

**Hijab** - if there is one symbol of Islam that is widely recognized now, it is this piece of clothing. Women who take an interest in Islam will definitely be brought to a point where they have to reckon with the idea of wearing it, which in turn will direct them to investigate the scriptural basis of wearing it. And Muslim women who grew up within the faith will also find themselves directed towards a similar pursuit, as a result of the controversies that surround it. These controversies often come from a racist intention of denigrating Muslims by associating hijab with the oppression of women. But controversies also arise when Muslims (including scholars) question the need and religious validity for hijab in the modern context. Unfortunately, these controversies also lead to discrimination and violence against women. History of the hijab is rife with a tyrannical claim on the woman's body, from proponents as well as opponents.

Hijab as we understand it today is a garment that Muslim women wear to cover their heads. This is a linguistic adaptation that came in the early 20th century. Hijab in its literal sense means a 'separation'. This word appears seven times in the Quran and in all of them, it stands for a barrier - either of an abstract kind (like the psychological barrier disbelievers have towards belief) or of a concrete kind (like a screen, a curtain, or a partition). Mary takes to seclusion from her family with a screen (*hijab*) in 19:17. The men in the Prophet's community are asked to interact with the Prophet's wives only from the other side of a screen or curtain (*hijab*) in 33:53. In both instances, it is serving the purpose of privacy. In the latter case, it is meant "to shield the Prophet's wives from petitioners and those displaying excessive familiarity" (The Study Quran). The verse is often interpreted to mean that the Prophet's wives were not to be seen outside, that even a sight of their silhouette was [forbidden](#) to men outside the family, but this interpretation is [disputed](#) by some scholars.

### Relevant Verses and the Critical Terms

"And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms (***zinah***) [in public] beyond what may [decently] be apparent thereof; And let them draw their head-coverings (***khumur***) over their bosoms (***juyub***). And let them not display (more of) their charms (***zinah***) to any but their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are beyond all sexual desire, or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness; and let them not swing their legs [in walking] so as to draw attention to their hidden charms." (Al-Nur 24:31)

"And [know that] women advanced in years, who no longer feel any sexual desire, incur no sin if they discard their [outer] garments (***thiyaab***), provided they do not aim at a showy display (***tabarruj***) of [their] charms (***zinah***). But [even so,] it is better for them to abstain [from this]: and God is all-hearing, all-knowing." (Al-Nur 24:60)

"Oh Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters, as well as all [other] believing women, that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments (***jalabib***) [when in public]: this will be more conducive to their being recognized [as decent women] and not annoyed. But God is indeed much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace!" (Al-Ahzab 33:59)

## Looking at the Critical Terms

**Zinah-** “Most contemporary scholars DO NOT differentiate between the issue of ‘*awrah* (parts of the body that are to be covered) and *zīnah*. In other words, they assume that *zīnah* is equal to or the same as displaying private parts and that revealing the ‘*awrah* is identical to *zīnah*. The word ‘*awrah* is mentioned in the Qur’an in two relevant contexts: 24:31 and 24:58—both times it connotes something private and personal. In the hadith literature, the term ‘*awrah* refers to something that is personal and should be secluded or hidden. There is a hadith that describes women, in general, as ‘*awrah*; the authenticity, connotation, and context of this hadith would require a lengthy discussion. In fiqh literature, ‘*awrah* refers to private parts that should be covered and not revealed. As I mentioned, contemporary scholars have grown accustomed to not differentiating between ‘*awrah* and *zīnah*. In other words, they read the Qur’anic reference to *zīnah* as a reference to the ‘*awrah* of women before foreign men. This eliding of *zīnah* and ‘*awrah* is unjustified. *Zīnah* is what a person adorns himself/herself with or what a person displays in order to be noticed and attract attention.” ([Khaled Abou El Fadl](#))

**Khumur-** “The noun *khimār* (of which *khumur* is the plural) denotes the head-covering customarily used by Arabia women before and after the advent of Islam. According to most of the classical commentators, it was worn in pre-Islamic times more or less as an ornament and was let down loosely over the wearers back; and since, accordance with the fashion prevalent at the time, the upper part of a woman's tunic had a wide opening in the front, her breasts were left bare. Hence, the injunction to cover the bosom by means of a *khimār* (a term so familiar to the contemporaries of the Prophet) does not necessarily relate to the use of a *khimār* as such but is, rather, meant make it clear that a woman's breasts are not included in the concept of "what may decently be apparent" of her body and should not, therefore, be displayed.” (Muhammad Asad, “The Message of the Quran”)

**Juyub-** *Juyub* is the plural of *Jayb*, which means “a slit” (a pocket is called a “*jayb*” for the manner in which it is constructed, that is within a slit). Classical commentators refer to the top opening of a woman’s blouse as the *jayb* in reference here. Dr Shabir Ally, “[Defining Awra, Zinah, Juyub and Khimar](#)”; Yasir Qadhi, “[Understanding the Ruling and Wisdom of Hijab](#)”

“A *jayb* can refer to the heart or chest, the beginning of a woman's cleavage, the place where the chest meets the neck, the opening of a shirt through which one places one's head, a pocket, or the shirt itself. *Jayb* is also used to describe that into which Moses places his hand and pulls it be covered out white in 27:12 and 28:32, where it is rendered bosom (referring to the chest area of his garment)” (The Study Quran)

**Jalabib-** “Cloaks translates *jilbāb*, which means a piece of fabric that is larger than a shawl but smaller than a large sheet and derives from the root j-l-b, which describes an object that completely covers some-thing, like the darkness of night (Lisan al-arab). It is here employed to mean the outer cover, which would cover the entire body. The manner in which one draws the cover has been debated. Some say that it is to be done in such a way that it covers all but one eye, while others say it means that it must cover the forehead and most of the face, but not the eyes.”(The Study Quran)

“A *jilbāb* is any outer garment worn by men or women that covers unspecified parts of the body. (The translator M.A.S. Abdel Haleem correctly points out that the expression utilized by the Qur’an means to make the garments “hang low,” not “wrap around” as other translators have assumed.) The context of this verse indicates that the purpose of the Qur’anic revelation is to address a specific social problem at the time of revelation. This is made clear with the verse that follows the one cited above. Verse 33:60 threatens the men causing the problem (i.e. the harassers or molesters) by saying that if the hypocrites, perverts, and rumor mongers in Medina do not desist from causing harm, they might be expelled from the city all together. Various sources report that at the time of the Prophet, scoundrels would hang out in the streets, and harass or molest slave girls. If a woman would turn out to be free, these men would leave her alone. Some classical scholars claimed that the purpose of the revelation was to distinguish between free women and slave girls by instructing free women to cover with their *jilbāb* because slave girls did not wear a *jilbāb*. Other sources report that the purpose was precisely the opposite: Muslim women would cover themselves with the *jilbāb* so that scoundrels could not tell the difference between a slave and a free woman, and so they would be unable to harass either. It is clear by the very language of the verse the purpose of this injunction is to protect women from harm, and in my view, it is also clear that the narrative sought to support equity between classes and the equal treatment of women of divergent social status.” (Khaled Abou El Fadl [Fatwa](#). You can also see his explanation of the verse here [33:59](#) )

***Tabarruj***- This comes from the word *barajah* which is the sea or *baarij*- a ship standing out in the water. This connotes the flouting of one’s appearance or the act of inviting undue attention to oneself. There is a report of Aisha that says that Allah permitted *zinah* but forbade *tabarruj*. (Khaled Abou El Fadl explains in [24:60](#))

## Reflections

- What has been your journey with the hijab?
- How would you define modesty? Is this a Quranic virtue?
- Can 33:59 be interpreted to say that a muslim woman should be identifiable by her clothing?
- Talk about the “lowering of the gaze” that has been mandated for both men and women. How do you relate this injunction, and the injunction not to draw undue attention to yourself to the idea of privacy and the use of public space. Discuss other injunctions in the Quran related to privacy, like 24:27-28 and 24:58.

Additional resources: [The Hadith on Women’s Clothing](#) (Let the Quran Speak)