

## The Truth about Hijab (Islamic cover/dress)

**Dr. Farid Younos, Ph.D**

Department of Anthropology  
California State University East Bay  
25800 Carlos Bee Blvd., Hayward, CA 94542  
USA

### Prelude

Praise the Lord of the universe who created men and women from a single soul and made no distinction among them but piety and knowledge.

The reason I conducted this research is because I have noticed many mistranslations in the Qur'an that I am concerned not only misleads Muslims, but also gives a prejudice viewpoint to non-Muslims about Islam. For example, on verse 34 chapter 3, "Women," in the Qur'an, we read, *"As those women on whose part you fear disloyalty and ill conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them lightly."* How can Allah (God), the Most Just say such a thing and spread violence at home? This translation is not only against civil manner of Islam, but also, against justice of the Qur'an and Islam. The real translation is not "to beat lightly" but "to split" because divorce in Islamic law is mandatory and marriage is not; rather, it is simply a social contract. The problem is the difference between translation and interpretation. The Qur'an cannot be translated literally. "Aya" which has been translated as "verse," means "sign" and "symbol." This means that the Qur'an is a book of symbols in the form of a language. Therefore, it cannot be translated but interpreted. The second problem in Islamic studies is the principle of research. Muslim scholars always refer to our old scholars and quote them instead of reopening the case and seeing for themselves. Scholars are human beings and they can make mistake. Research does not mean copying old scholars. Research means that a researcher examines the issue and finds something new or corrects the past mistake. That is why the word "search" has a prefix of "re" meaning re-search it .

In this essay, we try to answer three questions: Is Hijab (cover) for women only? Is "zinah" (ornament) for women only? Do women really need to cover their head according to Islam?

To make this study more understandable, we better define both terms, namely "hijab" (cover) and "zinah" (ornament) according to the Qur'an (the first source of Islamic law). To do so, we better quote a few verses from the Qur'an.

**Surat(chapter) Al-Isra' (The Night Journey), verse 45 we read:**

وَإِذَا قَرَأْتَ الْقُرْآنَ جَعَلْنَا بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ  
حِجَابًا مَسْتُورًا

Thus when you recite the Qur'an, O Prophet, We place between you and those who do not believe in the Hereafter a hidden veil protecting you.

**Surat(chapter) Al-A'raf (The Heights), verse 46:**

وَبَيْنَهُمَا حِجَابٌ ۖ وَعَلَى الْأَعْرَافِ رِجَالٌ يَعْرِفُونَ كُلًّا بِسِيمَاهُمْ ۖ وَتَادُوا أَصْحَابَ الْجَنَّةِ أَنْ سَلَامَ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ لَمْ يَدْخُلُوهَا وَهُمْ يَطْمَعُونَ

For there shall be between them a dividing wall as a veil. Yet awaiting upon the Heights of the wall will be men who can see and recognize each group, those of Paradise and those of Hell, by their respective marks:

Thus they shall out to the Companions of the Everlasting Garden of Paradise: Peace be upon you! For they themselves will have not yet entered it while ardently they desire to do so.

**Surat(chapter) Al-Ahzab (The Federated Clans), verse:**

وَإِذَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُنَّ مَتَاعًا فَاسْأَلُوهُنَّ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ

(Furthermore, with respect to his wives), whenever you ask them for any article, then ask them behind a screen. The above verse eludes to the relationship of the Prophet's wives to the people at that time. This verse is exclusively revealed to the Prophet's wives and not all Muslim women. Hence, since those noble women have passed away, this verse has a historical significance and not a ruling for contemporary Muslim women.

**Surat(chapter) Saad (discrete Arabic letter Saad), verse 32:**

فَقَالَ إِنِّي أَحْبَبْتُ حُبَّ الْخَيْرِ عَنْ ذِكْرِ رَبِّي حَتَّى تَوَارَتْ بِالْحِجَابِ

He then said: Indeed, I have loved these much-loved good steeds over the remembrance of my Lord until such time as they concealed in the seclusion of the stable.

**Surat(chapter) Fussilat(The Lucidity Distinct), verse 5:**

وَقَالُوا قُلُوبُنَا فِي أَكِنَّةٍ مِمَّا تَدْعُونَا إِلَيْهِ وَفِي آذَانِنَا وَقْرٌ وَمِنْ بَيْنِنَا وَبَيْنِكَ حِجَابٌ فَاعْمَلْ إِنَّا عَامِلُونَ

Thus they say: Our hearts are unsheathed against what you are calling us to. In our ears, moreover, there is an utter deafness to it. For between us and you, there is impenetrable veil. So do as you will.

**Surat(chapter) Al-Shura(Consultation), verse 51:**

وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَنْ يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ ۗ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ

Moreover, it is not for any human being that God should speak to him, except by Revelation, or from a veil, or by sending a messenger-angel that reveals by His permission-whatever He so wills. Indeed, He is ever-exalted, all-wise.

**Surat(chapter) Maryam (Mary), verse17:**

فَاتَّخَذَتْ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ حِجَابًا فَأَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهَا رُوحَنَا فَتَمَثَّلَ لَهَا بَشَرًا سَوِيًّا

and she placed veil between herself and them. Then we sent to her Our Spirit, the Angel Gabriel, who thus appeared to her as a flawless human being.

We can see that the word “hijab” (cover) has been used differently in the Qur'an. Since the word hijab means to hide, to buffer, to cover, veil, to conceal, and curtain, scholars have used this word for women dress. The first point we want to prove that, “hijab” has never been used for women dress in the Qur'an.

“Al-Zinah” (ornament) also means decoration, dressing up, beautification and clothing.

**Surat Al-Araf (The Heights), verse 31, we read:**

يَا بَنِي آدَمَ خُذُوا زِينَتَكُمْ عِنْدَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا وَلَا تُسْرِفُوا ۗ إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفِينَ

O children of Adam! Don your adorning apparel when setting out for every place of worship. Moreover, eat and drink freely. But do not be excessive. For indeed, He does not love those who are excessive.

In the above verse, we clearly see that adornment is not only for women. The verse addresses both men and women, and it says,” O children of Adam.” That means the whole of humanity. Quite often, people understood that adornment is only for women while that is not the case according to the Qur'an. The Qur'an addresses and invite both genders for dignity on **Surat Al-Nur ( the Light) verses 30 and 31** saying:

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ۗ ذَٰلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ

Say also to the believing men, O Prophet, that they should lower their gaze from women (that are forbidden to them) and safeguard the chastity of their secret parts. That is most pure for them. Indeed, God is all-aware of all that they do.

On verse 31, following verse 30, the Qur'an addresses women the same thing and says:

وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا ۖ وَلَا يَبْضُرْنَ بِخُمْرِهِنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ ۖ وَلَا يَبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَائِهِنَّ أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوْ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولِي الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَىٰ عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ ۖ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ مِنَ زِينَتِهِنَّ ۖ وَتَوْبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

There are some issues with the above verse in it that scholars of religion derived and designed their argument for the hijab. The verse addresses women exactly as it did to men. The verse says “And say to the believing women, as well, that they should lower their gaze from men that are forbidden to them and safeguard the chastity of their secret parts.” You see that God Almighty addresses women just like men and most importantly this verse does not order women to cover up their face as some Arab women do or Afghan women who wear a *burqa* do because it mentions that men and women should lower their gaze. This verse is a clear indication of the relationship of men and women in society. The verse continues saying, “and not exhibit their own physical adornment, except what must be necessarily appear thereof.” So what is “adornment”? Is the purpose hair, lips, or eyes? We do not have a *hadith* where the Prophet of Islam defined “adornment”. As we know, the face is naked. Hence, the eyes, the lips, the nose, and the cheeks cannot be “adornment”. Interestingly enough, from a psychological point of view, two parts of the women’s face provoke passion: the lips and the eyes, and God Almighty did not declare them as “adornment.” The Qur'an takes hypnotism into consideration and asks both men and women to lower their gaze. Whatever definition you may have about “adornment” is from the scholars of religion not from the Qur'an or the *Sunnah* (tradition) of the Prophet.

Just like hijab, “zinah” (adornment) also has many definitions in the Qur'an. It means to cover, beautification, decoration and so on. For example, in Surat Hud, verse 15, adornment has been defined as the material beauty of this world; in surat Yunus, verse 88, it has been defined as wealth; in surat Al-Kahf, verse 7, it has been defined as bounties of the world, in surat Nur, verse 30, it has been defined as “secret parts.” We do not have a clear definition for women of adornments according to the Qur'an and the hadith. The source of law in Islam is the Qur'an and next is the hadith. These two sources did not clarify precisely the definition of “adornment.” The only thing that the Qur'an is eluding is to ask people (men and women) to protect their adornment. Whether this adornment is different parts of the body or jewelry is not clear except the “private parts” for both men and women. Whatever we read, is coming from the scholar speculation and not from the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*.

Scholars have translated the word “بِخُمْرِهِنَّ” [bekhumrehen] as head cover. When we look at the word from a philological point of view, it means “whatever is covered and hidden” and not exactly covering the head. Also, الخِمْر [al-khimer] in Arabic means “to hide or to conceal”. Some scholars argue that covering the head is mentioned in the Qur'an and some scholars argue it is not. The matter of fact is that covering the head is not mentioned in the Qur'an at all if we look at the words carefully. The next word in the same verse is “جُيُوبِهِنَّ” [jeubehen] that comes after “bekhumrehen.” The Qur'an asks women to cover their bosoms with their garment collar. This is because before the advent of Islam, women sex workers were wearing open bosom dresses. The Qur'an orders women of faith to cover their bosom to be distinguished from those people and also to protect themselves from men who had wrong intentions. I am not discussing the issue of slaves which is mentioned in the Qur'an because in this century it is mostly irrelevant. Going back to the verse, it simply asks women to not disclose their beauties and conceal them with their collars. [jeubehen] also means pocket such as coat pocket. In the verse it is used in the plural form.

Today, there is no one kind of 'hijab' and scholars of religion have different views on covering the head. The Hanafi scholars do not see a problem if the hair is visible. This means, according to them, “hair” is not an adornment. In Iran, for those who do not work for the government, if their hair is a little visible, the authorities do not mind. In the beginning of the Islamic revolution, Iranian authorities were very harsh on this matter. They are taking it easy is now because they know it is a controversial issue. Hijab had different forms among Muslims. The Saudis cover their face and their hair is not visible at all. In Iran, if hair is visible, they do not mind and they call it “*Chador namaz*.” Indian and Pakistani Muslims put a cover on their chests and their hair is totally not covered. Afghans have big and large head cover but their hair is still visible. Afghan women wear an adornment on the top of their foreheads on the hair and it is still very much visible.

The verse talks about those men who are “*muharam*” in the household. Muharam, meaning that women can openly interact with these people at home, such as their husbands, their fathers, their father-in-laws, their sons, or sons of their husbands, their brothers, or sons of their brothers, or sons of their sisters or womenfolk who are believers. If you pay close attention to this verse, there are limited people who are “muharam” in the household. If we apply the verse out of context and specify a few men that are mentioned in the Qur'an as muhram, consequently other men within our household are not muharam such as the brother of the husband, uncles (both paternal and maternal), and the list goes on. While uncle is a muharam in the household, it was not mentioned in the Qur'an. Here we understand another issue relating the study of the Qur'an, that “ayah”, which has been translated as verse, actually means “sign” and “symbol.” Hence, the Qur'an cannot be translated but interpreted. Qur'an broadly eludes to many issues but it was the interpretation of the Prophet and later Ibn Abass (may Allah be pleased with him), his cousin, who turned out to become a prominent interpreter of the Qur'an and made the Qur'an more understandable for the layman. A clear example is the household of the Prophet. According to the above verse, Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) was not a muharam in the household but history tells us that he was raised in the Prophet's household and become a muharam as well.

At the end of this verse, we read about slaves that is not applicable to contemporary world and those servants who do not have sexual desires, and that is not applicable either. The Qur'an does not see certain things as dignified adornment for women. For instance, “or children who are not sexually discerning about the nakedness of women.” This nakedness is the private parts. Then, we read “Nor let them stamp their feet while walking to make visibly known what they conceal of their adornments.” This section of the verse eludes to those women who, at that time, wore anklets on their feet and used them to make noises. That noise deliberately attracted the attention of men for wrong intentions. The Qur'an forbid this and did not see that as a dignified adornment for women. Nowadays, no woman wears such an adornment unless they are on the stage performing as an art in the field of performing art such as dancing. Even those who wear such ornament; typically nowadays it does not make noise when walking. But if the heels of shoes make noises that is fine and the Qur'an does not elude to shoes. These shoes are fine as long as their forelegs are covered. What we mean here is that the purpose of the verse is not that high heels shoes are forbidden to wear. Although, the verse relating anklet does not have any real application in contemporary lifestyle, it does have a broad application in today's living that any ornaments, be it an anklet or other ornaments, should not attract jealousy, indication of extravagance, or attract thieves.

Jahad of Afghanistan against then, the Soviet Union, had different implications and today our people mostly imitate the Wahabis and the main justification they have is the following: “we did not know our Deen.” They do not want to confess to their imitation. Before the Islamic revolution of Iran, Afghan Shia did not have these type of hijabs. What we see among Afghans as hijabs were not common in Afghan culture previously. When the late Sardar Mohammad Daoud removed the chaadari and burqa (only in Kabul), Afghan women used to wear thin white head-covers called “*Gaach e safid*.” Afghans did not have the economic ability to wear silk head-covers. This tradition was rightfully imitated from Um Kalsum, the daughter of the Prophet (peace be upon him) that she was seen wearing thin silk head-cover. (hadith no. 5842 Sahih Bukhari). Nowadays, when one enters into a gathering, one notices different hijabs with different styles. It is important to clarify that in our research, there is no one Islamic principle according Islamic jurisprudence as is the case with prayer. *Ulema* (scholars of religion) have had their own interpretations from the verse and they interpret according to their own thinking and taste. What we relatively know about women dress from the Qur'an is coming from verse 59 of surat Al-Ahzab which reads:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِأَزْوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلَابِيبِهِنَّ ۚ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَنْ يُعْرَفْنَ فَلَا يُؤْذَيْنَ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا

O Prophet!

Say to your wives and to your daughters and to the women folks of the believers that they should draw part of their mantles over themselves in public. This makes it more likely that they will be recognized as virtuous women, so that they will not be harassed. And ever is God all-forgiving, mercy giving. The interpreters, in this verse, just like the word (khumerhen), translate “Jalaabebehen” as head-cover. While the correct translation of this word is either a coat or mantle. Women were ordered, in order to be recognized as people of faith or to be distinguished from infidels, or they should be safe from dead eye men to wear a coat when venturing outside home.

It is worth mentioning that the burqa, that is common among Afghan women, used to be a custom of the Abbasid empire where women wanted to go out for a short period of time and would put something on so as not to be recognized and to quickly return home. The fact is that those women who believe in Islam should cover their bodies up to the neck but how to cover is up to themselves. It is their personal choice. Dress in Islam is not like the era of Mao Tse-tung in China where the government made a uniform for people or an Islamic government that decides for women how to dress. As long as women dress decently-that is hijab. For example a blue-jean that is not too tight with a blouse with long sleeves and the chest is buttoned – that is a hijab. Today there are beautiful blouses with different colors that have buttons and long sleeves, jackets, coats and so on that all play the role of a hijab. Hijab is not uniform. Covering the head is a custom of pre-Islamic time that all women used to cover their heads. There is nothing sacred about it. It was a tradition with other religions in the region. Just like growing a beard used to be a tradition at the time of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). Today, if a person does not grow a beard; he has not committed a sin. Beard is not an empathized tradition (Sunnah Muakadda) of the Prophet. As we said, all women used to have head-covers. For instance, we see the image of Bibi Mariam (Mary), the mother of Issa (Jesus) peace be upon him, who lived more than six hundred years before Islam and she used a head-cover. The choice is with ladies if they want to cover their hair or not; there is no ruling in the Qur'an. In the collection of hadiths of the Prophet, there no clear indication of head cover. There is a difference of opinion about the hair visibility among both Sunni and Shia scholars.

“Zinah” (adornment) according to the Qur'an is for both men and women. The Qur'an forbids both men and women from extravagance and luxury. At the same time, the beauty of women has been specified up to their necks. The nakedness of men also is not only their private parts and we do not have a hadith that determined the nakedness parts of men either. Men also should not swim in front of those women who are not their muharam. It is true that all body of men is not nakedness. It is from the knees up and from their chest down. Today Muslim men get naked in front of women and wear shorts which is which is not Islamic and, in the eye of a believer, looks funny and ridiculous. Men also have hijab, and the best hijab for men is their modesty. Since “hijab” means covering, and clothing has been ordained for both men and women, but the clothing of piety is closer to Allah according to the Qur'an that says: “O children of Adam! We have, indeed, bestowed upon you a sense of want for clothing to cover your secret parts and garments for adornment. Yet the garment of fearing God that is the best of human adornment. This is the manifest signs of One God, that they may remember His mercy and be thankful.” (Al-A'raf, 26). In this verse we see that Allah(SWT) addresses both men and women together and speaks of two kinds of hijab. First, the hijab of the heart and second, the hijab of the body. This verse has been revealed for both genders, not only women, that says that fearing Allah and piety is closer to Him.

Today, we have women who wear “hijab” but they do not have the hijab of the heart. They gossip, they call people infidel on their TV talk show, they do not have humility and makes themselves appear that they are more pious than others. They are sarcastic and taunt others, they are tale-bearing and still cover their heads. We also have men who grow beards and wear Islamic attire but they neither have Islamic moral nor piety. Piety (taqwa) means to stay away from all sorts of sin. We learn from this verse that it is not clothing (which can be a source of luxury and pride) that makes a man but it is fearing God and having piety that grant a person the personality that a human being should really have. Piety is humility, guarding one's tongue, respect to the rights of others, respect to elders and masters (professors) and being compassionate to youngsters, not to insult others, not calling people infidel, not accusing people, not gossiping, not overspending, not breaking promises, delivering people “Amaana” (trust) on time, not lying and cheating, staying away from personality-cult, tribalism, materialism, foreign worshiping, and ethnocentrism. I encourage people on this level to become a pious person in the eye of Allah; not just having the clothing and covering only.

My conclusion is that the hijab is for both men and women. Those women who believe in Allah and the last day will have first hijab of the heart and cover their body properly- that includes their arms, chests and their legs. By the same token, pious men will have the hijab of the heart first and then cover their private parts and not walk naked. By not wearing proper attire, men and women both show either their weak belief in Islam or lack of Islamic education. Both can be considered a deficiency while they call themselves Muslims. Since men and women are both equal from a civic point of view, we all have to emerge as civilized men and women and not a puppet of the non-believers or an ignorant person of the era of Jahilia (ignorance). I will end this essay with a poem from S'adi, one of the most famous poets of Khorasan, and ask for forgiveness in this month of Ramadan.

تن آدمی شریف است بجان آدمیت  
 The body of human being is noble because of his humanity  
 نه همین لباس زیباست نشان آدمیت  
 It is not this beautiful clothing the sign of humanity  
 اگر آدمی بچشمست و دهان و گوش و بینی  
 If humanity is with eyes, mouth, ears and nose  
 چه میان نقش دیوار و میان آدمیت  
 What is the difference between the the motives of a wall and that of humanity  
 خور و خواب و خشم و شهوت شغیبت و جهل و ظلمت  
 Eating, sleeping, anger, passion is the tumult of ignorance and darkness  
 حیوان خبر ندارد ز جهان آدمیت  
 The animal is not aware of the world of humanity  
 به حقیقت آدمی باش و گر نه مرغ باشد  
 In reality be a human being, otherwise it is a parrot  
 که همین سخن گوید بزبان آدمیت  
 That speaks in the tongue of humanity  
 مگر آدمی نبودى که اسیر دیو ماندی  
 Were you not a human being that become captive of the devil  
 که فرشته ره ندارد بمکان آدمیت  
 That the angel does not have any path to the place of humanity  
 اگر این درنده خوئی ز طبیعتت بمیرد  
 I this brutality dies out from your nature  
 همه عمر زنده باشی بروان آدمیت  
 All your life will be living with the spirit of humanity  
 رسد آدمی به جایی که بجز خدا نبیند  
 Humanity will reach that high, that will not see but God  
 بنگر که تا چه حدست مکان آدمیت  
 Look that what is the limit of the place of humanity  
 طیران مرغ دیدی تو ز پایبند شهوت  
 You saw the flying of the parrot from the captivity of lust and passion  
 بدر آی تا به بینی طیران آدمیت  
 Come out to see the flying of humanity  
 نه بیان فضل کردم که نصیحت تو گفتم  
 I did not utter excellence that to admonish you  
 هم از آدمی شنیدم بیان آدمیت  
 I, also heard from a human being the expression of humanity