Behind the Veil

When it comes to understanding Islam, few issues are as controversial or as difficult for the non-Muslim to understand as the role of women. In the U.S., the common image is that of the meek Muslim woman, dressed head to toe in a formless black cloak. But like most stereotypes, this one tells only a small part of a complex picture. In reality, the lives of Muslim women are as varied as the countries they come from. In Egypt, women make up 40 percent of the work force, and are active in medicine, science, and higher education. Muslim women have been leaders of Turkey, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and play prominent roles in the Palestinian rights movement. In conservative Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, or where radical Islamic movements are dominant, like Afghanistan, women's lives are tightly restricted. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are not allowed to vote, drive cars, or travel without permission.

The radical Islamic movement itself is controversial and hotly debated among Muslim women. Some oppose it, saying it restricts hard-won women's rights and encourages abuse of women, such as wife-selling. Others embrace the movement, saying it protects women's status and dignity.

In October 1987, I stepped off a plane into the dusty air and swirling crowds of Cairo's airport terminal. The arrival hall was a primer on all the possible variations of Muslim women's dress. In Arabic, the word for Islamic dress is *hijab*, which literally means "curtain." At one extreme were the faceless tourists from Saudi Arabia, who were curtained off from the world in their 360-degree head-to-toe tents. Everyone else showed at least her face: Egyptians in floor-length skirts and brightly colored scarves held in place with headbands of seed pearls; Pakistanis in silky tunics drifting low over embroidered trousers, with a shawl thrown over their heads. And there were plenty of women—Palestinians, Lebanese, Egyptians, and others—dressed in stylish Western fashions they'd picked up on trips to England or Italy.

All of these women were Muslims. Yet each seemed to have her own interpretation of the sketchy instructions found in the Koran: "Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils [close around them]."

Before the advent of Islam in the 7th century, Arab women didn't cover their faces and bodies with veils. The wives of Muhammad—the founder of Islam—were the first to do so, to set them apart as something special. Because their veils were a matter of prestige, other women rushed to imitate them. Veiling soon became traditional for women throughout what is now called the Middle East.

Egyptian women of the 1920s were the first to throw off the veil. Egyptian feminists saw the veil as a symbol of their second-class status. But by the time I arrived there, many young Egyptian women were putting it back on. Throughout the region, teachers, politicians, and business managers were choosing to cover their hair or being told to do so. Everywhere I went in the Islamic world, the issue of women's dress was always in the background, like a neighbor hammering. In most countries I managed to pass easily enough among many local women who didn't veil. But almost unconsciously, I began to fill my closet with high necked blouses and long, loose dresses.

My behavior changed too. For any journalist, interviewing means developing a good relationship with your subject. But in much of the Islamic world, ordinary men aren't used to spending much time with women outside their own families. When I would get a man talking in depth about his opinions and experiences, he would often misinterpret my interest as sexual. Slowly, my manner became much more reserved. And I learned that the safest way to interview men was through their wives.

Dressing Like a Muslim

Sometimes, doing my job required the hypocrisy of dressing like a devout Muslim. I'd been in Cairo just a few weeks when I got a chance to interview a member of Islamic Jihad, the radical group responsible for gunning down Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. He would see me, he said, if I wore a head scarf. I never like interviews that come with conditions, and I certainly didn't like this one. But I had come to the Middle East to write about the way things were. So I put on a scarf. I could barely hear the translator because of the fabric tied tightly around my ears.

Some Muslim women veiled for practical rather than religious reasons. They discovered a paradox: If they accepted restrictions on dress, they could claim greater freedoms elsewhere. In Kuwait, a student activist picked me up in her gold Mercedes sports car and took me to lunch. She was wearing an Yves St. Laurent dress in midnight blue. There was no way this young activist would veil. But wearing what she wanted had a price. "I have to be very careful how I act," she said. "A veiled woman is much more free to be with the men on campus, to talk, to argue, and even to share a joke with them. I have to be very formal, almost cold in my dealings with men, to preserve my reputation."

In Jordan, a fundamentalist professor told a woman student to wear a scarf to his lectures on Islamic law. She replied that she hadn't come to the university to learn to be a hypocrite and went to class bareheaded. At the end of the course, he failed her. But the student believed that the high-handed professors weren't the only reason for the spread of veils on campus: She blamed herself and other affluent secular women like her. "I come from a family that can afford to give me money for nice clothes and good haircuts," she said. "People like me snub the poorer girls who look shabby. The Islamic women are warm to them—they include them in study groups. They let them see that they are going to save a fortune on clothes and hairdressers when they start wearing the veil."

The Veil or the Lash

In Iran, I always had to wear Islamic dress. Iran absolutely requires women to cover their hair, all curves of the body, and all skin except the hands and the face. Visitors and residents, Muslims and atheists, can face a penalty of up to 80 lashes for disobeying the law. These days, most city women fulfill the requirements with a scarf and a lightweight topcoat. But Islamic radicals and most village women stick to the *chador*—a big square of fabric draped over the head and held tight across the chin. Because holding the chador in place makes women virtually one-handed, it is probably one of Islam's least convenient garments. For me, though, it was a godsend. Wrapped up like Darth Vader's sister, I was no longer a foreigner. Sitting in the back of a pickup truck with other chadori women and their children, I sailed through roadblocks, defied travel restrictions, and got an uncensored look at Iranian life.

Hairless and Fuzz-Free

Muslims are very particular about body hair. According to religious recommendations, it should all come off at least every 20 days for married women, every 40 days for married men. The unmarried are supposed to keep their hair in the hope that its repulsiveness will fend off the illicit advances of the opposite sex. When I wanted to get gossip out of my women friends, I would join them for a *helawa* session. As we reclined together nibbling pastries and sipping scented coffee, the helawa lady would knead a toffee-textured paste of sugar and lemon up and down our bodies, yanking hair out by the roots. I would just have my legs done, but my Muslim friends would be there for hours, emerging as fuzz-free as a Barbie doll.

In Islam, perfume is in; nail polish, out. Muhammad loved perfume, so both men and women scent themselves before each of the five-times-a-day prayers. Nail polish is a no-no because hands need to be scrupulously clean for prayer, and nail polish is considered polluting. In Iran, getting into government buildings often requires a dress inspection, including a fingernail and toenail check.

Instead of polish, many religious women decorate their hands with henna in a process more time consuming than getting a professional manicure. Experts make a paste of the dye and paint it on hands and feet in elaborate arabesques. Because the red pigment sinks into the skin and nails, rather than coating them, it isn't considered polluting.