

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Coverings Uncovered

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It is hard to imagine a symbol more potent, more contentious in our times than the veil. It has grown so dense with meanings and interpretations, it has been so frequently abused for purposes of diverse political ideologies, that it is almost impossible to discuss it for what it really is.

When viewed as an anachronism, it can be perceived as the final frontier between the past and the present, between the victimization and liberation of women. When seen as a symbol of Islamic devotion, it can be construed as a badge of piety, respect, protection, pride and beauty.

Whether it frames a woman's head and only covers her hair in a headscarf, or cloaks her from head to toe (abaya, chador), is combined with a separate piece to hide her face (nikab) or constitutes a tent-like cover (burqa), or is plain or embellished, the veil remains the decisive mark of outward difference between Islam and other religions.

Despite considerable debate surrounding the origins of veiling, one fact is certain: The garment predates Islam, as **Leila Ahmed** makes clear in her book "Women and Gender in Islam."

There was a time, in classical antiquity, when a veil was a privilege reserved for women of the court and high aristocracy, raised to levels of sanctity by the distinctions of wealth. It symbolized the retreat of both Jewish and Christian women from public life. The term chador, which is the form of veiling most used in Iran today, means a tent, and has its roots in the pre-Islamic practice of ferrying wealthy women around in covered sedan chairs.

The veil, however, was institutionalized through sharia, the religious laws of Islam. According to the Koran chapter 24 verse 31, Muslim women should cover themselves modestly: "And say to the believing woman to cast down their eyes, and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward."

The Koran does not, however, spell out the details of such a covering. Nor does it specify any penalty for a woman who is not veiled. Most of the assumptions we have about veiling -- that it should cover all but a woman's face and hands and that it should be loose enough to conceal her figure -- are interpretations of this verse or are based on sayings of the prophet Muhammad. The great disparity of religiously acceptable clothing in the Islamic world proves how varied interpretations of the Koranic injunction can be.

For more than a century now, to wear or not to wear a veil has been a central divide within the Islamic world. It has been viewed as a flag, a line of demarcation separating "us" from "them," the visual symbol for some of a modern society, and for others of a society protecting its traditions, its independence and its faith. Politicians have spoken for or against it; people have been killed for its sake or because of all that it symbolizes.

In Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk became the first Islamic leader to abolish the veil in 1934, a symbol of his determination to remake his country into a modern, secular state. Ataturk did not impose any legal sanctions, but half a century later Turkey's military government banned the veil in public places, firing some government employees and arresting some university students who disobeyed. An elected member of parliament who insisted on wearing a scarf was prohibited from serving her term.

In Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi ordered the mass unveiling of women in 1936. Law enforcement agencies were directed to literally tear the veil off women's bodies. Although some women welcomed the royal decree, others were horrified by it and organized sit-ins, hunger strikes and refused to leave their homes. Some braved the streets concealed only in sacks. In due course, though, a few women appeared in public with their veils on and, finally, the ban was rescinded in 1941.

Soon after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Islamic Republic reinstated the veil -- as did the Taliban in Afghanistan when they came into power. Yet by making veiling mandatory, these governments symbolically unveiled women by turning them into objects of global gaze.

Until the advent of modernity, Muslim women in the West were not associated with the veil. For instance, none of the Muslim female protagonists in Medieval or Renaissance literature were veiled, as Mohja Kahf makes clear in "Western Representations of the Muslim Woman." Since then, as Faegheh Shirazi points out in "The Veil Unveiled," the prototypical Muslim woman has appeared and reappeared in paintings, novels, films, television, newspapers, and even in such unexpected publications as *Playboy*, *Penthouse* and *Hustler*.

American attitudes toward the veil have shifted over time, often depending on U.S. relations with the Islamic world, but more often than not they have been negative. Disguising, concealing and hiding are all synonyms for veiling, and all are suspect activities in a culture that, at least ideally, values openness and transparency.

Perhaps that is why the Barbie doll, which is sold in more than 140 countries and has assumed many nationalities, has never included the Muslim veil in her multi-ethnic wardrobe.

Despite all the controversy surrounding the veil, the woman behind it remains obscured. The debate has fixed our attention on her body or her face instead of herself, her freedom or her subjugation, her rights or their denial -- instead of who lives behind this portable wall and the moderating role she has often played in the Islamic world.

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