

The Evolution Of The Burqa

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The Burqa is not the Taliban's invention. This tent-like cloak that completely drapes a woman's body and face, with only a crocheted screen as an eye-piece, has been worn by women to go out in public for almost a century or more in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and parts of the Arabian peninsula. It literally draws a curtain around a woman and allows her to move about outside the family compound, while conforming to the religious-cultural custom of remaining secluded from men. The Taliban enforced its use as a law, contrary to traditions, and thus turned this very photogenic object into a symbol of their oppression and foolishness.

The Afghan Burqa conjures up the image of a Halloween ghost. A group of Afghan women in Burqa, a la movie Khandahar, make a mind-blowing picture for the western public. Liberating Afghan women from the Burqa was a sub-text of the war against the Taliban. Although some Afghan women have discarded the Burqa, after the fall of Taliban, an overwhelming majority continue to wear it as a matter of choice and social norm. So far the Burqa has survived the American bombing and the NGOs onslaught. International activists for women's rights have been disappointed, and are now silent, by the mass of Afghan women continuing to wear Burqas. Yet the Burqa as a cultural artifact is evolving and changing. It has taken many new forms mostly in the neighbouring sub-continent.

I grew up surrounded by women wearing Burqas. In the British-ruled Lahore (a big city in Pakistan) of the 1940s, almost every middle class Muslim woman wore what is now the Afghan Burqa. My mother and aunts went for shopping, movies and picnics wearing Burqas. They would have been shocked to show their faces to men who were strangers. As women grew old, they often took off the Burqa, replacing it with a thick cotton shawl (Chadour) loosely wrapped around the head and shoulders, with the face left open.

The Burqa was a mark of respectability. Women who worked along-side their men in fields, shops and domestic settings, did not wear it. These women, numerically a majority of the population, wore the Chadour but generally stayed aloof from men who were not relatives. The Burqa was both expensive and obstructive for them.

When a family rose on the social scale, e.g. sons/ daughters became clerks, teachers, mechanics etc, or husbands /fathers were successful in business, its women started donning the Burqa. It was a symbol of their newly gained social status and class. At the top of the social ladder, the custom was different again. The women of rich and modern families, wives and daughters of political

leaders, military commanders, senior civil servants and corporate executives, for example, went about in shawls and scarves without covering their bodies or faces. The Burqa was scarce among the families of the rich and modern. Almost similar social dynamics operated in Afghanistan before the Taliban.

Changes in life styles and fashions have also transformed the Burqa. In the 1950s' and 60s', a new and more functional Burqa emerged in Pakistan and India. The tent-like Burqa, currently worn in Afghanistan, gave way to a two-piece black satiny overall, a full-length overcoat for the torso and a head-piece with a voile veil to screen the face. This body-fitted Burqa was a fashion statement of the new generation growing up in cities. My sister and cousins wore this Burqa. They would not be found dead in their mothers' "shuttlecock" Burqa. The new Burqa gradually blended in to the women's dress, revealing arms and body contours and shrinking the face veil. In time this Burqa almost disappeared, leaving a silken wraparound scarf (Dupatta) to cover the upper body and head. Burqas, old and new, were confined mostly in the traditionalist clans and families, in cities as well as villages. The generation that adopted the new Burqa also was on the forefront of discarding them. Burqas were kept in the wardrobe, mostly to be taken out for visiting ancestral neighbourhoods and grand parents.

The Hijab is a women's head covering, without the face veil, which was popularized by the women's movement in Egyptian universities as a reaction to Nasser's authoritarian socialism, though Muslim women in the Middle East have worn it for a long time. It particularly suited the needs of women professionals and office workers. They interpreted the Islamic injunctions about women's public deportment to be requiring only covering the hair and observing modesty.

The Hijab has found a place in the emerging self-definition of young Muslim women in the Western Societies. It is largely from North America and Europe that the Hijab has diffused into Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh and in the South East Asian Countries. It has become the new symbol of Islamic femininity, though still largely confined to the segments of women in schools and colleges. The mothers who grew up without veils and head coverings find their daughters adopting the Hijab.

The Burqa has metamorphosed into the Hijab on the one hand and into the Niqab, a stand-alone face veil, on the other. It was in Montreal about two years ago that I saw someone in a Niqab after a long time. The Niqab is beginning to be seen, occasionally, in Toronto and New York, Houston and other North American cities. It may spread back into Pakistan/India and Afghanistan from here. Yet among Muslims all over, the Niqab and, to lesser extent the Hijab, remain emblems of orthodoxy.

Over a half century, the Burqa has shrunk from a 'moving tent' enveloping a woman to a head covering in the form of a more formalized Hijab and alternatively as a loose head scarf in Pakistan-India. This evolutionary path will, inevitably, unfold in Afghanistan if and when it begins to have peace, modern forms of governance and development.

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