
THE CONCEPT OF NUDITY AND MODESTY IN ARAB-ISLAMIC CULTURE

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the Arab-Islamic perception of body, and the concept of nudity and modesty, based on the Quranic verses and their interpretations. These texts and their interpretations show that there is no match in what is considered nudity in the Muslim world. It contains confronting perspectives of Islamic scholars and lawyers with perspectives of secular and Muslim feminists on the topic of veiling a woman's body. Personal empirical knowledge, based on living in the Muslim world, and academic research play a significant contributing role. The Quranic verses are analysed from the original Arabic text (Qur'an 1996) and its English translation. The terms 'West' and 'East' are used for guidance, where 'West' stands for the Euro-Atlantic area and 'East' stands for the Islamic world.

Keywords: body, nudity, Islam, veiling of women, feminism

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of nudity and veiling or revealing human body is presented throughout the history of mankind. Naked human bodies already appeared on the wall paintings of a prehistoric man. Taboos about nudity and sex may differ from culture to culture, but they are still present. The perception of nudity has changed due to natural, cultural, religious and economic conditions. Various religious systems take different attitudes to the exposed human body. While for some religious teachings nudity is an inalienable phenomenon, for others it is their essence. In Islam, male or female nudity is taboo, but for Digambaras, nakedness is part of their lifestyle, as they do not wear any clothes. Different cultures perceive body and nudity with different optics, for example, the Greeks and the Romans did not deal with nakedness of human body as with an ethical problem. The attitude towards the naked body began to change with the influence of religion; especially the female body became tabooed in Christianity and Islam. The male body gets more freedom in Christian and Islamic morality than the female body, which is under strict family and social control. In Muslim society, the concepts of female body and nudity concern many contexts that need

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to be clarified in order to understand this issue from the Islamic perspective. Attitudes towards female bodies, nudity and chastity, should be seen in confronting the relationships in which these attitudes were born and developed. Their emergence was a reaction to the social, cultural and economic situation in the Arabian Peninsula – the cradle of Islam.

2. Historical background

The population of pre-Islamic Arabia was characterized by confessional diversity. Besides the majority of Pagans, also Jewish and Christian communities lived and spread their beliefs and customs among local people. Different cultures had an impact in the territory of Arabia; foreign cultural elements were imported by the immigrants, tradesmen and soldiers, not only from surrounding areas but also from all over the world.

Mindset and cultural development of emerging Islamic community (*umma*) was greatly influenced by diverse local cultural traditions that merged simultaneously. Local customary law was deeply rooted in the conquered territories due to the high illiteracy of the local population. The new religion acted as a unifying religious idea of the emerging Arab-Islamic caliphate. Local traditions which contradicted Islamic norms continued to survive in everyday reality. This fact negatively marked the lives of Arab women and their social status. Islam admitted women the rights which they did not have before. It limited the number of wives, forbade killing female newborns, gave the woman the right to inherit, etc. To a certain extent, it improved women's position, but ultimately the Muslim society followed the patriarchal organization of social relations where men set the rules of morality, and the way of everyday life is exclusively based on the androcentric interpretations of religious texts. Diversity of cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of the Caliphate led to dogmatic speculation and inconsistent interpretations of Quranic verses, *hadiths*, which later resulted in the codification of the standards of Islamic Sharia law. It also deals with the issue of clothing, especially of veiling female body. Inconsistent interpretation arose as a result of inaccurate translation and misunderstanding of complicated Arabic terms. Arab and Islamic feminists draw attention to the fact that exclusively men devoted to the interpretation of the Qur'an. The woman was particularly aware of her duties. Due to the high illiteracy of women, they should not learn about their rights [1-4].

The Islamic religion is a social system in which ethical and legislative standards are part of the faith. In addition to the doctrinal teaching, the Qur'an also contains moral lessons. The moral code and value system of the Muslim society also absorbed elements of the cultures of indigenous people whose territories were conquered. Even the criteria of female beauty had changed, depending on the new ethnic groups that entered the multicultural Muslim world [5].

According to Küng [6], Islamic religion is constant and it penetrates into all forms, rituals and institutions. It formed not only legislation, but also mystique, art and mentality. It also includes ethical and legal provisions for organizing gender relations. Therefore, when explaining any phenomenon in Arab society and culture, the interpretation of the relevant Quranic verses in the context of historical and contemporary Islamic thinking cannot be ignored. The religion has greatly participated in shaping of the cultural identity of the Arab world, but its sociocultural environment is not only determined by Islam, but also by local traditions dating back to the pre-Islamic period [7].

3. Islamic concept of the ‘awra’

Islam has offered a sophisticated system of standards and guidelines that a Muslim woman should obey. Islamic theologians and lawyers elaborated the concept of perception of female as well as male body along with the criteria for appropriate clothing and the rules of female veiling. The issue of female body and nudity in the Islamic context includes questions of veiling, determining criteria for chaste and modest behaviour, and defining appropriate clothing. Islam has influenced all aspects of society’s everyday life, not excluding its intimate and aesthetic aspect. The Arab society (Christians or Muslims) perceives the human body as something inviolable and exclusively intimate. The female body is a symbol of home, privacy, and female dignity.

The Islamic understanding of nudity is related to the concept of the ‘awra’ (*awrat* in plural). Linguistically, it means hidden or secret place. The person’s *awra* must be kept hidden. It also refers to everything that causes shame when exposed, thus, the *awra* of an individual is the area of the body which usually causes embarrassment, if exposed [8]. *Awra* refers to those parts of the male and female body that should be covered up while performing religious duties such as prayers, pilgrimages, etc., or in the presence of other people, except for the spouse. Male *awra* includes wife, who needs to stay hidden and his part of the body between the navel and the knees [9]. Definition of female *awra* is more complicated because there is no consensus in Islamic law schools and their lawyers (*fuqaha’*) on which parts of the female body must be covered, whether whole body with face or without face, and hands and feet. In the Islamic world, there are four religious Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), officially involved in the interpretation of religious texts. They differ in matters of definition of the *awra* and the obligation to veil. Only the Hanafi school (*madhab hanafi*) does not consider the veiling of a woman’s face to be an obligation, in contrast to the more conservative attitude of the other three law schools (Maliki, Shafi’i, and Hanbali). The majority of Sunni Muslims, who accounts for about 85% of all Muslims, reports to the Hanafi law school. Hanafi interpretations are relatively liberal; they use reason, logic, and the choice of a more suitable alternative. The Hanbali School is considered the most conservative; it is an official law school in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where the niqab, the garment

covering the whole female body and the face with a narrow opening for the eyes, is widespread.

The defining of the female *awra* is made difficult by the fact that the term ‘nudity’, in the sense of what is not to be exposed, varies depending on different situations and individuals. That is whether a woman is in the presence of a man or a woman, what kind of religion they are and whether they are relatives or belong to a group of persons designated as ‘*mahram*’ (unmarriageable kin). When defining the female *awra* we cannot avoid the concept of *mahram*. In relation to the woman, it refers to a man who must not marry her because of their bloodline, or a marriage-related relationship, or a relationship arising from breastfeeding by the same woman. The *mahram* category includes: father, father-in-law, son, stepson, brother, nephew, uncle from father’s and mother’s side and a person breastfed by the same woman. It is permissible for a woman to expose the following parts of her body in front of the *mahram* males, as well as other women and children: head, hair, face, neck, shoulders, forearms, hands and legs from below the knees. There is no *awra* towards the husband, thus, no part of the body should remain covered. In front of other men (‘non-*mahram*’) and older children, boys who have already realized the nakedness and physical difference between men and women, the Muslim woman can only reveal her face and hands up to the wrists. Uncovering the *awra* is only permitted in cases of necessity such as medical treatment and life threatening situations.

The interpretation of the *awra* has naturally influenced setting of the rules for a proper female garment to prevent inappropriate physical desires or an unauthorized sexual relationship. The definition of what should or should not be concealed in specific situations belongs in Muslim society among the basic standards of interpersonal relations. What is not defined as nudity (*awra*) may be shown.

4. To veil or not to veil the face?

While covering the *awra* is imposed on both men and women, women’s clothing is different. God commands men and women to *lower their gaze and guard their modesty* upon each other (Qur'an 24:30-31). Additionally, women *should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof* (Qur'an 24:31). The modesty shame is central to Islamic conducts, whose key controlling instrument lies on the gaze and visual interaction between men and women [10]. The Quran contains several instructions to regulate the sexual morality of believers, and emphasize modesty and restrained behaviour. Islamic polemics of conservative scholars and Muslim feminists in connection with verse 31 focus on the concept of ‘ornaments’ and ‘visible ornaments’. According to conservative exegetes, these terms refer to a woman’s hair, face, bust, intimate places, so the whole body and the face. Muslim theologians and feminists point to the part of the verse where it is said: [women] *should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof*. Being ‘visible’ clearly means women’s face, hands and feet, and therefore the

concept of *awra* should not include these parts of the female body. Quranic instruction, *lower their gaze*, proves that women in early Islam did not cover their faces. Current Islamic feminist discourses emphasize that the exegesis of Quranic verses originated in an androcentric environment, where male thinking and experience represented normative standard [R. Hassan, *Challenging the Stereotypes of Fundamentalism: An Islamic Feminist Perspective*, 2001, http://www.riffathassan.info/writing/IslamicTheologyofWomen/Challenging_the_Stereotypes_of_Fundamentalism.pdf]. Consequently, women-Islamic theologians are also being practiced in exegetic practice, and they point to other meanings of the words used in the Quran, which can sometimes alter the whole interpretation.

Islamic discourse on veiling a woman's face seems to be endless. The views of modern scholars oscillate between two opposing attitudes whether to hide the entire body and face or to hide the body without a face. The other, along with Muslim feminists, justify their view that there is no clear indication in the Quran that women conceal their faces; on the contrary, as mentioned above, some verses suggest that the face is not part of the *awra*, and therefore does not need to be covered. Whether women have to or do not have to veil their faces is not current controversy, but also medieval scholars did not have the same views on this question. They argue that the human face is the basis for identifying each individual [11-17]. Face and hands should also be revealed due to the need to confirm identity in actions such as work and business matters, testimony, or other activities mainly carried out in the public sphere. Muslim feminists point out that face veiling is a foreign cultural element in the Islamic world. This is obviously confirmed by the fact that women do not conceal their faces while performing religious rituals during the pilgrimage in Mecca, the holiest place of Islam [18].

The Muslim society has set the basic clothing standards that men and women should obey. The garment should cover the *awra*, but it may not shine through and highlight the shape of the body, should be modest, appropriate to the situation and clean. Women's clothes must not resemble the male and vice versa. Men cannot wear silk and gold, that is the privilege of women. Jamal Badawi points out that Islam is paying significant attention to women's and men's clothing, as it does not fulfil only one purpose. Islam, under the term 'clothing', recognizes three inseparable dimensions: protection from different weather conditions, beautification and moral aspects [19].

In the Islamic world, there are also extreme ways of covering female body where the whole body and face are hidden, despite the fact that this has no support in religious texts. They are called *niqab* that covers the whole body and face with a narrow opening for the eyes (worn by women especially in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Yemen), or *burqa* - the most conservative female garment that conceals the entire body and face, leaving just a mesh screen to see through (worn by women mainly in Afghanistan). These garments belong to local traditional clothes, Islam does not require woman to wear them. The above mentioned types of clothing are not a symbol of religion, but a symbol of cultural identity.

Muslim women are not forbidden to dress nicely and tastefully or to use beautifying elements. A woman has the right to dress nicely and to look good in the public and private. Rapidly expanding fashion industry designed for Muslim women is the evidence. Fashionable apparel and related accessories are designed by both western and eastern fashion designers, who reflect current fashion trends while respecting the rules of veiling; the garment is long to the feet and the *hijab* (a headscarf) is added. Covering a woman's body is currently the most disputed issue not only in the West but also in Muslim societies. Since the rise of Islam, the views of theologians and lawyers have differed, in particular, on the issue of veiling the female face. However, this topic should be irrelevant in today's modern world where one cannot avoid the face detection in direct identification of a person. In order to eliminate prejudices and stereotypes, it is necessary to adjust current gender discourses so that the West begins to perceive and judge the veiling of Muslims in the context of the cultural and religious environment, where this tradition is applied. Western discourses stereotype the phenomenon of veiling, and their attitudes are based on the views of Muslim women integrated into Western societies, usually after they have been academically educated or working there. Of course, their interpretations also represent a notable contribution to a gender polemic. However, it is more important to focus on the views and attitudes of Muslim women living in the natural, authentic Muslim space, just because this problem is the most relevant to them.

5. Orthopraxy in everyday reality

The Arab and Islamic feminist movement pays attention to taboo topics such as the body perception and the concept of nudity. Contemporary feminists seek to take into account a woman's view of the world. Women try to cope with the new situation, the new social conditions. They present their opinions, attitudes and thoughts through their own interpretations of religious texts, in which they express themselves freely and spontaneously. More courageous of them openly provoke or shock the public, such as Ghada Al-Samman and Nawal Al-Saadawi [20].

The attitude to the body and the nakedness has begun to change under the influence of Western cultural elements penetrating the Arab world. Social conventions are being released; the fashion industry is developing, not only for secular-minded women but also for the veiled Muslims. Women and their interpretations of religious instructions enter the literary or media sphere, dominated by men in the last century [21-23]. It should be mentioned that the change in the concept of viewing of female body depends on the degree of religiosity of the Arab society and on the intensity of its local traditions.

Muslim feminists are increasingly engaged in debates about the veiling and point to the need for reinterpretation of the Quranic texts. They highlight that wearing a hijab is a choice for Muslim women, not a command. Hijab is not only a part of their clothing but also a symbol of their personal identity [24], giving them a sense of security, and having a visual and ethical meaning [25]. Neither it

is a religious dogma, nor does it discriminate against women. They emphasize it with the exclamation point. In this context, the Czech Arabist and Islamologist made a concise statement: *the main imperative, which is fully pronounced in the Quran, is chastity. Hijab without chastity does not make sense unless the woman behaves modestly* [Proč se muslimky zahaluji, zdaleka nejde jen o korán, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/svet/1888349-proc-se-muslimky-zahaluji-zdalek-a-nejde-jen-o-koran>].

The current Islamic society is characterized by a diversity of real situations of women. In everyday life, we see the veiled women from head to toe, or women with hijab and elegant clothes, or women without hijab. One can only estimate the kind of their confessional identity and the degree of their religiosity. The kind of dressing does not always reflect the degree of their freedom. Every woman wearing a hijab is not oppressed and passive. And everyone who does not cover up is not the ‘wearer of progress’. The generalized classification by external signs is very superficial and misleading [26].

Secular and Muslim feminists, who enter the direct discussions with male experts in the academic or media sphere, represent the current female population of the Islamic world as regards to the issues of body covering. Secular feminists are fundamentally opposed to any veiling. Along with Western female colleagues, they consider this phenomenon to be a symbol of oppression, humiliation, and isolation of a woman from society. Representatives of Muslim feminism criticize this attitude and regard hijab as a symbol of their personal freedom, and cultural and religious identity [27, 28]. They consider attempts to ban the wearing of headscarves that took place in Turkey and Iran in the first half of the last century, as a restriction of woman’s freedom. Not all women want to go to the public unveiled [29, 30]. Among Muslim women are undoubtedly also those who wear *hijab, niqab* or *burqa* involuntarily. They are forced to do so by male or female relatives (mother-in-law, sister-in-law, etc.) or society, due to the degree of religiosity in the country and working environment. They cover up, although they are not internally identified with this tradition. Another group consists of women who identify themselves as Muslims, respecting religious duties (pillars), but they choose not to cover by their own will. They view their faith as a personal, private matter that does not need to be visually presented to the public. First things are deeds. On the other hand, they do not condemn those Muslim women who wear the *hijab*, if it is their free decision. Woman, who has not previously been veiled, will discuss this question with her future husband before marriage. There are cases when the engagement is cancelled, if the couple does not have the same opinion about the hideout. It also happens that a woman starts to cover voluntarily after marriage.

Muslim women who conceal their head or body perceive body exposing as a revelation of soul, privacy, and intimacy, which ultimately makes them more vulnerable. They neither need to discover more than their faith allows them, nor they give up their intimacy. They reject the idealized universal image of a woman represented by a ‘modern’ revealed woman. At present, we can even talk about ‘radicalization of female body concealing’. Some women voluntarily wear *burqa*

with the belief that this garment frees them from assessing their personality and intelligence only by their physical qualities. According to them, the pressure on feminine beauty and perfection, and the continual shifting of boundaries in uncovering the female body, is immoral. Women who wear a *hijab* (covering the hairline of the head) do not think that scratching the headscarf will guarantee them a better social status. The veiling is both violent and voluntary, and the voluntary hideout is not considered by these women to be a patriarchal construct. On the contrary, they consider it a manifestation of free will and a symbol of desexualization of women [25]. Paradoxically, Western women perceive wearing a *hijab* as a symbol of oppression, humiliation, passivity, etc., in opposition to Muslim women who feel more free, more self-confident and more affectionate, especially in a male collective. They see themselves as modern Muslims, representatives of their culture and potential pioneers of change in society [31]. Of course, this applies to women who voluntarily cover up.

Rifat Hassan, an Islamic theologian, states that identifying women more with the body than with mind and spirit is a common feature of many religious, cultural and philosophical traditions. Women are traditionally identified with the body but they are not considered owners of their bodies [*Women in Islam: Quranic Ideals Versus Muslim Realities*, http://riffathassan.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Women_in_Islam_Quranic_ideals_versus.pdf]. Men and religious scholars have control over their bodies, as a result of the androcentric interpretation of religious texts that have been transformed into Islamic *sharia* law.

6. Conclusions

The historical excursion of the perception of a woman's body reveals negative attitudes directed towards women in terms of their mental and physical disposition, starting with ancient civilizations (Babylon, Assyria, the ancient Greeks ...) through monotheistic teachings to the present when women at different levels of awareness at the West, or the East, are still fighting for their own identity and equal rights with men in everyday reality [32, 33]. Contemporary feminists are fighting the idea that a woman's mind and body are dangerous to men, and they also reserve the right to decide about their bodies [34]. Regarding the question of the ownership of the female body, American Professor of Philosophy and Gender Studies Sandra Bartky [35] points out that the body is a private space that belongs to its wearer, but Western women still live under the burden of other beliefs or opinions of what to wear, their body is a public domain because it is under constant control of others [36]. Women from the Eastern world solve the question of whether or not to cover up, and what part of the body. Both eastern and western women are constantly fighting for the ownership of their private space, their body and beauty.

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