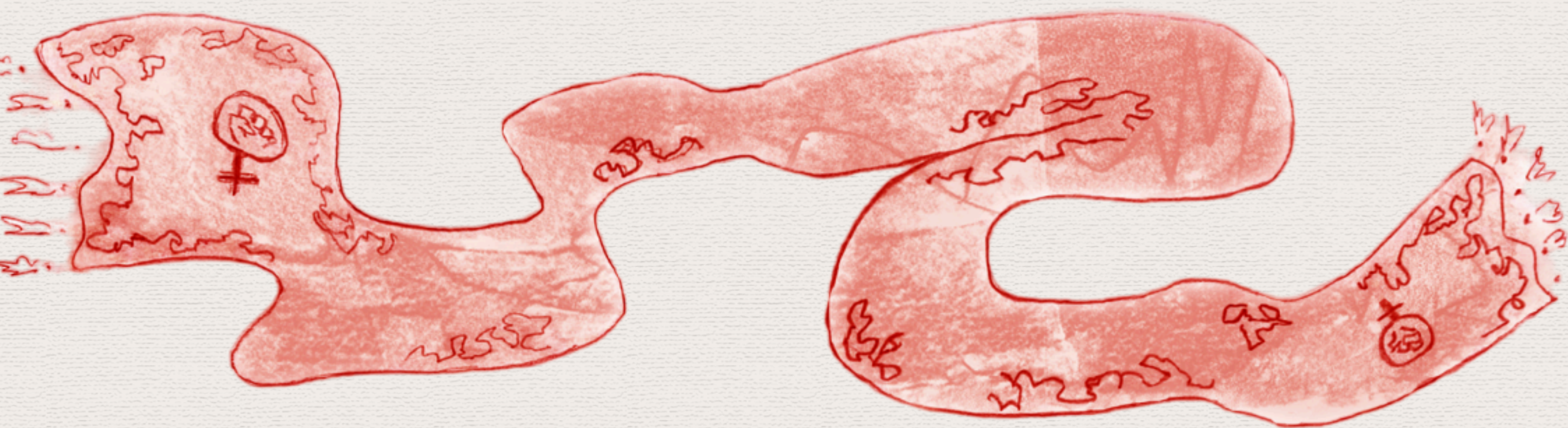


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BY LUCY BARRIE



# CAN RELIGIOUS MODEST DRESS



*Be Included in the Feminist Project?*

ARTWORK BY DAISY MARSH

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In 2009, Nicolas Sarkozy, the former French president, claimed that the burqa was not a symbol of faith but rather a sign of enslavement, and was therefore unwelcome in French society (La Fornara, 2018). Feminism aims to free women from any such 'enslavement' that would act as a barrier to gender equality. Nevertheless, the intersectional injustices that impact religious women make this debate more complicated than what Sarkozy suggested. This essay will therefore explore the ethical significance of religious modest dress, and advocate for its compatibility with the feminist project. This will be achieved through focusing on Jewish and Muslim women, living as minoritised groups in Western countries. While religious patriarchal structures seem to contradict the strive for gender equality through dictating how women present themselves, this should not permit the Western world to act as 'saviours' and reduce these women to victims. Instead, they should be included in the feminist cause and an effort should be made to truly understand their perspectives in order to strive for a modern world that treats men and women from all backgrounds more equally than it does currently.

Before unpacking this further, it is necessary to understand what the feminist project is. While there are undoubtedly numerous ways to define feminism, the International Women's Development Agency understands it as working towards the aim of 'all genders having equal rights and opportunities' (IWDA, 2018). This should be achieved by striving for an end to sexism, gendered exploitation, and oppression. Taking this interpretation to be broadly encompassing of many others, but recognising that it is not the sole approach, it will be used as a springboard for the following discussion. In the fight for this objective, there are discriminatory systems which make it more difficult to achieve, and through understanding the intersection between race, class, and in this case religion, with gender, it becomes

clear that to fulfil the goal of gender equality, other forms of oppression must also be tackled (Arinder, 2020). It is important to keep this notion of intersectionality in mind as we examine the way in which the perception of religious modest dress can be understood as a practice that treats women with inequality, therefore contradicting the feminist objective.

In our modern society, the sexual exploitation of women is prominent, and can be seen in many ways. From the portrayal of women in the media to children's toys, women are consistently valued for their physical appearance, and consequently sexual desirability, rather than for their abilities, intelligence, and morals. An example of this are Disney princesses, whose small waists and other idealised bodily features are exaggerated, emphasising to young girls that the princesses 'win their man solely on the basis that they are the most beautiful girls in the land' (Rutherford and Baker, 2021). The fairy-tale ending that they strive for is only possible if they accept their own objectification.

On the other hand, in both Judaism and Islam, the focus is on women existing 'outside the unduly libidinal economy of the social,' (Hahner and Varder, 2012, p.28) and sexual relations are meant to be reserved for marriage. Thus, as these religions are experienced in a society in which women are oversexualised, a conflict arises, and it falls on the woman to solve it; she must cover up in order to prevent the societal objectification of her until she finds the man who is worthy of objectifying her (Hahner and Varda, 2012). This reflects an entrenched misogyny, which blames the woman for being a sexualised being by virtue of her simply existing. Modest dress supposedly acts as a barrier to this objectification, rather than calling on men to not see women only as sexual objects. In Islam, the Arabic word *awra* refers to what parts of the body

must be covered to align with modesty requirements. Women are required to cover their entire bodies, including their hair, apart from their face and hands. (Boulanouar, 2006, p135). Similarly, a Jewish woman must cover her elbows and knees, and her hair with a wig or headscarf if she is married (Loewenthal and Solaim, 2016). The implication is that if women do not dress in such a way, they will solely be seen for their physical attributes, rather than for the plethora of other characteristics that men are valued upon. This contradicts the essence of modesty as it is a projection of unabashed masculinity. Socially speaking, there seems to be no problem with the way that men perceive women, and the burden falls on the latter to consistently present themselves to the world in a way that makes life easier for men to follow the laws of their religion. Therefore, one can argue that women dressing modestly with the goal of preventing their own objectification stands in direct opposition to feminism's aims of emancipating women from oppression and treating them as equals to their male counterparts. There is no equality to speak of in a world in which women must persistently make decisions regarding things as basic as the clothes they wear each day for the sole purpose of benefitting men and preventing them from being sexualised by them.

However, modern society tends to dichotomise nuanced discourses into black or white. It is reductive and exclusionary of feminism to assume that religion in general, and consequently religious modest dress, is an antithesis to gender equality. A hugely celebrated aspect of feminism's progress is that it has afforded women choices they have never had before. With this logic, it might seem appropriate to adopt 'Choice Feminism', as it understands 'freedom as the capacity to make individual choices, and oppression as the inability to choose' (Ferguson, 2010, p.248). Choosing to dress modestly for religious purposes exercises this liberty just as much as the decision to dress in a way that

we might traditionally categorise as going against gender stereotypes. If feminists think that it is right to dictate how other women should dress in order to resist the patriarchy, then surely, they are contributing to the oppression that they hope to dispel, creating another hurdle to autonomy and liberation (Hahner and Scott).

Particularly in regard to religious women living as minorities in Western countries, the immediate assumption that religious dress is oppressive implies that women who abide by these dress codes are docile and incapable of making decisions for themselves and require the secular world to 'rescue' them. This saviour complex is damaging, not only feeding into larger notions of Western superiority, but also allowing space for religious prejudice to become a part of wider cultural beliefs. To return to the example of Sarkozy's burqa ban, which is not only patronising and paternalistic, as it depicts Muslim women as having no autonomy or understanding, but also fosters an atmosphere in which Islamophobia is allowed to be disguised as wanting to 'save' these women from their own religion (La Fornara, 2018). Essentially, this justifies the actions of those who are uncomfortable with the wearing of burqas to claim that their Islamophobia comes from a desire to help women be free from men. In this way, gender and religious prejudice intersect, and Choice Feminism seems to be a way to combat this, by giving women back their ability to choose as they so desire.

Furthermore, the assumption that religious women need saving from oppression ignores the possibility that the choice to dress modestly might be rooted in other aspects of their identity, not necessarily linked to gender. Due to their intersectional identities as both women and religious minorities living in western countries, Muslim and Jewish women are placed at a disadvantage, particularly as their voices are not listened to as much as other women who only face gender-based oppression.

Religious experience in this setting is considerably more complex, and others oversimplifying this without making the effort to properly understand it, acts as an impediment to inclusivity. When analysing religion from an outside perspective, it is often overlooked just how much religious principles permeate the daily lives of those who are observant (Michelman, 2003). For example, Jewish standards of modesty are called Tzeniut, and come from Halakha, Jewish law. They do not solely correspond to women, and importantly do not just relate to the way that Jewish people present themselves outwardly, but also refer to modesty in terms of being humble through actions, thoughts and behaviours, unrelated to sexual desires; dress is a way to express this humility (Sadatmoosavi et al, 2016). It therefore has other functions and acts as a part in a wider whole that characterises religion. To reduce it in a way that aligns with the secular narrative belittles its true meaning, and perhaps overlooks the possibility that there are other ways to value women that go beyond their sexual desirability.

Another reason for modest religious dress that should be taken into consideration before the women wearing it are dismissed as oppressed, exists particularly in the context of a majority non-religious society. This can be illustrated with regard to Muslim women who choose to wear hijabs, as many argue that it is a symbol of their religious faith, both for themselves but also to others, and is a way to stay connected to the culture that they or their family may originate from (La Fornara, 2018). Political connotations can impact this. For instance, following 9/11, many Muslim women living in the West were more likely to wear hijabs. As Islamophobia became more rampant, this seemed like a means to demonstrate a positive counter-image to the prejudices that were being created because of the unjust associations people made between Muslims and Islamic extremist terrorist groups (La Fornara, 2018). Hamdan explains that

she dresses like this as ‘a form of political and cultural resistance to the way the hijab is perceived in the West’ (Hamdan, 2007).

Furthermore, returning to France’s Burqa ban, the intersection between politics and religion is evident, as the government attempted to impose their views on the personal choices of their people. Thus, the same is true in terms of resistance against this. In 2011, Kenza Drider, alongside other Muslim women, stood outside the Notre Dame, wearing a niqab (Sunderland, 2013). She protested the right that was taken away from her to dress as she so wished. In this way, unfairly, her personal decision became inherently political, an active choice which opposed Sarkozy’s narrative that she was ‘enslaved.’ These examples demonstrate that the experience of religious women, particularly those living as minorities, is multifaceted, and therefore requires more understanding from the secular world before attempts are made to protect or save them from their faith.

This is especially important considering the ‘saving’ of these women perpetuates connotations of infantilising or belittling them which only adds to preconceived notions of gender and women’s inability to make their own decisions. Such infantilization, like the previously discussed over-sexualisation of women, is something which permeates the everyday life of modern society. This relates to the way that women present themselves, in addition to clothing, with for example, the expectation that women should remove their body hair. This ensures that they resemble their pre-pubescent appearance as much as possible, and demonstrates the way that society idealises the ‘girl’ over the ‘woman’ with the aim of re-emphasising the dominance of men in society. Men are not pressured in the same way to appear childlike, but rather must be as assertive as possible, highlighting that the patriarchy promotes the submission of women to men, such as that of a child



to an adult. This demonstrates the added significance of patronising religious women, it emphasises the notion that women are not capable of making their own decisions in the same way that men are. The tumultuous fight across the world to achieve women's suffrage is just one example of the way in which women's decision-making has been suppressed by patriarchal sentiment. When this sexist notion is combined with the Islamophobic prejudices that rely upon a Western superiority complex, the two parts of these women's identities intersect, and it becomes all the more evident that the narrative of 'protection' is simply a disguise for continued oppression. From this, one may convincingly argue that Choice Feminism is a view that we should support when talking about modest dress, as each woman, no matter their beliefs, should be free to wear whatever clothes they wish, modest or otherwise, in order to resist both sexism and anti-religious rhetoric.

Nevertheless, while Choice Feminism might succeed in its inclusion of modestly dressed women in the feminist cause, it is a flawed outlook in other ways. Ultimately, as Hirschman claims, "the invitation to leave one another alone is really an invitation to leave the current unjust arrangement in place." (Ferguson, 2010, p.250) While it is true that gender inequality is not the only factor for religious women dressing modestly, it undeniably plays a part, and as earlier explained, is a symptom of centuries of patriarchal traditions. Therefore, Choice Feminism's claim that women should be free to act as they wish, while certainly a goal of the general feminist project, mistakenly ignores the prevalence of internalised sexism/ As Ferguson argues, complete liberty, but as a choice resting on preconceptions of choices are shaped by the way that we are socially conditioned. She gives the example of stay-at-home mothers making the decision to leave their jobs and care for their children, not from a place of complete liberty, but as a choice resting on preconceptions of motherhood and child psychology.

There are many barriers in place for mothers wishing to leave home, such as the underfunded and under-regulated childcare systems in place, as well as the societal opposition against women who break free from this traditional route (Ferguson, 2010, p.250). This choice is influenced to such an extent that other possibilities become far less appealing, but also less realisable. As a consequence of these conditions, the choice to stay at home is rendered the only feasible option, bringing into question if this is truly liberty at all. This same conditioning can often occur in tight and loving religious communities. While certainly not an example which demonstrates the experience of all Jewish women who decide to dress modestly, certain ultra-orthodox Jewish communities are completely separated from the outside world. The Charedi community in Stamford Hill, London, raises its children to speak Yiddish as their first language rather than English, replaces what we might deem 'standard' education with religious learning, and barely engages with mainstream society through TV, newspapers or the Internet (Holman and Holman, 2002). In this way, young girls who are taught to cover their bodies from a very young age have never seen any different. It requires this understanding to see that the 'choice' that we might think they have, is not really there, given that they do not see any other option, nor know what life is like outside of their world. In this way, the flaws of Choice Feminism become apparent.

However, our rejection of Choice Feminism does not mean that we should endorse the Western saviour complex that, as mentioned, often results in the development of patronising and infantilising attitudes towards religious women. These beliefs only contribute to pre-existing prejudices which wrongly place the Western world as superior to others. While it is ignorant to claim that these women lack autonomy and need 'saving' as a consequence of the ingrained misogyny that

religious dress in part endorses, it is not the case that these personal choices have no social consequences (Holman and Holman, 2002). They influence the people surrounding them, as well as future generations, perpetuating a cycle of patriarchal views which are difficult to escape from. It is therefore the responsibility of feminists to make judgements on what we believe to be contributing to the feminist cause, but to do so without actively judging or excluding this group of people. We must instead make the effort to truly understand the motivation behind religious dress, and from there can make public judgements which are necessary to strive for a more equal future for all men and women, no matter their faith. In conclusion, the concept of religious women dressing modestly can and should be included in the feminist project, although with caution and consideration. This essay has examined the various motivating factors for religious dress, some of which do perpetuate patriarchal traditions that feminism should aim to combat. It has also considered and rejected an alternate feminist view Choice Feminism, which although seems convincing in its aim of inclusion, overlooks how the internalisation of misogynistic structures limits the freedoms it aspires for women to have. By focusing on more than one perspective and allowing space to consider the nuances of each, we can reach the necessary ethical resolution that is inclusive of all those involved. This mindset should be promoted when making academic, cultural, moral, and political judgements regarding the way religion manifests in our societies, and furthermore the particular experiences unique to those with intersectional identities, such as women belonging to religious minority groups. Ultimately, this inclusivity is dependent upon having respect for, and being willing to learn from and understand religious women who dress modestly. These prerequisites to the formation of judgements regarding modest religious dress ensure that all women, no matter how they choose to live their lives, are involved and listened to within the feminist project.

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