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Modesty Discourses

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Within the Islamic tradition, a Qur'ānic verse that can be, and frequently has been, drawn upon to authorize discourses of modesty for women is Verse 31 of Sura 24 (Light): "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know naught of women's nakedness."

Across the Muslim world, in a variety of social settings, women's modesty, whether expressed as respectful comportment; the sexual propriety that circumscribes interactions between men and women in public; dress that conceals bodily contours, hair, and sometimes the face; or the emotions of shyness or embarrassment, is a fundamental component of a gendered social morality. Although many aspects of this moral system may be found in non-Muslim societies, especially those of the circum-Mediterranean, what may be distinctive is that the religious source cited above, along with related statements on morality and virtue found in the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth (traditions of the Prophet), are available for citation and interpretation. Historically, they have been adapted and adopted to give meaning or authority to local practices and demands. The emphasis has usually been on the importance of modesty for women, the parallel verse (24:30) enjoining men to be modest being less frequently invoked and carrying different connotations.

Approaches to the analysis of modesty

Analysts have taken a number of approaches to understanding the workings of the gendered ideals and discourses of modesty in the social lives of communities across the Muslim world. Many anthropologists who have worked in tribal or rural communities have focused on how the modesty of women is linked to the code of honor that governs social relations in communities organized around kinship. Where the honor and reputation of families, rather than fixed wealth, control over the means of production, or occupation is critical to social ranking, the behavior of individual family members is constrained by the ways in which it might reflect on the family, maintaining, enhancing, or jeopardizing the family's standing or prestige. In many such situations, from societies of the circum-Mediterranean to those of South Asia, the modesty of women – defined by respectful comportment and sexual propriety – is deemed critical to the honor of their families.

Many social functions have been attributed to this moral system, particularly the imperative of women's modesty. Some anthropologists argue that the ideal of modesty for women functions to preserve patrilineal kin groups, restraining women and thus preventing them from disrupting the bonds among brothers and patrilineal kin. Others note that such systems function to preserve patriarchal control by excluding women from interfering in decision-making, whether over property or marriage alliances. Yet others suggest that at the least this system reproduces gender hierarchies since the passions of men for their honor lead them to strictly control the women who might undermine it. This relationship shapes the ties between brothers and sisters.

Those who find unsatisfying these sorts of functionalist arguments about the utility of modesty discourses in preserving social structures favor approaches that place more weight on the honor code as a system of cultural meaning. How do the ideals of modesty, they ask, give value to certain ways of being? For example, Abu-Lughod's analysis (2000) of the Awlād 'Alī Beduin in Egypt questions whether the requirements for women to be modest are patriarchal. She observes that in such social systems both men and women are held to moral ideals; and they are held equally responsible for the maintenance of family and personal honor. She concedes, however, that the ideals are gendered such that men's honor tends to take the form of valor and independence whereas women's honor takes the form of modesty, which can be defined as voluntary deference to social superiors and the sexual propriety that is one aspect of this deference.

Analyzing modesty as part of a system of meaning can lead also to an appreciation of the ways in which discourses of modesty can work to rationalize and reproduce social distinctions among social groups or strata. In deeply hierarchical societies such as that found in Yemen, modest comportment, along with competitive hospitality and consumption, are, as anthropologist Anne Meneley (1996) shows, crucial to the reputations of the socially respected landowning families in at least one city. This moral discourse has the effect, however, of asserting the superiority of this propertied elite group as a whole, in contrast to socially marginal "outcaste" groups. Women from these marginal groups are denigrated by social superiors for lacking modesty and are ridiculed if they try to take on the accoutrements of modesty by veiling. The moral discourse of modesty, in other words, according to Huda Seif, an anthropologist who has studied propertyless and despised social groups in Yemen, should be seen as one of the ideological mechanisms for perpetuating social inequality.

Ethnographers of everyday life in various Muslim communities from Africa to Asia have noted that whatever its functions and meanings, the discourse of modesty is context-sensitive. Expectations about women's modesty come into play only in certain social situations and vary over the life cycle, being dependent especially on age and marital status. The demands for modest comportment are particularly directed at girls and younger women. The restrictions and expectations shift over the life cycle such that morality for older women tends to be less tied to the demands of modesty. In many societies across the Muslim world, older women behave more assertively, are more relaxed in the company of men, and have more public roles. Modesty can also be situational: in many communities that value and insist on the modesty of women, women can be bold, use sexually explicit or coarse language, and be anything but shy and retiring as long as this is within the intimate social contexts of gender-segregated women's spheres. Veiling too can be situational, either being expected only in public or varying by the relative status of the men being encountered. Moreover, in some communities, women have available to them particular forms such as oral poetry in which they can freely express a range of sentiments that, if communicated in ordinary language and in public contexts, would compromise modesty.

Finally, phenomenological approaches to the study of modesty insist, against the functionalists and those interested in interpreting the cultural meaning of modesty, that one must explore how the ideals and discourses of modesty are experienced, learned, or cultivated by women themselves. Some have noted the close relationship between the assertion of modesty as a moral ideal and the feelings of shame or embarrassment that women experience in situations when they find themselves inappropriately dressed, exposed in public, or find their seclusion or separation from unrelated men breached. The critical reports in the early twentieth century of Bengali writer and champion of women's education, Rokeya Sakhawat Husain, on the absurdities of women's lives in purdah (the South Asian term for the seclusion of women) inadvertently reveal the depth to which women have internalized modesty. She recounts an incident in which a young bride, left for hours on her own in her new household, was forced to urinate in a vessel in which she had brought betel nuts because she was too shy to go wandering around the house looking for the bathroom (Rokeya 1988, 27–8). Others have focused on how the dispositions to act modestly and even the sentiments of shyness or embarrassment that underlie them are inculcated in the socialization process. Girls are taught appropriate behaviors, scolded for inappropriate or immodest behaviors, and absorb the ideals of modesty through moving naturally through symbolically loaded everyday worlds constructed in terms of the separation of the sexes.

With the growth and spread of Islamist or piety movements in the last decades of the twentieth century from Egypt to Malaysia, women's modesty has taken on cultural meanings different from the familial core and consequently is experienced differently. Modesty has assumed more explicitly religious meanings. As Saba Mahmood argues, using the case of Egyptian women in the mosque movement in the 1990s, in such contexts modesty or shyness is considered one of the key religious virtues for women. Rather than being linked to the honor of families it is seen as integral to the realization of "closeness to God." Women seek to cultivate modesty and shyness in themselves, many of them sensing that it does not at first come naturally because of their upbringing. Through bodily acts, especially veiling, such women,

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often from more secular and middle- and lower-middle-class backgrounds, believe that they will be able to imprint on themselves the appropriate attitudes and sentiments of the pious person. If some women complain at first that they feel uncomfortable taking on the *ḥijāb*, the head covering that is part of contemporary Islamic or modest dress, they believe that eventually they will come to feel uncomfortable when they are not wearing it. As Mahmood (2001, 214) concludes, conducting oneself modestly and taking on the veil are treated by these women, as “the critical markers, as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious” (emphasis in the original).

The modern politics of modesty

If modesty discourses in the twentieth century have been associated primarily with Muslim piety or with the familial code of honor that is so much a part of rural, tribal, or even conservative urban communities, these are not their only contexts and meanings. Historians and students of the development of nationalism and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernizing projects across the Muslim world have observed a pattern whereby women, almost as a condition of their becoming educated and moving into public spaces, have taken on stricter forms of modesty and chastity than those practiced in family-based worlds. It is as if they and their families, or their modernizing rulers, must prove that their moves out of the home and sex-segregated spaces will not threaten the social order or bring about their moral degradation.

Deniz Kandiyoti, for one, has argued that for the Turkish women who benefited from the secularizing reforms of Kemal Atatürk beginning in the late 1920s, being educated and finding public roles in politics and the workplace entailed a desexualization. Cultural emphasis was placed on women's maternal roles or their roles as ungendered citizens. Similarly, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi has argued that as elite and middle-class Iranian women in the early part of the twentieth century unveiled, entered educational institutions, and began to inhabit the “modern” heterosocial space where men and women mingled, they came to strictly control their behavior and language. They lost, she argues, the richly sexual and lively language of the homosocial women's worlds that earlier generations had inhabited. She describes the result as “veiled discourse – unveiled bodies.” The secular or nationalist women who emerged out of these projects in Turkey and Iran have been described as “modern-but-modest.”

Ideals of women's modesty have also been built into the laws about public morality that have been adopted by many Muslim majority states. Rather than seeing these as vestiges or holdovers from “traditional” values deriving from the honor-based morality of face-to-face communities, analysts such as Ayşe Parla argue that such laws, and the enforcement of sexual modesty represented by such related new practices as state-mandated virginity examinations, must be viewed as new and unprecedented forms of coercion and control over women. Turkish feminists protested at these examinations in the 1980s and 1990s which were conducted mostly on young women in state institutions such as schools or factories when there was suspicion of sexual (immodest) behavior. Carried out by medical doctors and enforced by state agents such as police, principals, and prison guards, these examinations are expressions of new powers the modern state has arrogated for itself. They are fundamentally different from familial controls, even occasionally violent, over the honor and modesty of daughters and sisters. The use of rape, as reported in Turkey, Pakistan, and elsewhere, as part of the torture of political dissidents or intimidation of political rivals is another example of the current exploitation of the cultural ideals of modesty for political purposes in modern states.

The modesty of women, and especially the veiling that is the most visible symbol of it, have also been appropriated and manipulated by modern nation-states in the Muslim world in their bids to declare either their modernity or their cultural authenticity. Although the early twentieth-century debates about veiling in countries such as Egypt or the subsequent laws mandating the removal of the veil and the wearing of “Western” dress in countries such as Iran under Reza Shah illustrate the powerful symbolic value of women's modesty as a sign of national cultural backwardness, the most far-reaching deployment of the discourse of modesty has been that undertaken by the Islamic Republic of Iran under the Shī'ī clergy led by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. Immediately, as a sign of the Islamization of society, veiling and the strict separation of the sexes, which some feminist critics call gender apartheid, was imposed. Championed in the name of resistance to the sexual objectification of women associated with the West, and couched in the language of protecting women and respecting them, regulation of women's modesty has sometimes been enforced by self-appointed moral police and zealously promoted by some clerics who express anxiety about the sexual chaos that the free movement of women in public might ignite. Above all, the fact that the modesty and veiling of women have in this case been directly tied to the preservation of a national morality, and to the assertion of an Islamic cultural authenticity that legitimizes this nation-state,

distinguishes the state-imposed modesty discourses from family-based ones or even those emerging from grassroots piety movements in nominally secular states.

Islamic prescription in the context of East and West

There are historical precedents for the association of gendered discourses of modesty with Islamic religious virtues, creating a tradition on which those in modern states such as the Islamic Republic of Iran can draw. Religious reformers who have sought to bring their societies into line with what they consider proper Islamic behavior guided by the Shari‘a have often focused on the modesty of women. In their prescriptive treatises on proper religious, legal, and ethical behavior, Muslim scholars condemn the lax modesty practices of women of their times and assert the importance of restricting women's movements in public as a means to preserve the separation of the sexes. A distinguishing feature of twentieth-century treatises is that the modesty of Muslim women is implicitly or explicitly cast in relationship to the immodesty and immorality of Western or non-Muslim women.

A comparison of treatises on women from different historical periods reveals the shift in the religious signification of modesty. A good example of an early document is the mid-fourteenth-century Egyptian treatise al-Madkhal by Ibn al-Hājj, analyzed by medievalist scholar Huda Lutfi. This treatise, which criticizes popular social and religious practices of Cairenes of the time, returns again and again to the threats to the social order represented by women's violations of modesty ideals as they dress in their finery to go out in public, mingling with shopkeepers, Sufi adepts, and donkey drivers who take them to visit shrines; as they wear clothing that reveals their bodies and are careless about veiling; and even as they watch processions from behind screened windows.

Five and a half centuries later, at the turn of the twentieth century and on another continent, the Deobandi reformer Maulana Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī's popular treatise on women called Bihishti Zewar (Heavenly ornaments) similarly condemns contemporary women's religious and cultural practices, but in his own region of what is now India. Within his didactic text, Thānawī urges women to be sober and modest, even while advocating, because of the colonial context and Hindu-Muslim rivalry, that they become literate and educated. Because his prescriptive text emphasizes the importance of women's education as part of their fulfillment of religious duties, however, the range of virtues encouraged in women encompasses much more than modesty. Where modesty is explicitly encouraged, as in the reporting of a ḥadīth to the effect that “modesty is intrinsic to faith and faith brings one to paradise,” the moral commentary that follows warns: “You should never, however, be modest in regard to an act of religion. For example, women often do not perform the prayer during travel or during the days of a wedding. Such modesty is worse than immodesty” (Thānawī 1990, 214).

At the end of the twentieth century, conservative religious authorities such as Egypt's late Shaykh Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha‘rāwī, who could disseminate their views through television and pamphlets, articulated the dangers of sexual mixing and urged on women both domesticity and what had since the 1970s come to be referred to as Islamic or modest dress – full length clothing and a new form of veiling that involved either covering the hair or both hair and face, except the eyes. Running through Sha‘rāwī's promotion of a gendered Muslim morality is the negative foil of the West where women are treated as sex objects. To support his views, Sha‘rāwī even alleged that the well-known sex symbol Marilyn Monroe had expressed weariness at the limelight and wished that she had been a housewife (Stowasser 1987, 269). The stereotype of Western consumer society as a place where women are sexualized and exploited is common in Muslim discourses about women. This stereotyping took its most influential form in the revolutionary writings and speeches of the Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati who, in the 1970s, accused local Iranian elite women of being “painted dolls.” He warned, in his *Fatima is Fatima*, that women were the weak link in the Western capitalist infiltration and exploitation of the Third World.

These examples show how prescriptive treatises have changed drastically in form and content, even while authoritatively referring to religious sources. The incorporation of modesty discourses into what might be called cultural nationalist arguments, or arguments about the distinction between Islamic society and the West, has given greater weight to calls for changes, often restrictive, in women's freedom of movement and in the conduct of their social lives. These treatises enunciate the dangers of the social chaos that might result or has resulted from failures to enforce women's conformity to ideals of modesty; the latest threat is considered the threat to the integrity of Muslim nations or the Muslim community.

Many Muslim women share these men's concerns about the integrity of their national or religious communities and have proudly embraced the ideals of modesty and the veiling that is associated with it. At the same time, the invigoration of modesty discourse through its bolstering by religious authorities has presented formidable challenges to feminist activists. Those activists who work for an end to punishments of women for sexual infractions, including rape, or who advocate gender equality, more public and professional roles for women, and the non-reduction of women to their sexual identities, find that these goals are not easily reconciled with discourses of women's modesty. Most disturbing is that these goals are now susceptible to delegitimization by being associated with the West.

Conclusion

Women's modesty is a fundamental component of gendered moral systems in many societies across the Muslim world. It has been analyzed using different approaches: tracing textual sources, noting social functions, interpreting cultural meanings, and exploring phenomenologically how it is experienced. Although modesty sometimes finds its authoritative religious justification in the Qur'ān and can be inspired by women's desires to be pious, it cannot in all its daily social practices be derived solely from religious texts. Linked in many societies to a cultural code of honor that determines the respect and reputation of families, it both pressures and motivates women. Such codes are found in non-Muslim as well as Muslim societies, most notably around the Mediterranean. The discourses of modesty have been transformed radically in the twentieth century as they have become integral to piety movements, appropriated and generalized by nationalist movements, and incorporated into modernizing reform movements, secular or Islamic. Some modern nation-states' enforcement through law and the police of women's modest behaviors, whether of sexual propriety and segregation or forms of dress, in the name of protecting public morality and the nation's health or asserting an Islamic identity in contradistinction to the West, has also fundamentally altered its significance as a moral system. It has also generated critiques by feminists within and outside these societies.

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