

THE LOVE OF GOD | As you are probably aware, there is a lot of media coverage being given to the proposed ban on face-veils (niqab/burqa) in Europe and even here at home in Canada. I was approached by a journalist some months ago, who wanted to interview me and hear my thoughts on this topic. The very first question she asked me was what the veil means to me. The initial thought that involuntarily rushed to my mind was, "I love God." It was a simple but resounding statement that issued from deep within my soul. However, realizing those words alone would probably not have made much sense to the journalist, I elaborated: God has stated in the Holy Qur'an that He loves those women who are chaste; those who cover themselves and maintain a respectable level of decorum and propriety at all times. I love God dearly and want to please Him more than anything. Therefore, it is incumbent upon me to love anything and everything that God loves. I love this cloth that I use to cover myself with, simply because it pleases and attracts the special love of God.

Since that time, I have found that in every discussion related to purdah, my thoughts always start and end with this defining statement, "I love God."

PURE INTENTIONS | I have often been asked: What if a Muslim woman is modest and pure in her thoughts and intentions, but she chooses not to conform to this specific dress code (i.e. cover her head)?

The true concept of the Islamic veil can be understood and judged correctly by studying the source of all the Islamic teachings, The Holy Qur'an. Therefore, the simplest response is that it is indeed a commandment for all believing women to manifest their purdah outwardly.

God says, "And say to the believing women that they restrain their looks and guard their private parts and that they display not their beauty or their embellishment except that which is apparent thereof, and that they draw their head coverings over their bosoms..And that they strike not their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may become known. And turn ye to Allah all together, O believers that you may prosper." (24:32)

This verse directs the believing women to restrain their eyes when they happen to face men and to guard their chastity and also not to display their beauty and embellishment, whether it is natural or artificial.

Moreover, God says," O Prophet! tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers that they should draw close to them portions of their loose outer coverings. That is nearer that they may thus be distinguished and not molested..." (33:60)

It is true that Islam places an emphasis on recognizing your true "spiritual" identity more than what your physical appearance/attributes represent. However, in the case of a woman, her physical appearance includes features of aesthetic beauty. So, it is expected that her physical attributes will be noticed in public, just as every eye is drawn to something of beauty that exists in nature. By extension, it can also be expected that if the physical appearance is what initially

draws the attention towards her, eventually other aspects of her personality (and identity) will be overlooked and become secondary to her appearance. We have already witnessed this phenomenon in the current social climate, where women are openly and blatantly judged on the basis of their looks alone. There are numerous industries that operate entirely on this premise. God had foreseen this happening; that is why He instructed the Holy Prophet (sa) to guide Muslim women to observe modesty and purdah.

As I mentioned before, in defining the true identity of a woman, Islam gives precedence to a Muslim woman's morals, beliefs, values, and intellectual and spiritual capacity and capabilities. Islam encourages her to search for and embrace her "identity" in this way. This is only possible when the attention is drawn away from a woman's physical features and attributes.

Hadhrat Khalifatul Masih IV (rh) has said to think of every piece of clothing that a Muslim woman wears as a physical layer of protection and mercy from God Himself. It is a physical barrier that blocks external negative influences. As an example, sun block lotion is used to block the harmful rays of the sun from absorbing into your skin and causing cancer. Similarly, this physical layer of protection acts as a sun block lotion would, to keep us safe from the infiltration of impurities.

In my own words, I like to think of it this way: when we prepare our meals, we try our best to ensure that the food is cooked well and is free of germs and bacteria. This is because we naturally value our physical health, and no one wants to attract disease and illness. In a similar manner, when we cover our bodies with clothing, it acts as a physical barrier against the "spiritual" germs and bacteria that exists in society. The clothing is a way to protect your "spiritual health". The illnesses and cancerous vices that exist in societies today are very quick to spread and can permeate through you in a very subtle way, causing your soul to get sick. We do not even realize when this happens.

There is a beautiful Islamic saying that I have always found to be inspirational: *"The wearing of the outer garments and veiling of the body leads to veiling of the heart and shielding it from impurities."* I feel these words truly capture the essence of the relationship between body and mind.

PROTECTION OF GOD | I watched an MTA program once, where the speaker described a woman's purdah in a very interesting and unique way. He gave an example of the law for vehicle drivers and passengers, in which they are instructed to always wear their seatbelts. The law exists as a precaution, so that in the unfortunate event of an accident, the seatbelt will afford some safety and protection to those in the car. However, what if one is overconfident in his ability to drive and in his familiarity with the route and feels that he does not need the seatbelt? It is common knowledge that an accident can occur within seconds.

In a similar way, purdah is a "precaution". It is a safety precaution that a woman takes when she is out in public. It affords her special protection from God Himself. If a woman feels that she does not need this protection, because she is pure in her own intentions, then it is tantamount

to refusing the protection of God. Everyone has a different level of spiritual maturity, so while you may be aware of your own intentions, you cannot guarantee or predict those of others. It is better to remain safe.

THE NIQAB | There is also a question in some people's minds whether it is necessary to wear the niqab (face-veil), in addition to the head covering. The response is that the face is actually part of your "beauty". In fact, it is the most attractive feature of your body. The injunction to observe purdah of the face is quite evident in the Holy Qur'an. Furthermore, it has been proven from traditions of the Holy Prophet (sa) that veiling of the face was practiced during his time. The Promised Messiah (as) has also said that "A (woman's) face is part of purdah".

In western countries, it can occasionally be difficult to achieve this level of purdah, especially in certain professional and academic environments. The blessing of Islam is that it is flexible and logical. Therefore, Hudhur (aa) has explained that those women who cannot cover their faces should, at minimum, cover their heads and avoid wearing makeup (so as not to draw too much attention).

Surely, Islam desires ease for the believer, and does not impose restrictions that are harsh and extreme. The intention is not to imprison women. The type of burqa that is being discussed in the context of most news stories (the full shuttlecock) is a cultural type of dress, and of course it is up to an individual woman to decide what the parameters of her own purdah are.

GENDER SEGREGATION | Many people find it very challenging to understand the concept of gender segregation in Islam. The separation of spheres between men and women actually is meant to further the "spiritual" progress of a society. Ultimately, it is our spirituality and purity of faith that is the true measure of our achievements and accomplishments in this world.

In a perfect Islamic society, the segregation between men and women would give rise to moral and spiritual advancement in all spheres of life. However, in western countries, it is not practically possible to limit ourselves to interaction with only the same gender in absolutely all spheres of life. Therefore, it is a personal "jihad" for both Muslim men and women to maintain their limits of modesty, while also engaging in professional and educational pursuits. Hence, Islam gives us the flexibility to pursue worthwhile activities, under the condition that we remain within the bounds prescribed by God.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE | When I first started working, unfortunately I experienced discrimination and prejudice at the hands of my colleagues. I am assuming this was because of my visible appearance as a Muslim woman. I tried to dispel these misunderstandings for many months, but to no avail. Finally, I was tired and was ready to quit. It was the blessed month of Ramadhan. I turned to God and prayed fervently that He would remove these feelings of enmity and hatred in the hearts and minds of those around me. I was amazed to see my prayers bear fruit so quickly! Almost immediately, my manager started to consult me more, and would guide me and give me positive feedback. Following his example, the rest of the division staff

also became more amenable and began to show kindness in their behaviours. I knew that God, in His Infinite Mercy, had intervened and helped me.

Today, I believe God has enabled me to gain more respect from my colleagues. By helping me to remain strong and not compromise my values, He enabled me to dispel some misconceptions that may have been festering in the hearts and minds of my colleagues. Alhamdulillah, they now consider me their equal, intellectually and professionally. This personal experience further enforces my firm belief that if a woman adheres to her values of modesty and maintains her physical purdah without fear of discrimination or ridicule from people, God surely manifests His grace and mercy as a special favour upon her. It is surely a jihad for the women who live and work in western society in this day and age, but remember that the reward for anyone who perseveres in the cause of her faith is always victory and success.

LAST THOUGHTS | I would like to end this article with a verse from the Holy Qur'an: "*O wives of the prophet! you are not like any other woman if you are righteous..*" (33:33) (It is important to note that while the wives of the Holy Prophet (sa) are specifically being addressed in this verse, the instruction automatically extends to all believing women)

Whenever I come across this verse, I sense a deep connection with God and it fills me with hope and joy. As Ahmadi women, I feel that God has blessed us with a very special status. This precious gift is not given to just any woman. However, in return, God expects us to also fulfil our obligations and responsibilities most solemnly.

In this verse, God has promised those women who preserve their chastity and safeguard their dignity and modesty at all times, that they will be given an esteemed and distinguished status. They will be afforded the special protection from God Himself. This promise is enough for me to strive to please God in any way I can- because I love God.

I hope and pray that God may bestow His special mercy upon each and every one of us. May He grant us strength and steadfastness, so that we may always remain true to our faith. May He enable us to serve in the cause of our faith so that we may earn everlasting rewards and higher spiritual ranks. May He always protect us and guide us on our journey to reach Him. *Ameen Allahumma Ameen.*