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## Divisive politics: Time to lift the dark veil

May 22, 2020, 11:52 AM IST | Dr Muneer in The Medici Way | India | TOI



The future custodian of the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina, who is supposed to be the figurehead of Islam even though he is not the Imam (spiritual leader), made a categorical statement some time back that was symbolically the harbinger of progress in Islamic society, much needed for years now! The crown prince of Saudi Arabia, who will take over the reins in the near future, has been “walking the talk” subsequently in ushering in some radical and much-needed changes to a society that stopped being progressive since the 12th Century.

Till about the end of the 11th Century, Islam had been the citadel of progress in the world. The best of intellectual exploration and scientific discovery on earth happened in Islamic society. Examples galore. More than two-thirds of the stars in the sky have Arabic names. We all use Arabic numerals. And there is more: Algebra, algorithm, azimuth, nadir, alchemy, alcohol, elixir, and so on. It all changed when an influential Muslim theologian, Hamid Al Ghazali proclaimed all science as evil, and the progress just got frozen.

Islam came to India around 620 AD during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), with the arrival of Malik Deenar, one of the first known Muslims to visit South Asia to spread the religion. Under the Chera Dynasty, he was instrumental in building the first mosque in India in 629 AD at Kodungallur, Kerala. Because of the spices trade with the Arabs, many Keralites, including my forefathers who were Brahmins, got converted to Islam.

Until the late 1970s, it was rare to find women in India wearing hijab (or abaya or burkha or purdah as it is alternatively called). A few elderly ladies wore it then, especially after performing the haj, probably mistaking the Saudi traditional attire as Islamic.

Circa 2000, a sea change had taken place: Weddings and family functions were swamped with penguins – the black-hijab clad women – in the hot sultry weather of Kerala. And they were everywhere: bus stops, malls, theatres, trains, and so on. What had changed in the modern-day? Did more women become Islamic now than before, or have they started sporting a “holier-than-thou” attitude, somewhat akin to the white Trishul symbol the Iyengars display on their foreheads?

The black abaya as a dress is most unsuitable for the tropical weather but those who tried to point this out were brandished as “kaafirs” (non-believers) by even the “educated” Muslims. With the Saudi crown prince making this statement and enacting changes, those folks now stand vindicated: “Sharia laws stipulate that women wear decent, respectful clothing like men. This does not particularly specify a black abaya or a black headcover. The decision is entirely left to them.” In a country long known for its stringent policies on the separation of men and women, and the dress code, this was transformational. While the

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### AUTHOR



**Dr Muneer**

Muneer is a global expert columnist, writing on topical issues looked through management frameworks. He wears multiple hats including that of a social evang...

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dissidents may take the swords out, the direction is very clear: Islam has no compulsions on either purdah or Prada as long as the attire covers a woman appropriately, and not provocatively.

The abaya is a traditional Arabic attire that protects the body, face and hair from the dry heat and wind that carries micro silica particles of the sand in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula that is somewhat similar to Rajasthan, where women cover their body, face and head, despite not being Muslims. Over a period of time, first with the Haj pilgrims and then with the increasing gulf employment, Indian Muslims construed it as traditional Islamic wear. For many this is also very convenient as they don't have to do elaborate make-up and dressing when going out. (Secretly many men like this quick wardrobe function).

The Quran does not specify anywhere that women should wear a hijab. It only states that women believers should draw down their shawls over them (33:59). The Arabic word used here is the plural of "Jilbaab", which means a long shawl that covers a woman properly. Essentially, it means a woman shall cover herself properly so that her attractive parts are not displayed to strangers. According to scholars, women should not wear tight fitted or thin clothes that bring attention to them in an inappropriate manner. A fashionable abaya that is very tight and leaves nothing much to the imagination is not appropriate although many young women in the Gulf wear that.

Now, before the feminists take their ire on Islam for being discriminatory, let me tell you the Quran speaks about "hijab" for men much earlier. Believing-men should lower their gaze and be modest is what it prescribes - The Quran cautions men before it advises women.

The idea of appropriateness is relative and will vary in different cultures. For example, in nude society appropriateness may be a bikini. Even feminists agree that random men need not get attracted to them. The traditional "Salwar Kameez" is quite an appropriate dress for India and the mainstream.

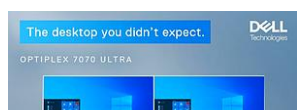
One of the major reasons for the hate against Muslims in some parts of India is based on ignorance, and this is partly the creation of alien culture and misunderstanding, albeit more similarities than differences between Hindus and Muslims. The current pandemic shows us that no one has an issue on covering faces with masks. So why else would a veil cause so much anguish?

While dressing is a personal choice, and nothing religious about it, by shedding the Arabic culture of hijab, and embracing the local tradition, Muslim women in India can literally lift the dark veil over Islam itself and be part of the mainstream. And this could further reduce the gaping division between them and others, who mostly are ignorant of Islamic customs.

One of the most often-used words in the Quran is "think" and this can only be practised when Muslims get educated more and more in science, maths and literature. For, they misconstrued one verse in the Quran that asks Muslims to differentiate from the rest: The verse meant to differentiate by way of good deeds but the mostly uneducated who didn't apply "think" chose the easier and tangible sartorial and facial-hair route! The highly literate Kerala society has demonstrated to the world how very similar Keralites have been, with the floods and the current pandemic.

DISCLAIMER : Views expressed above are the author's own.

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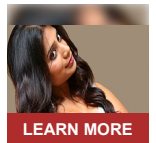
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Dr Muneer, nice one and appropriate for the times. The black veil is relatively recent to me, just about 20 years. it has not made anyone a better Mu...



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Whether to wear Abaya or not is a personal choice. What if that\'s my identity?...these are the frequently used comeback by my abaya clad cousins.To a ...



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