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Behind the Veil

By LORRAINE ALI

ALBUQUERQUE

HEBAH AHMED assessed the weather before she stepped out of her minivan. "It's windy," she said with a sigh, tucking a loose bit of hair into her scarf. Her younger sister, Sarah, watched out the window as dust devils danced across the parking lot. "Oh, great," she said, "I'm going to look like the flying nun."

Hebah, who is 32, and Sarah, 28, do wear religious attire, but of the Islamic sort: a loose outer garment called a jilbab; a khimar, a head covering that drapes to the fingertips; and a niqab, a scarf that covers most of the face. Before the shopping trip, they consulted by phone to make sure they didn't wear the same color. "Otherwise, we start to look like a cult," Sarah explained.

When Hebah yanked open the van's door, the wind filled her loose-fitting garments like a sail. Her 6-year-old daughter, Khadijah Leseman, laughed. Hebah unloaded Khadijah and her 2-year-old son, Saulih, while struggling to hold her khimar and niqab in place.

The wind whipped Sarah's navy-blue jilbab like a sheet on a clothesline as she wrangled a shopping cart. Her 3-year-old son, Eesa Soliman, stayed close at her side, lost in the billowing fabric.

Most people in the parking lot stopped to stare.

If the sisters were aware that all eyes were on them, they gave no signs. In the supermarket, they ignored the curious glances in the produce section, the startled double takes by the baked goods and the scowls near the cereal. They glided along the aisles, stopping to compare prices on spaghetti sauce.

Two Hispanic children gasped and ran behind their mother. "Why are they dressed that way?" the girl asked her mother in Spanish. "Islam," the woman said, also telling the child that the women were from Saudi Arabia.

Hebah, who is from Tennessee, smiled at the girl, but all that could be seen of her face were the lines around the eyes that signaled a grin. After nearly a decade under the veil, she and her sister know full well that they are a source of fascination — and many other reactions — to those around them.

Hebah said she has been kicked off planes by nervous flight attendants and shouted down in a Wal-Mart by angry shoppers who called her a terrorist. Her sister was threatened by a stranger in a picnic area who claimed he had killed a woman in Afghanistan “who looked just like” her. When she joined the Curves gym near her home in Edgewood, N.M., some members threatened to quit. “They said Islamists were taking over,” Ms. Ahmed said.

Her choice to become so identifiably Muslim even rattled her parents, immigrants from Egypt.

“I was more surprised than anything,” said her father, Mohamed Ahmed, who lives in Houston with her mother, Mervat Ahmed. He said he raised his daughters with a deep sense of pride about their Muslim background, but nevertheless did not expect them to wear a hijab, a head scarf, let alone a niqab.

Raised in what she described as a “minimally religious” household by parents who wore typical American clothes, Hebah used to think that women who wore a niqab were crazy, she said.

“It looked like they were suffocating,” she said. “I thought, ‘There’s no way God meant for us to walk around the earth that way, so why would anyone do that to themselves?’ ” Now many people ask that same question of her.

HEBAH AHMED (her first name is pronounced HIB-ah) was born in Chattanooga, raised in Nashville and Houston, and speaks with a slight drawl. She played basketball for her Catholic high school, earned a master’s in mechanical engineering and once worked in the Gulf of Mexico oilfields.

She is not a Muslim Everywoman; it is not a role she would ever claim for herself. Her story is hers alone. But she was willing to spend several days with a reporter to give an idea of what American life looks like from behind the veil, a garment that has become a powerful symbol of culture clash.

All that’s visible of Ms. Ahmed when she ventures into mixed company are her deep brown eyes, some faint freckles where the sun hits the top of her nose, and her hands. She used to leave the house in jeans and T-shirt (she still can, under her jilbab), but that all changed

after the 9/11 attacks. It shook her deeply that the people who had committed the horrifying acts had identified themselves as Muslims.

“I just kept thinking ‘Why would they do this in the name of Islam?’ ” she said. “Does my religion really say to do those horrible things?”

So she read the Koran and other Islamic texts and began attending Friday prayers at her local Islamic Center. While she found nothing that justified the attacks, she did find meaning in prayers about strength, piety and resolve. She saw them as guideposts for navigating the world.

“I was really questioning my life’s purpose,” Ms. Ahmed said. “And everything about the bigger picture. I just wasn’t about me and my career anymore.”

She also reacted to a backlash against Islam and the news that many American Muslim women were not covering for fear of being targeted. “It was all so wrong,” she said. She took it upon herself to provide a positive example of her embattled faith, in a way that was hard to ignore.

So on Sept. 17, 2001, she wore a hijab into the laboratory where she worked, along with her business attire.

“A co-worker said, ‘You need to wrap a big ol’ American flag around your head so people know what side you’re on,’ ” Ms. Ahmed said. “From then on, they never let up.”

Three months later, she quit her job and started wearing a niqab, covering her face from view when in the presence of men other than her husband.

“I do this because I want to be closer to God, I want to please him and I want to live a modest lifestyle,” said Ms. Ahmed, who asked that her appearance without a veil not be described. “I want to be tested in that way. The niqab is a constant reminder to do the right thing. It’s God-consciousness in my face.”

But there were secular motivations, too. In her job, she worked with all-male teams on oil rigs and in labs.

“No matter how smart I was, I wasn’t getting the respect I wanted,” she said. “They still hit on me, made crude remarks and even smacked me on the butt a couple times.”

Wearing the niqab is “liberating,” she said. “They have to deal with my brain because I don’t give them any other choice.”

Her first run-in with public opinion came, ordinarily enough, while driving.

“A woman in the car next to me was waving, honking, motioning for me to roll down my window,” she said. “I tried to ignore her, but finally, we both had to stop at a light. I rolled down the window and braced myself. Then she said ‘Excuse me, your burqa is caught in your door.’ That broke the ice.”

Her sister Sarah started wearing a niqab around the same time, while completing her engineering degree at Rice University. The learning curve was steep; both sisters found they needed to carry straws for drinking in public, but eating was another story. Once Sarah forgot she was wearing a niqab and took a bite of an ice cream cone. “Humiliating,” she said, shaking her head.

Breathing wasn’t as difficult as they had imagined, but Hebah had a hard time contending with all the material around her.

“I kept losing things or leaving them behind,” she said. “But it’s like when you first put on high heels or a bra. It’s not the most comfortable thing, but there’s a purpose, and you believe that purpose outweighs the discomfort.”

WOMEN who cover totally, called niqabis, make up a tiny sliver of the estimated three million to seven million Muslims in the United States, yet they have come to embody much of what Westerners find foreign about Islam. Hidden under yards of cloth, they are the most visceral reminders of the differences between East and West, and an indisputable sign that Islam is weaving its way into American culture.

In France, President Nicolas Sarkozy is backing a bill to ban women from publicly wearing the niqab and its more conservative cousin, the burqa, which covers the wearer’s eyes with a mesh panel. Similar legislation is being considered in the province of Quebec and Belgium.

In the United States, there have been flashpoints: in 2006, Ginnah Muhammad, a plaintiff in a small claims case in Detroit, refused the judge’s request to take off her niqab during court proceedings and so her case was thrown out. She later found herself in front of the Michigan Supreme Court, arguing for her right to wear the niqab in court. The high court upheld the judge’s action.

Ms. Muhammad and five other American niqabis were interviewed for this article, in addition to the Ahmed sisters. All of them made the decision to wear the niqab when they were single. And, although the Muslim faith does not require women to cover their faces, all

believe the niqab gave them a bit of extra credit in the eyes of God. “The more clothes you wear, the closer you are to God,” Ms. Muhammad said.

Menahal Begawala, 28, was raised in Queens, the daughter of Indian immigrants. She began covering her face at age 19. “I suppose there is some part of me that wants to make a statement, ‘I am a Muslim,’ ” she said.

She is a former grade school teacher now living in Irving, Tex. “I think I blow perceptions because I speak English, I’m educated and it’s my choice to cover,” Ms. Begawala said.

Sarah Zitterman, who as a teenager was a blond California surfer, converted to Islam after living in Zanzibar as a student. In Africa, she felt more at peace with the call to prayer than she ever did at church back home in San Diego. Now 30 and the mother of three in Fresno, Calif., Ms. Zitterman said that being white and American has made her experience under the niqab a little easier.

“It’s less scary for others,” she said. “But the hardest is when kids are frightened. If there’s no men around, I’ll uncover and say ‘Hey, I’m just a mommy — see?’ ”

Most of the niqabis interviewed said that they have received almost as much criticism at their local mosques as at their local malls. Many Muslim Americans do not like being associated with the niqab, saying it gives non-Muslims the wrong idea about their faith.

“The idea of covering one’s face is challenging, even in our community,” said Edina Lekovic, communications director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles. “For more-mainstream Muslims, the understanding is that you dress modestly and cover everything but your hands and your face. So for a woman to choose to wear niqab is above and beyond what the Koran calls for.”

SARAH and Hebah Ahmed live only a few miles apart in Albuquerque’s East Mountains — Hebah off a winding dirt road with her children and husband, Zayd Chad Leseman, an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico; Sarah in a rural geodesic dome with her son and husband, Yasser Soliman, an engineer with Intel.

Hebah and her husband, who is from Moline, Ill., met as graduate students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. By the time they were married in 2003, he had converted to Islam and taken the first name Zayd. People were often confused by the sight of the couple, she said, because he looks like “a corn-fed, Midwestern guy, then he’s walking with this covered women who’s dark — they can tell from my eyes.” She laughed and added, “They must wonder where he bought me.”

Mr. Leseman supports his wife's decision to wear the niqab. "I am proud of my wife's conviction to her beliefs, but it took some adjustment being out in public with her, especially with all the stares and comments," he said.

Once, he said, "we wanted to go to my sister's softball game, and my mother said 'Yeah, right! Hebah will have to stay in the van.' People think because her face is covered that her feelings are, too."

The sisters make the 30-minute drive to Albuquerque a few times a week to grocery shop, attend prayers at the Islamic Center of New Mexico and drink smoothies at Satellite Coffee. The trunk of Hebah's car is filled with pamphlets on Islam, English translations of the Koran and granola bars for her children.

When it comes to dealing with the public, she is a niqabi ambassador, friendly and outgoing. "I look at those run-ins with people as an opportunity to explain who I am and maybe shed some light on Islam," Hebah said. "If they knew me or more about my faith, I'm sure they would think differently."

She is used to explaining that a niqab is not a burqa and that no, she doesn't wear it at home. In an all-female setting like Curves, one would not be able to identify a niqabi among the other women in workout gear. It does get hot under the jilbab, but as Sarah explained, it is "sort of like a self-contained air-conditioning unit that circulates cool air."

Hebah has grown so used to her attire, she often forgets she has it on. "Sometimes I'll pass a guy who's looking at me, and I'm like 'Is he checking me out?'" she said. "Then I'll catch a glimpse of myself in a window and it's like, 'Uh, hello, Hebah — no.'"

WHILE driving on Interstate 40, heading home, Ms. Ahmed wedged her cellphone between her khimar and ear, then joked, "Look, a hands-free device." Sarah rolled her eyes.

There are many types of niqabs, Hebah explained, pulling at least a half-dozen out of her closet. Pushing aside her worn copy of "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus," she made room for them on the bed.

Her niqabs were made by a seamstress in Egypt whom she met while visiting extended family, but many American niqabis buy their garments online. "You can't get them here," Hebah said. "I mean, the ones at the back of our local halal store — hideous."

As she rummaged through her scarves, Khadijah tied one around her waist and twirled like a ballerina. Muslim women who cover usually wait until puberty to conceal their hair and

bodies in public, but Khadijah likes to wear a hijab for dress-up — especially the pink one with sparkles.

Hebah said she wanted Khadijah “to be a confident female who is not victimized or abused.” She explained: “For me, the best way to do that is to do what I’m doing, and not just because Mama told her to, but because of her conviction. At the end of the day, she has to stand in front of God alone.”

When reminded that hers is a rocky path, and it would likely be the same for her daughter, Ms. Ahmed paused, then began to cry.

“People don’t understand,” she said, wiping a tear with the edge of her sleeve. “We’re really strong, but it takes a toll on you. Sometimes you think, ‘I just want to rest.’”

Sarah, helping her sister out, said: “We think of paradise at that point. Heaven is where we’re supposed to rest. That’s what gets us through.”

According to the article, list at least three reasons why Hebah Ahmed wears the hijab.

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2)

3)



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