

Evolution of Hijab: A Review

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Abstract

Islam lay down utmost importance on the observance of modesty for its followers in terms of clothing (hijab). The significance of hijab in Islam can never be ignored. It is a symbol of modesty and it generally applies to the veil through which the body of the women is concealed. Most of the people relate veil solely to Islam and many a times hijab is exclusively been thought in terms of Islam however, the truth is that it is much older. It cannot be said in any way that the practice of veiling or doing hijab is totally pioneered in Islam rather the practice of veiling was wide spread long before the rise of Islam. It has emerged from ancient Indo-European cultures of the Greeks, Hittites, Persians and Romans. This review paper is an attempt to reexamine the history of veil and to trace the evolution of hijab. In reality, hijab has been given different names in different regions of the world and varies in shape and style from one culture to another. The paper along with discussing the history of veil also aims to compile the various forms of veils worn by Muslim women in past and present.

KEYWORDS: Islam, Hijab, Veil, Muslims, Women

Introduction

The word hijab has numerous meanings. According to scholars such as **Lane (1984)**, **Ruby (2006)** the term hijab could mean: “a thing a thing that prevents, debar, hinders, or precludes; a thing that veils, covers, hides, conceals, or protects, because it prevents seeing, or beholding”. It can also signify a partition, an obstacle or a barrier. In Arabic, hijab is an abstract word that has been acquired from the verb hajabat which means to cover and block, or forbid from seeing what is under or beyond (**Hajar, 2008**). In Quran the word hajabat is used for denoting cloud, it is said that the cloud hajabat the sunlight, which means that the cloud has blocked the sunlight. Thus, hijab on the whole means a covering which is used to prevent the outsiders from seeing what is beneath. **Hajar** stated that “After Islam came to the world, the term hijab applies to any Muslim head and body covering so that the body of the women is concealed”. In its today’s modern form hijab means a modest dress covering the limbs, trunk and hair but not necessarily the face. For this paper the word hijab has been widely used as it is a term which is universally recognized. People outside India are also familiar with this term. . There is a general notion that the practice of doing hijab or veiling has evolved with the advent of Islam, while it is not true. It has started much earlier than the religion of Islam and was first recorded in 1300BC (**Sands, 2014**). This review paper will discuss the

prevalence of veiling before the advent of Islam and how eventually the Muslim hijab has evolved taking the shape of various other veils.

METHODOLOGY

The paper analyses various scholarly articles, books, conference papers and other compilations. The integration of the findings of multiple sources has been done in order to gain insight and trace the evolution of hijab in the Islamic world. As mentioned earlier, Hijab is a general term used for Muslim veils. There are variety of veils that have been recorded from time to time that differ in terms of shape, pattern and draping style etc. among the Muslims present around the globe. This paper aims at tracing the historic evolution of hijab and also compiles various veils worn by Muslim women in past and present.

For this review paper the data of different articles, essays and studies are extracted and integrated to provide information and awareness to the larger audience leading to deeper understanding of the topic. The paper contains pure descriptive facts rather than implications and care has been taken that the interpretation should not go beyond what is supported by the existing literature. Around 40 studies were screened for this review paper and around 25 were selected which contributed in the writing of the paper. The information thus gathered is compiled in the following sections.

HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

The hijab in Islamic context generally referred to as veil. The term “veil” evolves from the Latin word ‘vela’ or ‘velum’ which means a covering. The term velum in its literal form means ‘sail,’ ‘covering,’ ‘curtain,’ or ‘cloth.’ It indicates both an actual curtain and a garment. It is in the former sense that the word hijab is essentially used in the Qur’an. There cannot be a denial to the fact that veiling has specific importance in Islam but contradicting the notion of many people the practice of veiling is not innovated in Islam. It was rooted in the history that precedes the emergence of Islam. The practice of women veiling is as old as the Roman Empire, where the women, when going out had to veil themselves (**Guindi 2003**). The practice of enveloping the body from head to toe and sometimes covering the face in certain circumstance when coming out in public places was wide spread in ancient times in the eastern Mediterranean, much before the advent of Islam. The historians like **Jennifer Heath and Guindi**, documented that the practice of veiling pre-dated Islam and is as ancient as the Assyrian laws on veiling, which date back to 1500 BC. Veiling was practiced in ancient Indo-European cultures of the Greeks, Hittites, Persians and Romans and was also witnessed in Mesopotamia, Israel, and pre-Islamic Arabia.

CLOTHING AT THE TIME OF PROPHET

At the time of prophet the general mode of dress of Muslim community was that of pre-Islamic Arabia (**Meri, 2006**). The norm of covering head out of modesty and respect by both men and women was already prevalent. The basic articles of clothing for both men and women consisted of a body shirt, a long dress, gown, or tunic, an undergarment and an over garment namely mantle, coat, or wrap. Foot-wear consisted of sandals or shoes, and head covering (**Stillman, 2003 and Meri 2006**). Most of the Dresses worn by men

and women at that time were same and were mainly in the form of large pieces of cloth which was wrapped by the wearer to cover the body. What distinguishes male attire from female in several instances was the draping style. Arabian fashion required both men and women to wear some kind of mantle or wrap over everything else when coming out in public. **Stillman (2003)** mentioned that in the case of people who are less wealthy, perhaps the outer wrap or mantel was the only garment over the underwear. He also stated that during this time there were some wraps and mantles that were associated with either men or women, although they were less in number. The jilbab, khimar, and mirt were primarily for women. In early Islamic times women while coming in public usually covered their head and face with a variety of veils. A common head veil that was the mantel or mintil (derived from Latin word mantellum). This word at that time was also been used for handkerchief or hand cloth. **Stillman** in the book “Arab dress: from the dawn of Islam to modern times” reported the top three commonly found veils of that time. First was ‘quint’, a rectangular cloth piece which covered the head and fell down over the face like a curtain. The second veil is another rectangular fabric that covered the nose and the lower half part of the face and is termed as ‘litham’. Third is ‘burqit’, a harness like thing. From the centre front of its headband (*isaba*) a fabric used to suspend to cover the face. Besides these head and face veils women usually wrap themselves from head to bottom leaving only one eye open in the large ‘jilbab’. The ‘niqab’ and the ‘nasif’ were some other veils worn by women at this time. Although practice of women veiling was apparently not that strict as it is in later urban Islam. **Meri** in her book “Medieval Islamic Civilization” revealed that strict veiling practices along with seclusion of women evolved only among the middle class over the first two centuries of Islam while following of Prophet’s sunna (deeds).

EMERGENCE OF HIJAB IN ISLAMIC WORLD

By now we have seen that the practice was prevalent long before the existence of Islam and by no means could it be said that veiling is a total invention in Islam. In the era in which Islam was emerging the women were not treated equal to men. **Hajar (2008)** elucidated that Islam has evolved in a nomadic culture, where many inhumane and violent practices were prevalent in society against women. **Dr. Nahid Angha** stated, “In that era, in the tribal culture of Arabs, women were not equal to men with respect to many social and personal conditions and systems, such as marriage, inheritance or education, among other areas”. They were subjected to exploitation by male masters and were considered as slaves and forced into prostitution. **Hajar (2008)** mentioned that “When Islam came, it wanted to secure the women with every possible device to maintain their dignity and respect as human beings in a culture that wronged women in all the aspects of their existence as human beings, and from here hijab came.” Hijab basically came to secure the wellbeing of women and to establish a new system of equality. It was to be the solution to a whole web of conflicts and tensions (**Fatima, 1991**). The practice of veiling was adapted to free the women from the evil practices. Due to the exalted position of the prophet first the women of his family started wearing hijab. **Sadatmoosavi (2008)** reported that the Prophet’s wife Aisha is said to have worn a veil since the time of her marriage that was in 623/1. Strict veiling was not although generally practiced by the early umma. It is around the fifth year of the hijri (626/27) that Muhammad received a revelation of Quranic verse that for the sake of identification and protection, his womenfolk and the believing women should envelop themselves in their

jalabib (referring to a woman's outer wrap). **Sadatmoosavi (2008)** stated that in the second decade of emergence of Islam, hijab verses were revealed in Madina and at first it got obligatory for Prophet's family (verses of Surah Al-Ahzab 32-53) and then to all the faithful Muslim ladies (verses of Surah Al-Ahzab 59 and Noor 30-31).

In the Quran, ayah 59 of Surah al-Ahzab says:

“Ya ayyuha an-Nabiyy qul li azwajika wa banatika wa nisa al-mu'minin yudnina alayhinna min jalabib hinna; dhalika adna an yu'rafna fa laa yu'dhayn. Wa kana Allahu Ghafur Rahim”

In the above mentioned verse, the message has been given to the Prophet. “O Prophet! Say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the faithful to draw their *Jalabib* close around them; that is better that they will be recognized and not annoyed. And God is ever Forgiving, Gentle.”

In addition to the Quran verses that stress the importance of hijab, there are many hadith (accounts/records of the sayings and actions of Prophet Mohammed) an important component of Islamic law, which expresses the border of hijab. Despite the historical existence of many religious and verbal differences between Islamic sects, there is no disagreement about the existence of hijab. About the border of hijab it is quoted in hadith that: Asmaa, the sister of Ayesha's went to the Messenger's home while, had worn thin clothes. Prophet Mohammad returned to her and orated- “O Asmaa, when a girl matured, her body should not be seen unless these part” (While he was pointing at his hands and face) (**Sadatmoosavi, 2008**). Therefore, through hadith it is recommended that women should wear something over their thin clothes in order to cover their bodies.

The history of Islamic Arab clothing had seen a new phase when after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the caliphs and the followers started the war of conquest (**Stillman, 2003**). They came out of their homeland and expanded the umma from the Atlantic to Central Asia. After the death of Prophet on June 8, 632 AD the caliphates took over the charge of spreading the religion. Islam started spreading from North Africa to south East Asia, extending to the boundaries of Imperial China and India by around 750 AD. The triumph of Muslim armies and the settlement of Muslims in these territories brought them in close touch with large non Muslim population having varied culture and a different vestimentary system. **Baker** stated that “chroniclers wrote extensively about such conquests, but little on dress matters”. Despite the fact, whatever existed literature found on various forms of veils that were in trend at different times in different places is compiled in the following section.

HIJAB FOR MUSLIM WOMEN AROUND THE GLOBE IN PAST AND PRESENT

As mentioned earlier also hijab is referred to as veil, it is a modern term used in place of veil. **Hajar (2008)** said that in the context of Islam, the veil may have many different names and not only hijab and each of these names has distinctive connotations. Hijab in Islamic world could mean different things at various places. Various names from different languages are given to denote the covering or veil worn by Muslim women on

top of their other garments to go out in public. Following section will describe the various forms of veil for women in Islamic world.

Ezar or Mezar: In early period of Islam, it has been used for different kinds of clothes; this word has been used as meaning of big Chadors or covers by which eastern women wear them. (*Mezar* word has also gone to Italy and it is root of *Mezarro* i.e. a big piece of painted cloth by which women used to cover their heads and shoulders)

Hebrah: Is a kind of *Burd*, i.e. a striped loose dress which is made in Yemen. Wearing Hebrah is common in Syria, Arabia and Algeria.

Chaarie (or Shaariah): It used to be thin cloth made of black horse hair with which women cover their faces. The sheer material enable them to see their ways.

Ruband: *Ruband* was traditionally worn by Iranian women in the 9th century, when *Ibn Battuta* (a Persian traveler in the 9th AH, 16AD) met Shiraz. Articles Iranica, 1385, 154)

Djenné: It is a fabric piece which was used for the purpose of covering head and two sides of the chest. Two holes have been made in fabric at eyes places so that it looks like Burqa.

Maghnaah (Ghenaah, Maghnaa): It is a piece of cloth (Kerchief or *Charghad*) that both men and women fasten to their heads. (Zoroastrians consider it same as *Makna* which is a cover of Zoroastrian women).

Shawl: A piece of a long hairy or wool cloth that was wrinkled up and wrapped around the neck several times. The word was first recorded in 1655-65 and is taken from the Persian word *shāl*. It is a Persian word which has been gone into many European countries and is also used in present time to denote a large piece of cloth worn mainly by women over their shoulders and/or head.

Chashm Aviz (literally means hanging net in front of eyes): It is a Black net mask of horsehair that women used to wear as an amulet. This cover allows women to see through the mesh while their faces remain covered. This mask used to be wear from medieval times and has also been named *Ayazy* or *Ayasy*.

Picheh: *Picheh* was there in Persia and resembled a mask which was made of weaved horsehair and was fastened to the forehead with two ties (ropes). The length, width and the amount of coarseness of the elderly and the young girls was less.

Yashmagh (or Yashmak): *Yashmagh* was a veil worn in Istanbul. It consisted of two pieces of fine muslin, one of which was placed across the bridge of the nose and tied or pinned at the nape of the neck, covering the lower half of the face and falling down to the breasts. The other piece was placed over the head being brought down till the eye brows. This veil used to be semi transparent but it was considered essential for most of the nose to be covered. This veil covers whole face except eyes. It sometimes comes on chest and sometimes it comes down till knees.

Kamari Chador (Belt Chador): It is a Chador which has a rope in its waist. It is sewed from inside which is fixing by a rope from head to waist or as a dickey around the waist and for wearing it, legs should be put into the middle and pulled up like pants and pull the upper part up to the head. A scissors cut has not been used in its sewing. Some ladies for more beauty, embroidered around it by lacing or sewing margins, this type of cover mostly was black color. *Kamari Chador* or *Ghajari Chador* is older model of Chador in Iran which used to be famous during the rule of Ghajarid.

Chador Namazi or **Charkhi Chador**: (today Chador in Iran): *Charkhi Chador* or Round Chador is front open and without belt. It is an enveloping cloak worn by women; it is generally full-length covering the body from head to foot but leaves the face uncovered. This chador is worn without a face veil and is not fastened in the front (fig1-a). The wearer typically has to hold it at the front by hands or under the arms. It is usually accompanied by a smaller headscarf underneath. The chador was worn with burqa in 13th century and by fifteenth century a face veil called as picheh made of horse hair emerged as another form of veiling. Many Iranian women still continue to wear the chador for their religious as well as cultural principles.

Jilbab: The word *Jilbab* comes from the word *jalaba* which means to gather and to carry. It has also been used in Quran (33:59) and at least is old since then. It is used to depict an outer wrap or mantel worn by Muslim women when appearing in public. It is a full-length over garment, traditionally covering the head and hands.

Burqa: Dozy quoted of *John Fraser* that *burqa* was a kind of cover which has been worn from the heads to feet of the women. **Yarwood (2011)** wrote that it was imported from Egypt and was a large piece of black muslin which was draped over the eyes and fell in folds nearly to the ground. In Afghanistan, people have named their veil as *Burqa*. It is considered as the most concealing veil of all Islamic veils as it covers whole body of a woman including the eyes, which are covered with a mesh like screen for a woman to see through (fig1-b).

Khimar: (That is mentioned in the Quran and had been used as scarf in that time) "*Khimaar*" comes from the word *khamr*, which means to cover. It refers to a long cape like scarf which is worn over the head and falling down till the middle of the back. This veil covers head, shoulders, neck and chin but not the face (fig1-c). Surah an-Nur ayah 31 of Quran mentions khumur, which is the plural form of *himar*. It is majorly worn in Saudi Arabia.

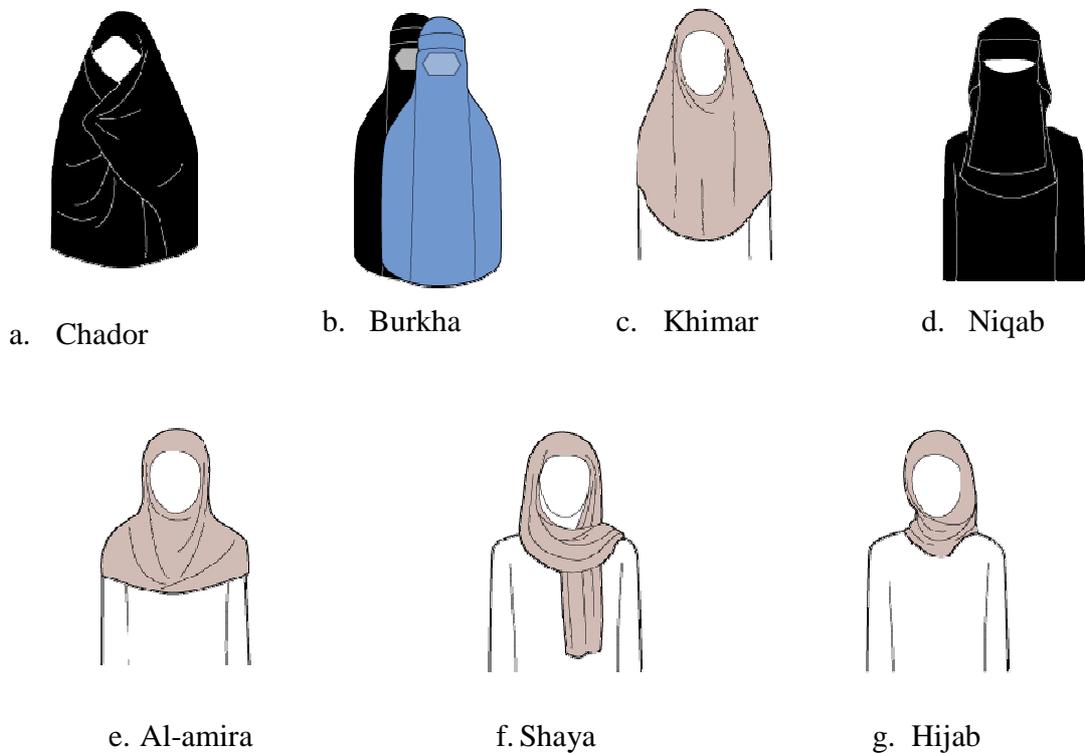
Niqhab (which is called *Ruband* in Iran) or **Mask**: A niqhab is a face veil which may or may not leave the eyes uncovered (fig1-d). This veil necessarily covers the mouth and the nose and may or may not leave the area around the eyes clear. It is accompanied with headscarf such as khimar per say.

Al-Amira: The *al-amira* hijab style consists of two pieces- a headscarf in a form of close fitting cap and the other scarf in a form of tube cap. This veil like khimar covers head, shoulders, neck and chin but do not cover the face (fig1-e). It can be seen in Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Tunisia and Iran.

Shayla: The *shayla* resembles a long rectangular shawl or scarf that is being wrapped around the head to hide forehead and neck. It is pinned at the shoulders or tucked in one of its layers so that it can stay at the place (fig1-f).

Hijab: The word *hijab* literally means a curtain or screen. As mentioned above the root of *hijab* is in Arabic word '*hajaba*' the core meaning of which is to conceal or hide. A woman who wears *hijab* is called *Muhaajaba*. Currently, *hijab* has become a synonym of the scarf that women wear on the head. It is most commonly worn in the West that covers the head and neck but leaves the face clear (fig1-g).

FIG. 1. VARIOUS FORMS OF VEIL FOR WOMEN



Source : <https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/02/10/the-truth-about-islamic-veils/>

DISCUSSION

The word *hijab* has been given numerous meanings by various scholars and basically means 'to conceal'. The practice of doing *hijab* or veiling is not initiated by early followers of Islam it was rather practiced much before the rise of Islam in Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece, Israel, and pre-Islamic Arabia. Still the importance of modesty and veiling in Islam cannot be denied by any means. Although any precise or specific time when *hijab* became universal cannot be identified, it was gradually Islamised and became a part of Muslim culture. The *hijab* verses were revealed in Quran around the fifth year of the Hijri (626/27). However, strict veiling practices along with seclusion of women

evolved only among the middle class over the first two centuries of Islam while following of Prophet's sunna (deeds). In regard to the importance of veiling especially for women in Islam and observing public modesty among Muslim nations, hijab has always been considered significant. According to historical evidences, during the period of cultural history, with little ups and downs, there existed a great range of hijabs varying in shapes and draping style in different countries. But general trend is to be modest and follow the hijab's borders. Of course, in some cases in addition to hair cover, covering faces have become common which seldom can be seen in a few Islamic countries.

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