In “Veiled Intentions: Don’t Judge a Muslim Girl by Her Coverings”, Maysan Haydar extolls on the personal freedom that she gained from wearing veils over her hair in adherence to her Muslim upbringing. In looking at contemporary American society, so much of how people view the world and the people in it has a direct correlation to what they see, rather than personal interaction. Haydar explains, through various life experiences, “how much of a saving grace” having worn a veil was for her (180). The personal freedom achieved in situations of social or societal pressure can be lessened by adherence to religious views of modest, whether it is life in high school, in the adult working world, or even around friends and family.

If there were a poll of the post-MTV American population, it would be tough to find a single person who escaped their narcissistic and judgmental four year prison term, also known as High School, unscathed. Haydar speaks of that term of her life, without references to the name brand clothes she wore or how many boys she kissed, but instead by recognizing that she was “...being liked for who I was beyond my body” (181). The veil she wore allowed her to circumvent some of the social pitfalls of that period in life and gave her the unique ability to be a girl in high school who knew she was attractive for her ability to relate to others “...without all the confusing sexual pressure” (181). She notes that because boys assumed she wasn’t able to date, it lifted “the weirdness of boy-girl interaction” (181). This isn’t a viewpoint most of American high school students from the past two generations can even understand, considering their experience was fraught with worry about their hair, clothes, shoes, or some other superficial concern that they can look back on from adulthood and shake their head at. Having a modest style of dress, while setting someone apart from the norm, also allows them to relate with both the male and female of their peers in a non-sexual and non-visually judgmental way.

These lessons, learned, but not fully appreciated at the time, followed Haydar into her adult experiences. It was on entering her adulthood and taking a job in New York, that Haydar began to “truly understand what veiling means” (181). Of course, for most people that’s the point when real understand develops. Perhaps this has to do with the frontal lobe of a human brain not fully developing until around age twenty-two, or maybe it’s just that living at home and the caged environment of Kindergarten through Graduation provides a more slanted and youthful view of the world. Whichever the case may be, Haydar notes that it was at this point in her life that she recognized “the way women acted out to draw attention to themselves” (181). The upbringing of a person can certainly impact the way that they present themselves in their own adulthood, as they emulate the examples set by their parents and the other adults in their lives. This was true for Haydar as well, as she notes that her mother used an alternative method of presenting veiling as a feminist, forward thinking option, noting that “Covering removes that first level of being judged” and removes the “desire to be wanted solely for my looks” (180). Haydar explained this most poetically by referencing the veil’s modesty allowing her “to be seen as a whole person instead of a twenty-piece chicken dinner” (180).

In addition to noticing the impacts of her modest dress on others, or rather its impact on how they treat her, she also notes the correlation between how people present themselves to strangers versus their loved ones. In Haydar’s experience she notes a woman who disparaged her covering, but spent an inordinate amount of time on “complicated hairstyle, loads of makeup and jeans she probably had to sew herself into” (180). This is an example of skewed priorities in modern America. Western priorities are not on track, as Haydar notes, “American women spend hours getting ready for strangers... but don’t give the same effort to those who see them in intimate settings” (180). In contrast, her experience from within her own culture and life has been that women cover themselves in public or around strangers, but that they are diligent in caring for their bodies and inclined to dress up for their close friends and families. As a result of her daily veiling, she notes that people who see women of her culture in less public settings “express surprise at the degree which these cloaked women maintain themselves” (180). In a society of oversharing (see: Facebook), it’s probably surprising to note that because someone isn’t willing to share their body or face with the public, it has to be because they are disfigured or ugly. Instead, it is more that some, like Haydar, save that portion of themselves for those who truly impact their lives instead of the entire world through a Facebook post of being at the beach in a bikini.

The personal freedom found in religious modesty can provide life experiences and insight that might not be garnered from life in standard American conformity. This is the freedom to know that a person is accepted in their circle because of who they are and not because of what they look like. This is the freedom to know that a raise at work is not proportional to the size of a woman’s breasts or the tightness of her pants. This is a freedom that at its basic level allows women to show the proper appreciation and respect for their family and friends instead of wasting the efforts on strangers. Haydar may have summed up her viewpoint best in the last few words of her essay when she said, “no one should suffer for what they look like or what they wear” (184).

Works Cited

Haydar, Maysan. “Veiled Intentions: Don’t Judge a Muslim Girl by Her Coverings.” Viewpoints.

Ed. W. Royce Adams, 8th ed. Boston, Wadsworth, 2013. (179-184)