

THE VEIL IN THE ISLAM - WHAT THE QUR'AN SAYS

English translation of the text from the site <http://ostervald.free.fr/muslim/levoile.htm>

After studying at Azhar University in Cairo, Mahmoud Azab obtained in France a PhD in Semitic studies (Sorbonne 1978). He has been Professor of Semitic languages at Al Azhar University in Cairo. He has been cooperating Professor in charge of the bilingual teachings at several African universities (Niger, Chad). He has also been delegate from Al Azhar University at the international conferences about the intercultural dialogue. He has been appointed Associate Professor of classic Arabic (language and literature) in 1996 in Paris at the National Institute of Eastern Languages and Civilizations, where he is regular Professor of Islamology since 2002.

In France and elsewhere, some Muslims practices seem questionable or fastidious. Are these practices "really" the Islam? From everywhere superficial or even wrong answers come. The stances multiply, ignorance often dwells in the spirit.

We thought it was important to question an Islam specialist, Professor Mahmoud Azab so that he could explain us the Islam and give us historical and academic indications about the religion founder text. He has explained us the religious doctrine and its evolution, quite different from the popular practices of the Islam. We have inaugurated with him a series of meeting about some topics regarding the Western societies and the Muslim communities, especially in France. The first meeting was about the stoning. Today, we will talk of the issue of the "veil" of the women.

Arthur Nourel: Dear Professor, before tackling directly the problem of the veil of the Islamic women, is there a global context of women status you would like to present to accompany our readers in the historical and textual journey we are proposing to them?

Professor Mahmoud Azab: To cover the issue of the veil in the Islam, one needs first to know the condition of Arab women in the pre-Islamic societies and to compare it with women's condition in the Jewish-Christian Biblical society, as well as in the Greek and Egyptian culture. By examining history and sociologic context one can explain and understand the position of the Qur'an and of the Islam, at that time, for what concerns women.

Women in Greek society, for example, were not considered an "object of desire". The desire relationship was celebrated among men. Among the Greek, women had a very lower statute than men. Greek philosophers were all men.

Let's examine women's condition in the society of the pre-Islamic Arab peninsula, in a historical time much far from the appearance of the Islam. We can see women had globally a very strong position; a freedom and more important rights than those of men. A woman could repudiate her husband. The contrary was forbidden. Remember Bilqis the Queen of Sabah. The Old Testament and the Qur'an (Surat The Ant) put her in a dominant position: beautiful, strong and clever. Pay attention, this refers to a very far time in history, before the appearance of the Islam!

AN: Was this women's "freedom" applicable to all fields, or had it some restrictions?

MA: Another tradition has been reported by the pre-Islamic time historians and it states women's freedom. When a man, coming back home, found the door of the tend folded outward (thus opposite to the normal folding direction), it meant he was prevented from entering, temporarily or definitely. At that time, a woman had the right to sleep with all the men she wanted before wedding, When she got pregnant and before the child birth, she chose, among all her lovers, the one who would have acquired the child's fatherhood, even if conceived with another one. Of course she chose the strongest, the richest, the smarter, etc...

AN: Are these theoretical and a posteriori constructions to justify the restricted rules the Islam applies to women?

MA: No. Many scientists, sociologists and historians look at the Qur'an as at a document reporting a time and testifying the daily life, instead of a religious book. They notice themselves, rightly, that the Muslim text often insists on some prohibitions. When the text says "do not", it means that these practices, by this time forbidden, were widespread before the Islam appearance. At that time, for example, it was a tradition that men and women made the pilgrimage naked around the Kaaba. For this reason the Islam forbids to be naked during prayer and pilgrimage. As always, to understand a rule it is important to get into the economic, spiritual and social-cultural context of the formation of this new community naming itself "Muslim".

AN: This is how you explain the prohibition, by the Islam, to bury the (alive) daughters at their birth?

MA: Yes. It was a widespread habit, before the Islam appearance, that the text forbids in a formal and definite way. I add that, if the punishment accompanying the prohibition is strong, it means that the act, by this time prohibited, was very widespread.

AN: You told us women had more rights than men, and were freer and more independent than them, but the daughters were buried alive at birth, considered useless. Isn't it a contradiction?

MA: What I was telling you about the great women's freedom concerns a time very earlier than the Islam appearance. Men, deprived of their rights, began to claim and to invert the history course, changing gradually the conditions. Contemporary and consequently, women's conditions degenerate and men prevailed over in so complete a way, that it seemed a revenge. It is a manifestation of dialogue of history resembling the balance movement. The more we get closer to the Islam appearance, the less women's statute is enviable.

AN: At the eve of the Islam appearance, women's statute had therefore seriously decayed compared to what it was some centuries before. How does this degradation manifest?

MA: In many ways. We have already talked about the burial of the female new born. The repudiation of a woman by his husband, left her without rights and helpless. There was another evident consequence of the female condition deterioration. When you look at the pre-Islamic society, but at a time close to the Islam appearance, that is when women were dominated by men, you realize men got married at their own conditions, and at the same time with as many women as they wanted, and that often these ones depended on them to survive; in the same way, men could repudiate them when they wanted, without any vital legal obligation towards them. Quite quickly these rejected women, who depended on the bridegrooms to live, found themselves in the complete misery. When they did not become slaves in the exact meaning of the word, they gave themselves up to prostitution, a terrible form of slavery. To attract attention they had often naked bosom, like the holy prostitutes known in Mesopotamia and India, regions with which the Arab peninsula had trades and cultural and intense human exchanges.

AN: Is it therefore to the "misery" and "naked" women the Qur'an asks to wear the veil?

MA: At that time the veil coincided with the Islam as the symbol of a regained dignity. Religion asks to the converting women to wear the veil to be distinguished from the slaves; it is a way to say to everyone of them: "we needn't anymore to sell ourselves (to be slaves); the new religion gives us a statute, and from now on we have rights. Our husbands cannot repudiate us anymore wrongly or rightly, and if a divorce sentence is pronounced, we keep means of subsistence".

Thus the veil is important only in relation to the social-cultural context where it appeared. It is not therefore a fundamental principle of Islam.

AN: You said us that in the first days of the Islam, the veil was advised as a sign of women "liberation" that could be shown. Are there other elements of the holy text confirming this will of Islam to set women free making them equal to men?

MA: In the other two revealed monotheist religions, Judaism and Christianity, the woman is considered the only one guilty for the expulsion from Heaven. In the Old Testament Eve is responsible for the Sin. The snake seduced Eve who seduced the man. That's why, in the Genesis, God punished both of them, condemning the snake to slither and to eat the ground and the woman to deliver with pain and to be "submitted" to man.

In the Qur'an, God addresses Himself to "the two" protagonists of Heaven (Adam and Eve). He uses the grammar form for duality. The text puts man and woman in a complete equality of responsibility, but here the Qur'anic interpretations, made often by men, will be manipulated, and you will hear that it was Eve to incite Adam to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree. The Qur'an on the contrary says: "Satan seduced both of them". Yes, I insists on this biblical and Qur'anic story, to say that it had influenced along the centuries people's consciences and imaginations, and not to judge the holy texts. I return to the Bible simply to tell the evolution of the common elements of the monotheist Semitic cultures.

AN: How has the veil been evoked in the Qur'an text?

MA: The word "veil" in French (and in English) is what you wear over your head; it is used as the translation of the Arabic word "hijab". From a linguistic point of view this translation is a sliding of the meaning. The issue of the hijab is considered 8 times in the Qur'an, and not once, to designate the clothe the woman should cover her head with.

AN: Could you give us the references of the 8 mentioned Surats?

MA: In the Surat 7, verse 44 the text evoking the Hereafter says: "A veil is often placed between Paradise and Hell (...)". Here the Arabic word hijab has clearly the meaning of a tend of separation, as in the other 7 Surats, even if the context is different.

The Surat 17, verse 47 considers the "virtual" protection God will excite for His prophets when they will read the Qur'an: "When you recite the Qur'an, We place between you and those, who deny the life to come, a (thick) veil".

In the Surat 19, verse 17 the word veil is used to figure the geographic distance that is put willingly between oneself and the others: "And you should recount in the Book (the Qur'an) the story of Mary: how she left her people and betook herself to a solitary place to the east. And she took a veil to hide from them".

In the Surat 33, verse 53, the text indicates, to those who are invited to enter the Prophet's house, and in case to have lunch, the conduct they should have. The Surat recommends them not to linger after having eaten and to retire without undertaking familiar conversations after the meal. And it adds: "If you ask his wives for anything, speak to them from behind a veil. This is more chaste for your hearts and their hearts". In this case also, the word hijab means a curtain and not a veil one should put over women's heads. Addressing to the Prophet's wives only they need to be behind a veil.

The very poetic Surat 38, verse 31, talks of the hijab with the meaning of "dusk": "When, one evening, his prancing steeds were ranged before him, he said: 'My love for good things has distracted me from the remembrance of my Lord; for now the sun has vanished behind the veil of darkness. Bring me back my chargers'. And with this he fell hacking their legs and necks".

Surat 41, verses 3 and 4, talks of those deviating from the Prophet's call: "They say: 'Our hearts are like inside a thick veil hiding us against the faith to which you call us. Our ears are stopped, and a thick veil stands between us. Do as you think fit, and so will we'". We can see here how the veil (hijab) could be positive (to protect the believers at risk of surrendering to the Prophet's wives charm) or negative (as it prevents someone to listen to the call to the new faith).

Surat 42, verse 50, considers the word God transmits to man: "It is not vouchsafed to any mortal that God should speak to him except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or through a messenger sent and authorized by Him to make known His will. Exalted is He, and wise".

In the Surat 83, verses 15-16-17, finally, the Text warns the disbelievers against their doom: "No! On that day a barrier shall be set between them and their Lord. They shall burn in Hell, and shall be told: 'This is the scourge that you denied'". (Editor's Note: The translation uses the word "barrier" to return the Arabic word "lamahgouboun" built from hijab).

AN: So you tell us that Muslims, using the word "hijab" to mean the veil covering women's heads, do a nonsense?

MA: Yes. They commit a contradiction in linguistic terms towards the Qur'anic vocabulary. And Muslim women, saying the hijab is mentioned in the Qur'an, are wrong about the word meaning. They should understand the meaning given to the word.

AN: Beyond this word nonsense, those inciting women to veil themselves don't they commit another nonsense?

MA: To the linguistic nonsense we need to add another basic nonsense.

The basic nonsense is the following: the veil had to indicate the woman freed from slavery as she had joined the new religion. Since then the community would have taken care of those who couldn't have provided for themselves. At that time it was a "liberation". I insist on the words "at that time", because today, in many cases, the veil appears as a woman's subjection. This way therefore it produces the opposite effect it had to obtain. What should we favour then? The veil at all costs or its symbolic importance? Should we desire the form more than the freedom?

Indeed we are questioning about the text historicity. The revelation has accomplished along 23 years of prophetic life. During this time, the Prophet, let it be clearly understood, summoned up his reason to adjust to reality the revelation he didn't question!

AN: Does the Qur'an advise all women to cover head and shoulders? And in what vocabulary does it do it?

MA: The Qur'an does not deal with women's clothes, but with the wide context of social life, of education, and of the family. It incites them to "chasteness".

AN: You say "chasteness", and this word, often used on the other way by women wearing the veil, has today a clear sexual connotation. Isn't it a bad English translation for the meaning of the word "ihticham"? Shouldn't we better talk of "decency" instead of chasteness?

MA: You are probably right. The Qur'an aims first of all at protecting society, and in this reading it invites to decency more than to chasteness with its sexual connotation, at least when it deals with clothes. However, the order aiming at the decency in clothes concerns women only! This is a big mistake made by the interpreters who have not studied enough. Every time the Qur'an talks about clothes, it speaks to both genders.

AN: For example?

MA: In the Surat 24, verses 30 and 31: "Enjoin believing men to turn their eyes away from temptation and to restrain their carnal desires. They will make their lives purer. God has knowledge of all their actions. Enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity; not to display their adornments; to draw their 'veils' over 'their bosom' and not to display their finery except to their husband, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their step-sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons..." Today the text reading should enlighten us about an essential point: the link between the objective and the mean, or yet learning to distinguish what is steady from what is variable, being the objective steady and the mean to reach it variable. In the case of Surat 24, the purpose was men and women

to be free and chaste. This is the steady part of the message, its spiritual intention. The mean is therefore secondary.

AN: Which Arabic word does the Qur'an indicate what women should put over their chests with?

MA: The Surat "Al Nour" (The Light) we have mentioned, proposes us the word "Khimar". "Wa liyadrabna bi khumurihenna ala jouyoubihenna". To wonder what the "Khumurs" are opens itself an important discussion: the best acknowledged translation of the word indicates it is a large robe. The word "jouyoub" means "pockets" in modern Arabic, but a pre-Islamic poet, talking about the beauty of a beautiful woman, would cite her "jouyoub", and we realize that the woman left naked, that is visible, her bosom. Therefore the holy text invites women not to display their chest and to put their large robes over their bosom, to unveil themselves only before their close ones, not to have a provocative behaviour. All things considered, it is not such a trivial consideration. This invitation to moderation is found in the three monotheist religions. In the Islam this invitation is addressed to women as well as to men.

AN: Should one understand from your point that the "khimar" is a robe over the shoulder rather than a veil starting from the head, covering it as well as the bosom?

MA: Absolutely. The old commentators, like Al Tabari for example, were perhaps closer to the exact meaning of the text, as they knew precisely what the text alluded to, and which was the situation preliminary to the text that the holy text itself was therefore to change. As before the Islam appearance, some women had the bosoms naked as we have already explained; thus the text comes to correct the effects of a situation detrimental to women's rights. Therefore, the essential step of the text, the main purpose is not to veil or not women's head or bosom, but to give them freedom and protection in relation to the context they were in. And if the context they are today in considers the veil as a submission, then they can display the head uncovered to declare their freedom gained in the Islam!

The Qur'an envisages almost a "technical" solution to reach the objective (the steady one). The veil is the technical solution to women's submission at that time. Men and women's freedom and their equality are therefore the steady one. It is thus necessary to consider the steady one only. The veil is the mean. It is not the purpose. It is variable. This is what we, old commentators, say, when we explain that the Qur'an should be understood in relation to what preceded it and its context. Women's statute quite poor at a time close to the Islam appearance, and that the Islam comes to ameliorate. If women's situation got worse again, today for example, the Qur'an spirit should prevail upon the interpretation. This spirit is to set the oppressed free. This is the steady part of the message. The mean used is variable.

AN: Whom are the injunctions about the clothes addressed to, and which are the surroundings?

MA: In the Surat 33, verse 59, the Qur'an lists us precisely what one needs to do and whom it addresses to:

"Prophet, enjoy your wives, your daughters, and the wives of true believers to draw their 'veils' (we should understand here the word as a clothe) close round them. That is more proper, so that they may be recognized and not be molested. God is ever forgiving and merciful".

We should immediately explain that the word translated as "veil" in many good quality translations, is truly in Arabic "jalbibihenna", that is the plural feminine possessive of djellaba (galabeyya in Egyptian). It is clear that it does not talk about a veil over the head, but about a clothe to be covered with. "To draw their veils close round them" does not indicate at all that the head should be covered. The head covering is more related to comfort habits than to whatever religious symbol.

It is enough to see an Eastern or Western Muslim woman (or a man!), in the fields, in the desert or at the sea, to realize they better work with tied hair and with the head protected from the sun. Moreover, the Qur'an does not invite to "hide" by covering oneself, but "to show oneself as a free being to the others".

The purpose of this Surat is not to "disguise" the eventual feminine attractiveness, but to enable women, in the ancient times objects of lust that reduced their freedom, to claim they are now free. This is what we should remember. I repeat it: if today the veil indicates women's submission, then it is urgent that women get rid of it. To answer this question, let's ask ourselves if Islam invites to submission. And to whom? To man or to God? In this context the "covering" is directed to all women, Prophet's brides and daughters, believers' brides. This means that Islam liberates all women embracing it.

AN: How can we distinguish in the text what is referred to the Prophet's brides from what is directed to all believing women?

MA: Surat 33, verses 32 and 33: "Wives of the Prophet, you are not like other women. If you fear God, do not be too complaisant in your speech, lest the lecherous-hearted should lust after you. Show discretion in what you say. Stay in your homes and do not display your finery as women used to do in the days of ignorance (Jahiliyya)". In Arabic it is: Yanissa'a al Nabi lastunna ka'ahad minal nisa. Tabari explains us that the meaning of the text is that women should nor resemble the slaves, by going out their homes. Freedom brought to women whose condition was bad, here the deep and lost-today meaning of the text.

AN: Can we apply what concerns the Prophet's brides, presented as a kind of model for women, to all Muslim women worried to aim at perfection?

MA: My answer must be in two times. To talk about the two genders believers the Qur'an uses the word "mou'menina" and "mou'menati": "qul lelmou' menina (...) wa qul lelmou'menati". "Say to the men believing...and the women believing". When it talks about the Prophet's wives it uses the word brides. Furthermore Surat 33 verse 32 explains well that "Prophet's brides are not comparable to any other woman". The Qur'an does not ask women of the community to resemble the Prophet's brides. However, it is not formally forbidden that Muslim women could look among the Prophet's brides for a model to follow. Indeed it is important that they followed the example of spirituality and freedom of the Prophet's brides, and not that they tried to imitate them without understanding the reason for their acts. Freedom research and achievement have to prevail.

We should pay attention to the idea of some women to apply to themselves what is required to the Prophet's wives only. For example it is forbidden to them to rest after the Prophet's death. Why should a Muslim widow think it is wholesome for Muslim widows not to rest, by generalizing the conditions imposed to the Prophet's brides only?

AN: Why do Muslim women in Muslim countries veil themselves?

MA: It is necessary to search at more levels: to delve into history, into people's traditions and cultures. When we are in a strictly religious field, at the level of the "sacred", when we search for the believers duties, for what is allowed and what is not, for punishment, we need absolutely to search for the "text spirit", that is its steady part.

Men look elsewhere for a better shelter than their immediate natural environment that is economic misery and social and cultural indigence.

As far as the veil is concerned, there is today the tendency to mix everything. It is a behaviour often due to ignorance and to the reading of the text at one level only, that is without the historical deepening. The Islam message is out of the time. As it is, on the other hand, that of the other two monotheist religions. However, it becomes understandable if we go back to the context when the Qur'an has been issued. This is exactly what the today Muslims don't do (don't do anymore). This way some fool, some fundamentalists, pushed by reasons that have nothing to do with faith,

present to the ignorant and illiterate masses a limited and oriented reading of the text. To have the courage to discuss it, one should have the culture of discussion and debate. You learn it in the families and at schools, but it is not the case of the majority of Muslim (and not) countries today. Thus women veil themselves! Men look for a shelter in a better place than their natural surrounding habitat, that of misery and social and cultural misery. Progressively this place has turned into a haggled "afterwards". As life on earth is difficult and miserable they have reserved for themselves a better afterwards. And they have "pawned" to God for their good conduct on earth, applying what is presented as Muslim faith by the manipulators and the hypocrite, diverted from its initial meaning and "sold" today with the fundamentalism reading only, that veils women and cries its hatred against "the West" in particular, and against "the others" in general. The class struggle, developing inside one own country or inside one own society, has become a religion struggle inside a globalized world. This is expressed, among the others, by the verse of an Islam strayed from its meaning under the influence of rich ignorant oil traders from the Muslim world and elsewhere.

AN: What do you say to women and young Muslim women veiling in France?

MA: First of all if they want to call themselves Muslim I ask them to know well the religion. That is the texts and its history. Knowing before choosing. Knowing and discussing. And choosing afterwards in the adulthood and with the knowledge. Then I invite them to talk freely.

Freedom is not to veil if they want to. It means to assert themselves as free in a society opening to them the way of freedom. They are French. They belong therefore to French society. If the veil is an obstacle to their freedom, that is to their full immersion in their society, they need to reflect and try to reach the values of the French society which is theirs. Young Muslim women have to search for and talk of the Qur'anic values addressing to whole humanity. They should not focus on the veil or on other similar objects, depending more on a variable context, than on a steady vision of the world.

N.B. For the Qur'an quotations it has been used "The Qur'an. The revised translation by N.J. Dawood", Penguin Classics. From the original French Denise Masson, Essai

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