

Liberation by the Veil

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In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Modesty and chastity , very important ideologies with Islam, are achieved by prescribing standards on behavior and the dress of a Muslim. A woman who adheres to the tenements of Islam is required to follow the dress code called Hijab, other synonymes are Veil, Purdah, or just Covering.

It is an act of faith and establishes a Muslim's life with honor, respect and dignity. The Hijab is viewed as a liberation for women, in that the covering brings about “an aura of respect” (Takim, 22) and women are recognized as individuals who are admired for their mind and personality, “not for their beauty or lack of it” (Mustafa) and not as sex objects.

Contrary to popular belief, the covering of the Muslim woman is not oppression but a liberation from the shackles of male scrutiny and the standards of attractiveness. In Islam, a woman is free to be who she is inside, and immuned from being portrayed as sex symbol and lusted after.

Islam exalts the status of a woman by commanding that she “enjoys equal rights to those of man in everything, she stands on an equal footing with man “ (Nadvi, 11) and both share mutual rights and obligations in all aspects of life.

Men and women though equal are not identical, and each compliments the other in the different roles and functions that they are responsible to. “ From an Islamic perspective, to view a woman as a sex symbol is to denigrate her. Islam believes that a woman is to be judged by her [virtuous] character and actions rather than by her looks or physical features” (Takim, 22).

In the article, “My Body Is My Own Business”, Ms. Naheed Mustafa , a young Canadian born and raised, university-educated Muslim woman writes, “The Quran [which is the Holy Book for Muslims] teaches us that men and women are equal, that individuals should not be judged according to gender, beauty, wealth or privilege.

The only thing that makes one person better than another is his or her character.” She goes on to say, “In the Western world, the hijab has come to symbolize either forced silence or radical, unconscionable militancy. Actually, its neither. It is simply a woman's assertion that judgement of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction.”

Muslims believe that God gave beauty to all women, but that her beauty is not to be seen by the world, as if the women are meat on the shelf to be picked and looked over. When she covers herself she puts herself on a higher level and men will look at her with respect and she is noticed for her intellect, faith and personality, not for her beauty.

In many societies, especially in the West, women are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness and are compelled to follow the male standards of beauty and abstract notions of what is attractive, half realizing that such pursuit is futile and often humiliating (Mustafa).

Chastity, modesty, and piety are promoted by the institution of veiling. "The hijab in no way prevents a woman from playing her role as an important individual in a society nor does it make her inferior." (Takim,22)

A Muslim woman may wear whatever she pleases in the presence of her husband and family or among women friends. But when she goes out or when men other than her husband or close family are present she is expected to wear a dress which will cover [her hair and] all parts of her body, and not reveal her figure.

What a contrast with Western fashions which every year concentrate quite intentionally on exposing yet another erogenous zone to the public gaze! The intention of Western dress is to reveal the figure, while the intention of Muslim dress is to conceal [and cover] it, at least in public (Lemu,25).

The Muslim woman does not feel the pressures to be beautiful or attractive, which is so apparent in the Western and Eastern cultures. She does not have to live up to expectations of what is desirable and what is not. Superficial beauty is not the Muslim woman's concern, her main goal is inner spiritual beauty. She does not have to use her body and charms to get recognition or acceptance in society.

It is very different from the cruel methods that other societies subject women, in that their worth is always judged by their physical appearance. There are numerous examples of discrimination at the workplace where women are either accepted or rejected, because of their attractiveness and sex appeal.

Another benefit of adorning the veil is that it is a protection for women. Muslims believe that when women display their beauty to everybody, they degrade themselves by becoming objects of sexual desire and become vulnerable to men, who look at them as "gratification for the sexual urge" (Nadvi,8).

The Hijab makes them out as women belonging to the class of modest chaste women, so that transgressors and sensual men may recognize them as such and dare not tease them out of mischief" (Nadvi, 20). Hijab solves the problem of sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances, which is so demeaning for women, when men get mixed signals and believe that women want their advances by the way they reveal their bodies.

The western ideology of, 'if you have it, you should flash it!' is quite opposite to the Islamic principle, where the purpose is not to bring attention to oneself, but to be modest. Women in so many societies are just treated as sex symbols and nothing more than just a body who "display themselves to get attention" (Mustafa).

A good example is in advertising, where a woman's body is used to sell products. Women

are constantly degraded, and subjected to reveal more and more of themselves. .

The Covering sanctifies her and forces society to hold her in high esteem. Far from humiliating the woman, Hijab actually grants the woman an aura of respect, and bestows upon her a separate and unique identity (Takim, 22).

According to the Qu'ran, the same high standards of moral conduct are for men as it is for women. Modesty is essential in a man's life, as well, whether it be in action, morals or speech. Islam also commands proper behavior and dress of men, in that they are not allowed to make a wanton show of their bodies to attract attention onto themselves, and they too must dress modestly. They have a special commandment to lower their eyes, and not to brazenly stare at women.

In Sura an-Nur of the Holy Qu'ran it says,

“ Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them, and God is well acquainted with what they do”. (4:31)

Many of the misconceptions of the Muslim woman in the west, particularly her veil stems from Arab and Muslim countries that have deviated from the true doctrines of Islam, and have “ mixed up Islamic principles with pre-Islamic pagan traditions” (Bahnassawi, 67)

In this present period of decline from Islam, many Muslim women are alienated , isolated from social life, and are oppressed by Muslim men and rulers who use the name of religion for their injustices. (Bahnassawi, 65)

In this instance, the Hijab is used as a means of keeping many Muslim women away from society, with the misconception that it signifies isolation and weakness. But as many Muslim women come back into the fold of the untainted and true Islam, they are able to recognize the injustice of men who have for so long stripped them of their rights to be an integral part of society and “deserving the same dignity, honor, progress and prosperity as the men” (Nadvi,26).

Women regaining their true identity and role in society, are now wearing Hijab and embracing its concept of liberation for women, and are taking their rightful places that Islam had endowed upon them fourteen hundred years ago.

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Thank you, peace and blessings of Allah to all my brothers and sisters in Islam.

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