

## **What May be Seen of the Man or Woman**

It is clear from the above discussion that a woman may look at a man's body, apart from his *`awrah*, which between the navel and the knee, provided that her looking is free of lust and that no temptation is feared. The Prophet (pbuh) let `A'ishah watch a number of Abyssinians while they were engaging in spear play in the courtyard of the Prophet's mosque; she watched their performance until she had enough and retired.<sup>(1)</sup>

Similarly, a man is permitted to look at a woman's face and hands, since they are not part of her *`awrah*, provided that the looking is without lust and that no temptation is feared. `A'ishah narrated that her sister Asma' once came to the Prophet (pbuh) clad in transparent clothes which revealed her body. The Prophet (pbuh) averted his gaze and said to her,

*"O Asma', when a woman begins to menstruate, nothing should be seen of her except this and this,"*

and he pointed to his face and hands."<sup>(2)</sup>

This *hadith* is classified as weak, but there are other sound *hadiths* which support the thesis that only the face and hands may be seen if they can be viewed without temptation.

In summary, the innocent look at what is other than the *`awrah* of a man or a woman is permissible as long as it does not become an intent look or is repeated with perhaps a taint of pleasure and lust. It is the reasonableness of the Islamic *Shari`ah* that a glance which accidentally falls on something, which is not permissible to be seen, is forgiven. Jarir ibn `Abdullah reported, "I asked the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) about the unexpected glance, and he replied, '*Avert your eyes*'."<sup>(3)</sup> This means that one should not look back deliberately.

## **The Display of Women's Adornment: What Is Permissible and What Is Not**

Thus far we have discussed the subject of the lowering of the gaze, which is commanded for both men and women in the two verses cited.

---

1. Narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim.

2. Narrated by Abu Dawud.

3. Narrated by Ahmad, Abu Dawud, Muslim, and At-Tirmidhi.

These verses also contain other divine instructions. Allah (Glory be to Him) says,

﴿That they should .... not display their adornment, except that which is apparent of it...﴾

(An-Nur: 31)

The adornment of women includes both natural features such as the face, hair, and other attractive parts of the body, and artificial enhancement of beauty, such as the dress, ornaments, make-up, and the like. In this noble verse Allah (Glorified be He) commands women not to show their adornment "*except that which is apparent of it*".

Scholars have different opinions concerning the extent of this exception. Does it mean what is exposed by necessity and without intention, for example, if the wind exposes some part? Or does it mean what is customarily, or instinctively, or by its very nature exposed?

The majority of the early Muslim jurists accepted the latter meaning. Ibn `Abbas interpreted "*except that which is apparent of it*" to mean kohl and a ring, and Anas has said something similar; the permissibility of showing the face and hands is implicit in the permissibility of showing kohl and a ring. Sa`id ibn Jubayr, `Ata', and Al-Awza`i stated explicitly that showing the face and hands is permissible. `A'ishah, Qatadah, and others added bracelets to what may be shown of the adornments; this interpretation implies that a part of the arm may also be shown. Various scholars allowed the exposure of the lower part of the arm up to a length varying between four inches to one-half of the arm.

On the other hand, others such as `Abdullah ibn Mas`ud, restricted the application of "*that which is apparent*" to that which necessarily appears, such as the outer garment and the like.

My own preference lies with that group of the Companions and their immediate followers<sup>(1)</sup> who include the face, the hands, and their ordinary adornments, such as kohl and a ring in the application of the Qur'anic phrase, "*except that which is apparent of it*".

---

1. This opinion is preferred by At-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, Az-Zamakhshari, Ar-Razi, and other interpreters of the Qur'an. You may refer to their explanations of this verse of *Surat an-Nur*.

This permissibility, however, excludes such cosmetics which women today use for their cheeks, lips and nails. We consider these cosmetics to be excessive, and they must not be used except within a woman's own home. Women using these cosmetics to attract men's attention when going out of house, is obviously *haram*. At the same time, however, the interpretation of "*that which is apparent*" as being the outer garment or covering is not acceptable, for this is not something which can possibly be concealed so that an exemption must be made; similarly, what the wind blows cannot be controlled, whether an exemption is made or not. What strikes the mind is that the purpose of the exemption was to provide some concession for the believing woman by permitting her to show something which is possible to conceal. Reason would indicate that it is the face and hands which are exempted from covering.

Assuredly, a woman is permitted to show her face and hands because covering them would be a hardship on her, especially if she must go out on some lawful business. For example, a widow may have to work to support her children, or a woman who is not well-off may have to help her husband in his work; had covering the face and hands been made obligatory, it would have occasioned such women hardship and distress. Al-Qurtubi said,

"It seems probable that, since the face and hands are customarily uncovered, and it is, moreover, required that they be uncovered during acts of worship such as Prayer and *Hajj*, the exemption (referred to in the verses of *Surat an-Nur*) pertains to them. This conclusion is supported by what Abu Dawud transmitted on the authority of `A'ishah. She said that Asma', the daughter of Abu Bakr, once came to the Prophet (pbuh) wearing transparent clothes. The Prophet (pbuh) turned his face away from her and said to her, '*O Asma', when a woman begins to menstruate, nothing should be seen of her except this and this,*' and he pointed to his face and hands."

In addition to this, we may infer from Allah's words, "*Tell the believing men that they should lower their gazes,*" that the faces of the women on the Prophet's time were not veiled. Had the entire body including the face been covered, it would have made no sense to command them to lower their gaze, since there would have been nothing to be seen.

In spite of all this, however, because of the widespread immorality and laxity in our time, it is better for the Muslim woman to conceal all her

adornments, including her face as possible as she can. Obviously, more caution in this regard is necessary for a woman who is so beautiful that men may be attracted to her. Allah (Glorified be He) also says,

﴿ ... that they should draw their head-covering over their bosoms... ﴾

(An-Nur: 31)

It is obligatory for the Muslim woman to cover her head, breasts, and neck completely so that nothing of them can be seen by onlookers. In addition, Allah (Glorified be He) says,

﴿ ... and not display their adornment except to their husbands or their fathers... ﴾

(An-Nur: 31)

This injunction prohibits women to show their concealed adornments, such as the ears, hair, neck, breasts, or ankles, to men who are outside the *mahram* relationship, before whom they are permitted to expose only the face and hands "that which is apparent of it".

Twelve categories of persons are exempted from this prohibition:

1. "Their husbands:" The husband and wife can see whatever they please of each other. A *hadith* stated, "Guard your nakedness (*`awrah*) except in front of your wife."
2. "Their fathers," including the grandfathers from both mother's and father's sides as well.
3. "Their husbands' fathers," for these are regarded as fathers to women.
4. "Their sons," as the grandsons from both sons and daughters.
5. "Their husbands' sons (stepsons)," a necessity for normal interaction, since the woman is regarded as their mother.
6. "Their brothers," including half and step brothers.
7. "Their brothers' sons," since marriage is permanently prohibited between a man and his paternal aunt.
8. "Their sisters' sons," since marriage is permanently prohibited between a man and his maternal aunt.

9. "*Their women*," meaning female relatives and sisters-in-faith, that is, other Muslim women. As for non-Muslim women, they are not allowed to see the Muslim woman's adornments other than what is allowed for non-*mahram* men, and the correctness of this opinion is verified.
10. "*Those whom their right hands possess*," refers to bond-servants, because in Islam they are considered members of the family. Some scholars restrict this permission to female bond-servants only.
11. "*Male servants who lack sexual desire*," refers to hired hands or household servants who, because of some physical or mental condition, are devoid of sexual desire. This is applicable only under the following two conditions: that they are the servants of those into whose houses they are given entry and that they lack sexual desire.
12. "*Small children who have no carnal knowledge of women*:" These are small children whose consciousness of sex is not yet developed. But if evidence of the sexual urge is noted among them, a woman should treat them like non-*mahram* men even though they may not have reached puberty.

The verse in question does not mention maternal and paternal uncles because they customarily occupy the same status as the father. A *hadith* stated,

*"A man's uncle is like his father."*<sup>(1)</sup>

## **Woman's `Aurah**

Whatever part of the woman's body that is not allowed to be shown constitutes her *`awrah*. It must be covered, for exposing it is *haram*.

Consequently, with respect to non-*mahram* men and other Muslim women, a woman's *`awrah* is her entire body with the exception of her face and hands, according to the interpretation we have preferred. We agree with Ar-Razi's argument that Islam has permitted her to expose those parts of the body, the face and hands, which are needed to be exposed in order to carry out daily business and for giving and taking; it has commanded her to cover what it is not necessary to expose, and has forgiven her accidental, inadvertent exposures or such exposures as are required by necessity. All

---

1. Narrated by Muslim.