound understanding of the clothing guidelines in Islam. The norms regarding dress in Islam are given in the religious book of Muslims *i.e.* ‘Quran’ and the *hadith (Sunnah)*. The paper analyses the details given in both without going beyond what is supported by the existing literature. Its main focus is on the documented dictates given in the holy book, Quran and as explained by the Messenger of Islam. Another detailed review paper related broadly to Islamic clothing, titled as “Evolution of *Hijab: A Review*” was published in Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal, March 2018.

Around 50 studies were screened and 25 were selected for compiling this review paper and the information obtained is assembled in the following sections.

Quranic norms

The Quran is believed to be the word of Allah transmitted through the Prophet Muhammad (Oxford Dictionary of Islam). It is the Holy Book for all Muslims which defines the rules and regulations of the religion and serves as guide for Muslim community. The Quran is divided in 30 parts (*Juz* in Arabic, *para* in Persian; the Muslims from south East Asia also refer to a *juz* as *para*) which consists of 114 chapters (*Surah* in Arabic) which are further sub divided into verses (*Ayah* in Arabic). Regardless of nation, colour and caste a complete catalogue has been provided for human civilization for all periods in the form of Quran in Islam.

There are two main verses in the Quran that have direct mention about the dress and these are the verses that are most discussed by the scholars (Boulnoor, 2006; Noor; Sadatmoosavi, 2011; Yousoff, 2014).

1. “Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. (Qur’an 24:30) And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their *zeenah* (adornments) except what appears thereof, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or their brothers’ sons, or their sisters’ sons, or their women and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! So that you may be successful.” (Qur’an 24:31) *Surah Al Nur*:

The above verse instructs both men and women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts. The verse specifically spells out the command’s pertaining that the woman’s natural beauty and her adornments should to be concealed from strangers.

2. “O Prophet! Say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to lower and draw over themselves some of their garments [when in public]: this will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed; and Allah is ever forgiving and merciful.” (Qur’an 33:59) *Surah Al Ahzab*

The above verse orders Muslim women to put their outer garments when they go out in public so that they should be known (as such) and not molested. Islam is very perceptive to the manners of clothing and grooming. "In Islam, privacy and good manners in public contribute to the highest virtues, and are parts of a Muslim's duty" (Yousoff, 2014). However, it should be noted that there is no restrictions on the proper or harmless items of clothing and ornaments in Islam. Indeed, the Quran calls such stuff as the beautiful gifts of God and reproaches those who look upon them as forbidden (Quran, 7:32-33).

Along with the above two verses the scholars have mentioned another verse that talks about clothing. It is given in chapter 7 of Quran and is stated as - "Children of Adam, We have sent down clothing to you to conceal your private parts" (*Surah Al-A'raaf*, 7:26). This verse clearly notifies that the purpose of clothing is to cover or conceal one's body. There are certain specifications in Islam regarding the parts of the body that should remain covered and in principle should not be seen by other people unless there is an articulated exception. There is a specific term called '*awrah*' that has been used for those parts.

Awrah

Awrah is a term which is used with in Islam to denote those parts of the body, for men as well as women, which must be covered with clothing. It is an Arabic word and refers to the parts of the body which had to be covered and may not be visible to the public. In Quran the word *awrah* appeared 4 times with three different meanings. In the *Surah an-Noor* verse 31 as limbs that must be covered, in the *Surah an- Noor* verse 58 it is defined in a different sense, not as a part of body but in regard to privacy, as three kinds of time when the bodies are often open and in *Surah Al-Ahzab* verse 13 it was mentioned twice and meant vulnerable. Besides Quran the command to cover *awrah* is also there in *hadith*. The evidences has been seen in many papers and articles that Islam has set varying limits between *awrah* of men and women which are discussed below.

For Men (including young boys) :

The *awrah* for men consists of everything between the navel and knees (Badawi, 1969; Karyono, 2017). The following hadiths provides the evidence for man's *awrah*.

- Ahmad (21989) narrated that the Prophet passed by Ma'mar when I was with him, and his thighs were uncovered. He said: "O Ma'mar, cover your thighs, for the thigh is '*awrah*.'"
- Narrated by 'Ali (RA): The Prophet said: "Do not show your thigh, and do not look at the thigh of anyone, living or dead." (Abu Dawood (3140) and Ibn Maajah: 1460)

For Women (including young girls) :

The boundary of *awrah* for women who have reached puberty is mentioned in one *hadith* as follows :

"It was narrated from 'Ayesha that Asma bint (girl of) Abu Bakr went to the messenger's home while wearing thin clothes. The Prophet Mohammed turned away from her and said: "O Asma, when a woman reaches the age of puberty, it is not proper for anything to be seen of her except this and this." And he pointed to his face and hands" (Karyono, 2017). So the *awrah* for women consists of whole body except the hands and face. It is also said that the garment should conceal the *awrah* from all sides as well as from above; however, it needs not to do so from below. In case of women different standards of acceptable exposure are there for persons at various degrees of closeness. The greatest degree of covering for a woman is required in the presence of

non-mahram; men other than her husband. A certain degree of relaxation in dress is permissible with *mahram* relatives. A *mahram* is a relative that is, someone too closely related to marry such as a father, father-in-law, uncle, brother, or son. The attire of women depends on the type of people she will be in the presence of. The two groups are:

- a) *Non-mahram* relatives and strange man.
- b) Husband, *mahram*, old men who lack vigour or small children who have no sense of shame.

Being in the presence of first group she should cover full body except face, hands and feet. As for being in the presence of second group apart from husband she must not display more than whatever appears during household chore such as head, neck, and elbow to the hands. The scholars have identified that apart from covering the *awrah* there are some other clothing requirements too that a dress of a Muslim should meet.

Clothing requirements

Most of the literary evidences have taken out the information from the Quran and *hadith* to specify the style and type of clothing that must be worn by Muslim men and women and identified certain requirements that must be met. Although, there are slight differences among the scholars regarding the actual number of requirements for dress but the most agreed upon and are backed by firm evidences from Quran and *hadith* are discussed below.

Extent of covering :

The first and foremost requirement is the extent of covering, it describes the parts of the body which should remain covered. The authors such as Badawi, Boulmour (2006) and Kaita (2010) for explaining this section stated the above mentioned verse of Quran (24:30-31) that is "Say to the believing men and women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty. In Quran, the women are asked to draw their veils over their bosoms and through *hadith* women are instructed to cover entire body except face and hands which mark their extent of covering and for men minimum amount to be covered is between the navel to knee.

Looseness :

Looseness of the garment is second requirement. It is guided in Islam that the clothing should be loose enough to conceal the outline of the body. This is consistent with the intent of the ayah cited above (24: 30-31). Skin-tight, body-hugging clothes are not allowed, for both men and women. Wearing a cloak over the dress is considered to be a highly desirable way for this purpose. Not only women's but also men's traditional dress in predominantly Muslim countries is a loose robe covering from neck to ankles. However, the Prophet indicated that if the woman's dress meets the Islamic standards it is valid (without a cloak) even for the prayers.

Thickness :

Third requirement is thickness of the garment which describes that the garment should be thick enough to conceal the color of the skin. Transparent clothing does not represent a proper covering. Kaita (2010) stated that some women came to see Aisha (Prophet's wife) wearing sheer clothes. On seeing them Aisha said; 'if you are a believing women than these are not the clothes of believing women.' In other instance a bride came to see her, wearing a transparent *khimar* on which Aisha said- "a woman who wears such clothing does not believe in *Surah An-Noor*." The

purpose of' ayah (24:30-31) is to hide the believer's body which cannot be served if the dress is thin, revealing the colour and shape of the body. To support the point further there is a *hadith* in which prophet is reported to have said that "There are two types of people who will be punished in hell and whom I have not yet seen: men who have whips like the tails of cows and they beat people with them, and 'women who are dressed yet naked' who will be inclined [to evil] and make others incline [towards it]; their heads are like the inclined humps of camels. They will not enter Paradise and they will not smell its fragrance which is smelt from such and such a distance (*i.e.* from a great distance)." See-through clothing is not permitted and is not modest, for either men or women.

Overall appearance :

The next requirement includes overall appearance. The overall appearance of a Muslim men or women should be dignified and modest. In Quran it is given that "...And do not make a display of yourselves (*tabarruj*) like the displaying of the ignorance of long ago..." (*Surah Al-Ahzab:33*). The word "*Tabarruj*" means not to only display oneself but also 'to spruce up one's charms for the purpose of exciting desire'! Quran (24:31) clearly prescribes the requirements of the woman's dress for the purpose of concealing *zeenah* (adornment). Flashy and gaudy clothing may technically meet the other requirements, but somewhere defeat the purpose of overall modesty.

No imitating of opposite sex :

One important requirement of a Muslim's clothing is that it should not resemble the clothing of opposite sex. Kaita (2010) and Badawi cited that Allah's Messenger cursed men who wear women's clothes and women who wear men's clothes (*Sunan Abu Daawood: 4098*). He also cursed men who make themselves look like women and women who make themselves look like men (*Saheeh Al-Bukhaaree: 5546*). Islam encourages people to be proud of who they are. Women should be proud of their femininity and not dress like men. And men should be proud of their masculinity and not try to imitate women in their dress. For this reason, Muslim men are forbidden from wearing gold or silk, as these are considered feminine accessories. The religion is very clear on the matter that man and woman must remain confined to their respective characters in order to safeguard their natural instincts.

Different from the clothing of unbelievers :

This requirement is derived from the general rule of *Shari'ah* that Muslims should have their distinct personality and should differentiate their practices and appearance from unbelievers. 'Abdullah ibn Amr said; Prophet saw me wearing two saffron colored garment and said "indeed these are the clothes of *kuffar* (unbelievers), so do not wear them (*Saheeh Muslim*). The Prophet also said, "Whoever imitates a people is one of them" (*Sunan Abu Daawood: 4031*). Clothing that involves imitation of the dress traditionally worn by non-Muslims, such as the type of clothing worn by monks and priests and wearing a cross. This also includes clothing that is specific to a certain religion, is forbidden in Islam. One point of notice here is imitation here does not include wearing clothing that is predominant in one's country even if such dress is worn by the majority of non-Muslims, for the Prophet used to wear clothing that was common amongst the *Quraysh* pagans with the exception of those clothing items that are expressly forbidden.

No vain or ostentatious dressing :

According to Abdullah (1998), the woman's dress must not be an expression of ostentation,

vanity, or as a symbol of status by being excessively showy or expensive. On the other hand it should not be excessively tattered in order to gain admiration. Bin Umar (RA) reported that prophet said; “whoever dresses for ostentation in this world, Allah will dress him in a dress of humiliation on the day of Resurrection, and then set it on fire. (Abu Dawood). Clothing worn by Muslims should be clean and decent, it should neither be excessively fancy nor should it be ragged or tattered. This point basically means that one should not dress in order to gain the admiration or sympathy of others. The Prophet said, “Eat, drink, dress and give charity, but without extravagance or arrogance” (*Hadith, Surah An-Nasa’i: 2559*).

Boulamour, 2006 acknowledged the fact that ‘modesty is central to Islam’ and referring to that the Prophet said: “Every deen [way of life]/ religion has an innate character. The character of Islam is modesty” (Al-Muwatta 47.9).

Discussion and conclusion :

Religion is one of the important factors to help ascertain rationale for any dressing style. Like other religions, in Islam also the religious beliefs have resulted in costume styles unique to Muslims. The requirements for modest dress differ between male and female due to rudimentary biological differences. There are Quranic verses and *hadith* that defines the norms and requirements for the clothing of Muslim men and women. The wearing of Islamic clothing means the clothing which meets the requirements and standards set out in the Quran and the *hadith i.e.* covering, loose, non-transparent, submissive, different from the clothing of opposite sex and unbelievers and no ostentatious dressing. In Islam the dressing could be an act of worship and submission to Allah. As a religion Islam is concerned with moral boundaries and community cohesion, and therefore the clothing norms are one of the ways of ensuring that the moral boundaries in the society are respected. Thus, the larger philosophy behind so many specifications of the modest dress in Islam is maintaining dignity and purity in all facets of life including the clothing behavior.

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