

From Oppression to Fashion:

How We Lost the True Meaning of the Hijab

In many parts of the world, the hijab has journeyed from being perceived as a symbol of oppression to being celebrated as a fashion statement. Yet in the process of defending the hijab from stereotypes and reclaiming its dignity, many Muslims have unintentionally diluted its true Islamic essence.

This article explores the evolution of the hijab's perception from rejection to commodification and calls us to return to its true purpose: obedience to Allah (swt).

Hijab as Oppression

In the modern Western imagination, the hijab has often been viewed through a secular and orientalist lens. It is seen as incompatible with liberal ideals of freedom and gender equality.

Media narratives frequently equated the veil with subjugation, erasing the voices of the women who chose it as an act of faith. This perception was reinforced by state policies across Europe, where the hijab became a site of legal contestation. France banned religious symbols in public schools in 2004 and face veils in 2010, claiming to preserve *laïcité* (secularism). In 2024, the French Senate voted to prohibit the hijab in all sports competitions.

Across Europe and parts of North America, Muslim women report discrimination in workplaces, education, and public life, simply for wearing a visible expression of their faith.

This verbal and physical war against the hijab has not only limited Muslim women's rights but also framed their religious practice as inherently problematic. The result has been a climate where the hijab is either stigmatized or, increasingly, misunderstood.

The Qur'anic Purpose

The hijab will always remain an explicit command from Allah (swt). Its essence lies not in politics or aesthetics, but in spirituality.

Allah (swt) says: **﴿وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَى جُيُوبِهِنَّ﴾** **“And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to display their adornment except what is apparent thereof, and to draw their veils over their chests”** [Surah An-Nūr, 24:31], and again: **﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لَأَزْوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلَابِيبِهِنَّ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَى أَنْ يُعْرَفْنَ فَلَا يُؤْذَيْنَ﴾** **“O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them. That is better so that they may be recognized and not harmed”** [Surah Al-Ahzāb, 33:59].

These verses emphasize modesty, chastity, and public dignity. The hijab serves as both protection and identification. It is a sign of faith and virtue, not fashion or rebellion.

When these verses were revealed, the women of Madinah responded immediately. 'Ā'ishah (ra) narrated: **﴿بَرَحَ اللَّهُ نِسَاءَ الْمُهَاجِرَاتِ الْأُولَى لَمَّا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ ﴿وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَى جُيُوبِهِنَّ﴾ شَقَقْنَ** **“May Allah have mercy on the first women of the Muhājirīn. When Allah revealed, ‘and to draw their veils over their bosoms,’ they tore their garments and covered themselves with them”** [Sahih al-Bukhari].

Their swift obedience reflected pure faith and submission. The hijab was not a cultural norm or a social trend; it was an act of love and servitude to Allah (swt).

The Rise of Modest Fashion

In recent years, global perceptions of the hijab have shifted dramatically. What was once vilified is now marketed.

According to the Global Islamic Economy Report (2023), Muslim consumer spending on clothing and footwear surpassed US \$313 billion, with the modest fashion industry valued at approximately US \$91 billion in 2024 and projected to reach US \$146 billion by 2033 (Business Research Insights, 2024).

Mainstream brands such as Nike, Adidas, and Uniqlo have introduced modest collections. Muslim brands like Haute Hijab, Veiled Collection, and Modanisa have gained global recognition.

This visibility has undoubtedly had some positive effects e.g. making modest clothing more accessible to young Muslims. However, with this visibility comes a subtle shift: from modesty as submission to modesty as self-expression.

The Shift from Worship to Display

In the rush to normalize and beautify the hijab, its spiritual core risks being overshadowed.

The hijab, which was revealed to reduce public attention, is increasingly styled to attract it. Fabrics become more revealing, outfits more tailored, and the line between modest and glamorous grows thinner.

The Prophet (saw) warned: «صِنْفَانِ مِنْ أَهْلِ النَّارِ لَمْ أَرَهُمَا قَوْمٌ مَعَهُمْ سِيَاطُ كَاذِبَاتِ الْبَقَرِ يَضْرِبُونَ بِهَا النَّاسَ» **“There are two categories of the people of Hell that I have not yet seen... women who are clothed yet naked, walking with an enticing gait, with their heads like the humps of camels; they will not enter Paradise nor even smell its fragrance”** [Sahih Muslim, 2128].

While this hadith is not a condemnation of beauty or care in appearance, it is a reminder that modesty must not be compromised for the sake of fashion or visibility. When hijab becomes a trend, its real purpose, humility before Allah (swt), can be lost.

The Commercialization of Worship

The commodification of modesty represents another challenge.

When modest fashion becomes an industry, spiritual practices risk being reduced to marketing strategies. Hijab is no longer introduced as a command of Allah (swt), but as an accessory, a lifestyle product, a brand identity.

Influencer culture amplifies this issue. Many creators, though well-intentioned, promote a performative version of modesty designed for social media consumption. As a result, hijab becomes content, curated for engagement rather than worn for devotion.

This calls for sincere self-reflection:

Are we wearing the hijab for Allah's (swt) pleasure or for societal approval?

Are we practicing modesty, or performing it?

Recentering the Hijab

The purpose of hijab is not to impress, but to express submission.

Allah (swt) reminds us: «وَلِبَاسُ التَّقْوَىٰ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ» **“And the clothing of righteousness, that is best”** [Surah Al-A'raf, 7:26].

True modesty is not measured by fabric or followers, but by taqwā. Hijab should cultivate humility, not vanity; spiritual beauty, not worldly admiration.

Muslim women are not forbidden from being fashionable or professional. Islam encourages cleanliness, dignity, and self-respect. But fashion should serve faith, not the other way around.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Sumaya Bint Khayyat**