

120388 - Response to those who quote the hadith about the Khath'ami woman as evidence for it being permissible for a woman to uncover

the question

In the hadith of al-Fadl ibn al-'Abbaas, when a beautiful woman came to ask the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) a question, and al-Fadl was riding behind him during the Farewell Pilgrimage, the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) turned al-Fadl's face away, wasn't the woman's face uncovered and the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) did not criticize her for that? Does this indicate that it is permissible for a woman to uncover her face?

Detailed answer

It is not valid to quote the hadith of al-Fadl ibn al-'Abbaas (may Allah be pleased with him) as evidence for it being permissible for a woman to uncover her face. The scholars have answered this in two ways.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ameen ash-Shinqeeti (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

I will also respond to that in two ways:

Firstly: there is nothing in any of the narations of this hadith that clearly states that her face was uncovered and that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) saw her with her face uncovered and approved of that. Rather the most that is mentioned in the hadith is that she was "radiant", and in some versions of the hadith it says that "she was beautiful." Knowing that she was radiant or beautiful does not necessarily imply that her face was uncovered and that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) approved of that. Rather it may have been that her face-veil was lifted without her intending that, so some of the men saw her without her intending to uncover her face.

Or it may be that her beauty was known before that time, because it is possible that he may have seen her before that, and recognized her. One of the things that would explain that is the fact that ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abbaas (may Allah be pleased with him), who narrated this hadith from him, was not present at the time when his brother looked at her and she looked at him, because of what we have noted above, that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) had sent ‘Abdullah on ahead at night from Muzdalifah to Mina, with the weaker ones among his family, and it is known that he only narrated the hadith in question via his brother al-Fadl, and his brother did not tell him that her face was uncovered. The fact that al-Fadl knew that she was radiant or beautiful does not necessarily mean that she deliberately uncovered her face, because it is possible that he saw her face and realized that she was beautiful because of her face-veil being lifted without her intending to do that, and it is possible that he had seen her before that and known that she was beautiful.

Some may argue that the fact that the words “she was radiant” is followed by the particle *fa* (meaning “thus”),

and the words “thus al-Fadl started to look at her” and “and he was impressed by her beauty” clearly indicate that he could see her face and looked at it because he was impressed by its beauty.

The answer to that is: that corroborative evidence is not necessarily to be understood in that manner, and does not necessarily mean that her face was not covered and that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) saw that and approved of it, because of the possibilities that we have mentioned above. Moreover, a woman may be known to be beautiful and looked at for her beauty even if her face is covered, because of the beauty of her overall shape. It may be known that she is radiant and beautiful simply by seeing her fingertips, as is well known. Hence Ibn Mas‘ood interpreted the verse (interpretation of the meaning): “except that which [necessarily] appears thereof” [an-Noor 24:31] as referring to the outer garment, as noted above.

Secondly: the woman was in ihram, and when a woman is in ihram she does not cover her face and hands, so she should uncover her face if there are no non-mahram men looking at her, and she must cover her face in front of men when she is in ihram, as is well known from the wives of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and others. No one said that anyone looked at this Khath'ami women except al-Fadl ibn 'Abbaas (may Allah be pleased with him), and the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) stopped al-Fadl from looking at her. Thus it is known that she was in ihram and no one was looking at her, so she uncovered her face because she was in ihram, not because it was permissible to uncover her face.

Some may say: the fact that she was with the pilgrims makes it likely that men could see her face if it was uncovered, because women usually have their faces uncovered when they are among the pilgrims, so there are bound to be men who see her face.

The response to that is: it that the Companions of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) were very pious and would not look at women, so there is no reason, on the basis of rational thinking, Islamic teaching or what is usually the case, not to think that none of them looked at her, for if any of them had looked at her that would have been narrated, as it was narrated that al-Fadl looked at her. From the fact that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) turned al-Fadl's gaze away from her, it may be understood that non-mahram men should not be allowed at a young woman whose face is uncovered, as you see. The evidence indicates that she was obliged to cover all of her body in front of them.

To sum up, the fair-minded person realizes that it is extremely unlikely that the lawgiver would give women permission to uncover their faces in front of non-mahram men when the face is the source of beauty, and looking at the face of a beautiful young woman is one of the most provocative and tempting causes of human desire that leads to inappropriate behaviour. Have you not heard the words of the poet:

I say, please let me have one glance (at her), then I do not care if the Day of Judgement starts after that?

Would you allow him to look in that manner at your wife, your daughters or your sisters?!

End quote from Adwaa' al-Bayaan (6/254-256).

Shaykh al-'Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

This hadith – that is, the hadith of the Khath'ami woman – was quoted as evidence by those who think that it is permissible for a woman to uncover her face. This hadith is undoubtedly one of the ambiguous hadiths that may indicate that it is permissible or may indicate that it is not permissible. As for the possibility of it being permissible, that is clear. As for the possibility that it does not indicate that it is permissible, we say: This woman was in ihram, and what is prescribed for the woman who is in ihram is for her to leave her face uncovered, and we do not know of anyone who looked at her apart from the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and al-Fadl ibn al-'Abbaas. With regard to al-Fadl, the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) did not approve of his looking at her; rather he turned his face away. With regard to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), al-Haafiz ibn Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) stated that it was permissible for the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) to look at a woman or be alone with her in a way that was not permissible for anyone else, just as it was permissible for him to marry a woman without a mahr (dowry) and without a wali (guardian), and to marry more than four women. Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, allowed more flexibility to him in some of these matters, because he was the most perfect of humanity in terms of chastity, and it is not possible for the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) to be tempted as other people could be tempted to do something that is not appropriate for a man of dignity and honour.

Based on that, the basic principle according to the scholars is that if there is a possibility (of interpreting something in a different manner), then quoting it as evidence is invalid. This hadith is ambiguous, and with regard to ambiguous texts, we are obliged to refer them to the unambiguous texts which clearly indicate that it is not permissible for a woman to uncover her face, and that a woman's uncovering her face is one of the causes of fitnah (temptation) and evil. End quote.

Duroos wa Fataawa al-Haram al-Makki (1408 AH, tape no. 16, side B).

And Allah knows best.