

It Is Just a Little Headscarf
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In 1978, Pakistan's newly elected president, Zia ul Huq, transformed his country from an aspiring secular republic to an oppressive Islamic state. A whole category of new laws was passed oppressing women (Zina Laws). It required two women testifying in court to equal one man, and rape went unpunished for men unless four pious men testified to witnessing it. Women who claimed rape were arrested for prostitution. And Hijab (Muslim modesty imposed only on women) saw the return of not only headscarves, but burqas (shrouds of invisibility). Upper class women in Pakistan are still largely modern and secular, but the middle and lower-class women were pushed again to the back of the bus.

I wrote an indignant column about this, but a colleague, a former CIA operative, laughed at me, asking "Why are you making such a fuss about a little headscarf?" I suggested that the men wear them and leave the women alone.

Headscarves and Hijab continue to roil not only the increasingly fanatical Muslim world, but travels with them as immigrants to their new homes. France was the first country several years ago to take up this issue with their Muslim immigrants: no headscarves in public institutions and no face-covering burqas in public. Civil libertarians objected, claiming that what women wear was no business of the government, until bank robbers and terrorists (men) took to hiding under Hijabs and women terrorists hid suicide bombs under their cloaks. Even in the permissive United States, a female convert to Islam tried to get a driver's license wearing a burqa. This would not only make her identity impossible to verify, but would also make her a dangerous driver! Her demand was denied.

In the Western world, the headscarf has become a political symbol for some Muslim females. It is apparent that women such as Linda Sarsour, a sweet-faced spokeswoman for Muslim "feminists," do not wear the headscarf for modesty; her lavish use of makeup demonstrates that beauty is important to her. Her Islamist credentials, however, are well on display in vitriolic anti-Semitism, a poison overlooked even by her Jewish feminist colleagues.

Not many of her sister Muslims from pious families have such freedom of choice. It is "wear it or we will beat you (or worse)." Even in the US, several honor killing (savagely murders of female family members) have been committed against sisters or daughters who reject hijab and want western values.

Today, headscarves are front and center in two countries: Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has long interfered in everything female: dress (invisibility mandated); access to driving, dating, going to sports events, or travel which requires male permission and chaperonage. Younger Saudis are fed up with this oppression and have a new champion in the young Crown Prince. Not only are they considering women driving cars (forbidden until now) but also attending sports events (segregated, but at least they are there). I was shocked to see a newspaper photo of several beautiful Saudi women, uncovered heads and flowing hair, in a Riyadh coffee shop in the company of young men! No sign of the nasty Religious Police! That is new.

Iran, unlike Saudi Arabia, had a modernizing culture before the Islamic Revolution shut it down. Modern women overnight faced involuntary "modesty" laws. They were compelled to be totally enveloped in a black cloak, every strand of hair covered. Female enforcers flooded the streets sniffing for perfume, wiping off lipstick, and arresting defiant ones. Over the years, cloaks became headscarves, scarcely covering hair; body-clinging coats; blue jeans; and proudly worn bandages on newly bobbed noses (a vanity frowned on by the old clerics).

Recently, before the current nation-wide demonstrations in Iran, a young woman climbed a telephone utility box and in slow motion, removed her headscarf and tied it to a stick, waving it. Several dozen other women have been arrested for the same act, after heeding a campaign of "White Wednesdays," when all women demonstrate contempt for hijab. In a national poll, 50% of the country agrees. This movement should go global.

674 words

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