



Veiling: Tradition, Identity and Fashion

Veiling in the Southern Indian city of Calicut

Narrator:

Calicut, also known as Kozhikode. Third largest city in India's southern state of Kerala. Flanked by the Arabian sea along its western edge, this thriving commercial centre has an average literacy rate of over 95%. It's a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society where around 40% of the population is Muslim. This has always been a major trading point and cultural hub for Muslims in southern India.

Zubair Hudawi:

The Arabs came here for the trade, and it seems even before the time of the prophet, Islam came in the age of the prophet himself.

And since then, one of the major parts of Calicut is that Hindus and Muslims, and recently Christians are also living, and you can see in and out of Calicut city, a lot of temples, mosques, situated together. In Calicut, all the Muslim organisations, Muslim people, they have all their offices, everything is centred in Calicut.

Narrator:

We're here to discover what veiling means to the Muslim women of Calicut. Who wears what, and why?

Moly Kuruvilla:

All kinds of dresses we can see in the campuses, and on the streets in the town. Everywhere. But the Muslim people mostly wear hijab.

Narrator:

Hijab could be a scarf that covers the head and neck, or a loose outer garment called a "hijab coat." But there are lots of names for what is essentially the same thing.

"Muftah" is another word that's used for head scarf. "Purdah" is a general term. Like "hijab," this could refer to a coat-like layer, but it may also mean to conceal, using clothes or anything else. Whatever the label, one thing is certain. A lot has changed when it comes to veiling in Calicut.

Abida Rasheed:

When I was young, when I was in school, or maybe in college days, I never saw people veiling like this, wearing the hijab. I didn't see my mother veiling, because she always covered her hair with the sari. She always covered her hair, my grandmother. She always covered her hair with that purdah, what we call. It's a veil. It's a very thin texture of cloth, what they used to wear.

In this picture, this was a wedding picture taking from my best friend's wedding, which happened in 1982. And here everybody's wearing sari, and you don't see anybody wearing a black hijab, or totally covered. Whereas now when you take a wedding photo, most of the people will be wearing, will be sitting at the wedding, also, with the hijab.

Narrator:

Today, purdah and hijab are a common sight on Calicut's streets. It's the long and often loose fitting garments combined with the head scarf that most distinguishes Muslim women from Hindus and Christians.

What's come to be known as a purdah craze began about two decades ago, with many factors contributing to this upsurge in formal veiling. One key influence was a wave of migrant workers seeking opportunities in the Gulf during the early 1990s.

Moly Kuruvilla:

With the Gulf migration, especially from Calicut to Malaparamba, you can see at least one man from every family in Gulf or some other Persian countries, along with this Gulf migration, there's an influx of new fashions and new styles of purdah.

Narrator:

Razeena Ayesha is managing director of an academic book business, and mother of three. Razeena didn't veil before she got married, but all that changed when she started to see the increasingly widespread use of the black abaya, a long cloak-like dress that's used by many Muslim women.

Razeena Ayesha:

Slowly, when I came to high school and I realised people are wearing these kind of abaya, and I thought maybe once I get married, I'll have to wear this. These thoughts were there in my mind.

Then came marriage. When I was 17, I got married. So my husband, he didn't force me to wear this. Yeah, but I had in my mind that I'll have to wear it. Because what I'm seeing is my cousins, once they get married, they're wearing it.

Auswaf Ahsan:

I was more worried about how to live after marriage, rather than what she is wearing. I don't feel dress is something different that I should force on her, and make her dress in a particular way that my religiosity, or my beliefs, or my politics will be reflected on her.

Narrator:

Razeena chose to veil. Her marriage to Auswaf marked the beginning of a long period of experimentation in how best to cover up.

Razeena Ayesha:

This is called an "abaya" in here. Common people here, commonly known as "purdah." You wear it like this. This - I pin it here. Then I take this and put it through here, like this.

Ali Ahsan:

When I was in my school in Manipal, I was the only guy who was a Muslim in class. When I went, there was a parent teacher meeting and all. You know, I didn't want my mom to come to the school with a hijab on, because I thought I would be not quite differentiated among my friends. But then as I grew up, I wanted our identity to be there. That we are Muslims. And that hijab is what we wear.

Narrator:

Today, Razeena's wardrobe tells the story of numerous shifts in veiling style that took place as her children were growing up.

Huda Ahsan:

When I was born, she was wearing this black burqa. And then she started with her whole pink, because my sister was in UAE, and she used to send scarves all the time. That's when I got interested with all the scarves and brooches. And then she changed into cream coats.

Razeena Ayesha:

And for this, it's the same way. These kinds.

Auswaf Ahsan:

I feel it's culture, more of culture. And of course, you cannot say, you can't classify, or water tight compartments. You can't say there is no religion at all. There is some part of religion, but it has become more of a cultural issue, though.

Razeena Ayesha:

These are the ones I wear now. I'm more comfortable with salwah kameez. And then these two shelves, full of salwahs, because I use it now.

Huda Ahsan:

Even though my mom kind of hints on the hijab, she has never actually made me, I mean, forced me to do anything like that. She has never told me to go and wear it, or don't come out. Nothing of that sort.

Razeena Ayesha:

These are for prayer. I use it for prayer. Here in [INAUDIBLE], we call it [INAUDIBLE]. It's tradition kind, like we were brought up like that. While praying, we wear all this white. But it's not necessary. My parents, you know, my mother, my grandmother, they all prefer white while praying.

Moly Kuruvilla:

Actually, the veiling, that means something that covers. And the particular thing, veiling, it is a very sensitive issue. Some parents have told me that we insist our daughters to put on muftah or purdah just because we don't want our girls to be stared at by others.

So they have to wear it just for the parents' sake. They have to wear it. And they have found a way out to wear it fashionably, stylishly.

Zubair Hudawi:

Now you see all different varieties. You can find there are body shaped dresses. And even some women you can find in Calicut itself, you can find many women wear the black purdah, the body shaped one. They will not cover their head, even. They'll just use the shawl.

Narrator:

Here at Kerala's biggest purdah manufacturer, business is booming. Honruly produces the local style of purdah, a floor length coat worn over other clothes. This is the most sought after brand in the state, and prices range from 200 to 5,000 rupees. That's between 2 and 60 pounds for a purdah.

Rasool Gafoor:

This business started 15 years before. It started with only one machine. Now we're using 200 machines working. Starting at one purdah per day. Now, 500 pieces of purdah per day manufactured.

Narrator:

Stylish, intricately crafted purdahs can command top prices. There's stiff competition to produce the perfect purdah.

Rasool Gafoor:

There are many companies which produce daily. So they have research and development units. All the purdah companies, they have their own research wing, which on the daily basis, they make and research new trends.

Narrator:

Like many women in Calicut, Marwa, who's a second year medical student, wears an all black purdah. She began veiling when she left her home in Qatar to study here in Southern India.

Marwa Ayoob:

I sort of feel protected wearing this. First of all, it's not revealing. And my figure is not revealed. And everything of me, except my face and my hands are covered, so nothing is really shown. When I wear this, it's complete, what I am. I'm a Muslim, and I'm dressed perfectly. So now I can do what I want to do. I get this feeling of confidence, freedom to do anything I want to do.

Moly Kuruvilla:

In the globalised world, women's bodies are increasingly becoming objectified and commodified. But if you are in purdah, it means, it implies don't look at me. So the very dress itself is good safety and security.

Narrator:

Marwa doesn't always wear purdah. There's a time and a place when she gets to dress up with her friends and family.

Marwa Ayoob:

Where I live is in a hostel. It's an all girls hostel, so the only people I'm exposed to is girls. And that's why I get to wear what I want, and wear normal, casual clothes. So basically, there's nothing like I miss the enjoyment of showing it off.

And there's my family, who sees, I mean, for me, what matters is people who matter to me should find me beautiful. They should accept me, and they should see the best of me. So it's my family and my closest friends, and in the future, my husband.

Ali Ahsan:

I find a girl more beautiful if she wear a hijab. I don't judge people by whether they wear this or not. But something charming about that veil

Moly Kuruvilla:

From all my experiences, my interactions with all these men and women, when it comes to their daughters or wives, they become traditional. It can take any form, or any fashion, or any state. That much lenient, they are become.

Narrator:

For Dr. Asma Rahim, there were no such pressures. This associate professor of community medicine at Calicut Medical College seen here at the local orphanage was free to choose when it came to adopting the veil.

Asma Rahim:

It was my decision to wear this. Nobody compelled me. I just read the scriptures. I thought to be complete, it would be better. When I started practicing after my internship, that is when I became a full fledged doctor, that time I started wearing the head scarf.

When this head scarf, and hijab and all came in, I think we women over her, we came out with our own kind of dress code with the sari and the hijab. It's not a specific style, but we working women, we find this kind of dressing comfortable.

Zubair Hudawi:

Generally, when they go into a job wearing religious corrected dress, the opinion from the religious people, oh, they say it's OK, it's fine. It's helped them a lot to do work.

Narrator:

By combining her veil with a sari, Asma has, like Razeena in her salwah kameez, adapted local styles to conform to Muslim dress codes and notions of modesty.

Razeena Ayesha:

We love to experiment with our dressing. And since in Kerala and Calicut it's a lot of democracy, we are at an ease, and we can try out different combinations. Maybe that's why you see so many permutation combinations of this here.

Marwa Ayoob:

What's happening at present is there's a lot of mixture of culture. Because current Islam, you can do anything. I mean, you can wear whatever you prefer. You just have to cover everything except your face and forehead.

Zubair Hudawi:

There is not a cultural order that you should wear this dress. The religious order is only that you have to keep this meaning. That you have to cover your body parts.

Marwa Ayoob:

So at present, what's happening is people want to follow Islam, but at the same time, they want to be stylish. Just a lot of mixture of culture.

Zubair Hudawi:

It is fashion for many. It is religion for many people. It's a trend for many people. They saw their religious meaning in the newly spending fashion, so they adapted it in different ways. So fashion plus religion, I say.

Razeena Ayesha:

As long as the person who's wearing it has done it out of her choice, then if it's fashion, it doesn't matter.

Moly Kuruvilla:

If it is against one's choice, it shouldn't be imposed on them. Because such rare instances are also happening in Kerala context, where girls are being pressurised.

Abida Rasheed:

For me, I don't think it's important that I want to wear a purdah. But I don't want to be revealing. I want to wear the typical Indian. I live in India, and I would love to wear Indian clothes. And I want to cover my head when the necessity is there. Maybe when I told you I mother wore only sari, so I also wore sari. If my mother was wearing the veil, I would have also gone through that.

Narrator:

Abida belongs to one of the oldest Muslim communities in Calicut. Though rarely seen today, this light cotton veil was once widely borne by Moplah, also known as Malabari Muslims, part of an age old veiling tradition.

Abida Rasheed:

See the women, I think this is my grandmother. See the women in this photograph? This was my friend's wedding. See the women all in the typical, traditional dress. This is what I saw my grandparents wearing. The Malabari, the Malabaris. The Calicut Muslims wearing.

Narrator:

Back at Kerala's biggest purdah manufacturer, preparations are underway for the launch of something new. This is India's first denim purdah, the latest trend in veiling that's set to go global very soon.

Zubair Hudawi:

From whatever a new trend, an imitable trend comes in. It will spread all over the world.

Moly Kuruvilla:

There will be new forms, further new styles, new colours.

Rasool Gafoor:

This is the best industry, best future. A lot of people are getting a job, also.

Marwa Ayoob:

Of the future, I can't really say 100% how I see myself, because we have this thing of husband's wishes. So if he is somebody who doesn't like me wearing abaya, maybe if he's totally against it, maybe I would have to restrict to a certain extent.

Razeena Ayesha:

I think I'll be like this forever. But it's not my last word.

Asma Rahim:

From my point of view, being an Indian, being in India, I would be very comfortable that if I could adapt the Indian way of dressing in a modest way.