

## OPINION

### **Let's Think Again About The Burqa**

The Quran does prescribe purdah. That doesn't mean women should obey it. >>

#### [Taslima Nasreen](#)

My mother used purdah. She wore a burqa with a net cover in front of the face. It reminded me of the meatsafes in my grandmother's house. One had a net door made of cloth, the other of metal. But the objective was the same: keeping the meat safe. My mother was put under a burqa by her conservative family. They told her that wearing a burqa would mean obeying Allah. And if you obey Allah, He would be happy with you and not let you burn in hellfire. My mother was afraid of Allah and also of her own father. He would threaten her with grave consequences if she didn't wear the burqa.

all dark inside? Don't you feel breathless? Don't you feel angry? Don't you ever feel like throwing it off? My mother kept mum. She couldn't do anything about it. But I did. When I was sixteen, I was presented a burqa by one of my relatives. I threw it away.

The custom of purdah is not new. It dates back to 300 BC. The women of aristocratic Assyrian families used purdah. Ordinary women and prostitutes were not allowed purdah. In the middle ages, even Anglo-Saxon women used to cover their hair and chin and hide their faces behind a cloth or similar object. This purdah system was obviously not religious. The religious purdah is used by Catholic nuns and Mormons, though for the latter only during religious ceremonies and rituals. For Muslim women, however, such religious purdah is not limited to specific rituals but

mandatory for their daily life outside the purview of religion.

A couple of months ago, at the height of the purdah controversy, Shabana Azmi asserted that the Quran doesn't say anything about wearing the burqa. She's mistaken. This is what the Quran says:

"Tell the faithful women that they must keep their gaze focused below/on the ground and cover their sexual organs. They must not put their beauty and their jewellery on display. They must hide their breasts behind a purdah. They must not exhibit their beauty to anybody except their husbands, brothers, nephews, womenfolk, servants, eunuch employees and children. They must not move their legs briskly while walking because then much of their bodies can get exposed." (Sura Al Noor 24:31)

"Oh nabi, please tell your wives and daughters and faithful women to wear a covering dress on their bodies. That would be good. Then nobody can recognise them and harrass them. Allah is merciful and kind." (Sura Al Hijaab 33: 59)

Even the Hadis --a collection of the words of Prophet Mohammed, his opinion on various subjects and also about his work, written by those close to him-- talks extensively of the purdah for women. Women must cover their whole body before going out, they should not go before unknown men, they should not go to the mosque to read the namaaz, they should not go for any funeral.

There are many views on why and how the Islamic purdah started. One view has it that Prophet Mohammed became very poor after spending all the wealth of his first wife. At that time, in Arabia, the poor had to go to the open desert and plains for relieving themselves and even their sexual needs.

The Prophet's wives too had to do the same. He had told his wives that "I give you permission to go out and carry out your natural work". (Bukhari Hadis first volume book 4 No. 149). And this is what his wives started doing accordingly. One day, Prophet Mohammed's disciple Uman complained to him that these women were very uncomfortable because they were instantly recognisable while relieving themselves. Umar proposed a cover but Prophet Mohammed ignored it. Then the Prophet asked Allah for advice and he laid down the Ayat (33:59) (Bukhari Hadis Book 026 No. 5397).

This is the history of the purdah, according to the Hadis. But the question is: since Arab men too relieved themselves in the open, why didn't Allah start the purdah for men? Clearly, Allah doesn't treat men and women as equals, else there would be purdah for both! Men are higher than women. So women have to be made walking prisons and men can remain free birds.

Another view is that the purdah was introduced to separate women from servants. This originates from stories in the Hadis. One story in the Bukhari Hadis goes thus: After winning the Khyber War, Prophet Mohammed took over all the properties of the enemy, including their women. One of these women was called Safia. One of the Prophet's disciples sought to know her status. He replied: "If tomorrow you see that Safia is going around covered, under purdah, then she is going to be a wife. If you see her uncovered, that means I've decided to make her my servant."

The third view comes from this story. Prophet Mohammed's wife Ayesha was very beautiful. His friends were often found staring at her with fascination. This clearly upset the Prophet. So the Quran has an Ayat that says, "Oh friends of the prophet or holy men, never go to your friend's house

without an invitation. And if you do go, don't go and ask anything of their wives". It is to resist the greedy eyes of friends, disciples or male guests that the purdah system came into being. First it was applicable to only the wives of the holy men, and later it was extended to all Muslim women. Purdah means covering the entire body except for the eyes, wrist and feet. Nowadays, some women practise the purdah by only covering their hair. That is not what is written in the Hadis Quran. Frankly, covering just the hair is not Islamic purdah in the strict sense.

In the early Islamic period, Prophet Mohammed started the practice of covering the feet of women. Within 100 years of his death, purdah spread across the entire Middle East. Women were covered by an extra layer of clothing. They were forbidden to go out of the house, or in front of unknown men. Their lives were hemmed into a tight regime: stay at home, cook, clean the house, bear children and bring them up. In this way, one section of the people was separated by purdah, quarantined and covered.

Why are women covered? Because they are sex objects. Because when men see them, they are roused. Why should women have to be penalised for men's sexual problems? Even women have sexual urges. But men are not covered for that. In no religion formulated by men are women considered to have a separate existence, or as human beings having desires and opinions separate from men's. The purdah rules humiliate not only women but men too. If women walk about without purdah, it's as if men will look at them with lustful eyes, or pounce on them, or rape them. Do they lose all their senses when they see any woman without burqa?

My question to Shabana and her supporters, who argue that

the Quran says nothing about purdah is: If the Quran advises women to use purdah, should they do so? My answer is, No. Irrespective of which book says it, which person advises, whoever commands, women should not have purdah. No veil, no chador, no hijab, no burqa, no headscarf. Women should not use any of these things because all these are instruments of disrespect. These are symbols of women's oppression. Through them, women are told that they are but the property of men, objects for their use. These coverings are used to keep women passive and submissive. Women are told to wear them so that they cannot exist with their self-respect, honour, confidence, separate identity, own opinion and ideals intact. So that they cannot stand on their own two feet and live with their head held high and their spine strong and erect.

Some 1,500 years ago, it was decided for an individual's personal reasons that women should have purdah and since then millions of Muslim women all over the world have had to suffer it. So many old customs have died a natural death, but not purdah. Instead, of late, there has been a mad craze to revive it. Covering a woman's head means covering her brain and ensuring that it doesn't work. If women's brains worked properly, they'd have long ago thrown off these veils and burqas imposed on them by a religious and patriarchal regime.

What should women do? They should protest against this discrimination. They should proclaim a war against the wrongs and ill-treatment meted out to them for hundreds of years. They should snatch from the men their freedom and their rights. They should throw away this apparel of discrimination and burn their burqas.