

The Beauty of Hijab

BY THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST BENEFICENT, THE MOST MERCIFUL

In Islam, both men and women are told to dress and behave modestly:

Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. [24:30]

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons; this will be more proper, that they may be recognized and not annoyed. And Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. [33:59]

Neither sex should be allowed to exploit its own physical features for selfish gain, nor allow others to manipulate their sexuality. One of the most misunderstood principles of Islam is that of the hijab, or covering, that Muslim women wear. The following two articles, written by Muslim women in the west, reveal the marvellous truths behind this Islamic practice.

My Body is My Own Business

by Ms. Naheed Mustafa

A Canadian-born Muslim woman has taken to wearing the traditional hijab scarf. It tends to make people see her as either a terrorist or a symbol of oppressed womanhood, but she finds the experience liberating.

I often wonder whether people see me as a radical, fundamentalist Muslim terrorist packing an AK-47 assault rifle inside my jean jacket. Or may be they see me as the poster girl for oppressed womanhood everywhere. I'm not sure which it is.

I get the whole gamut of strange looks, stares, and covert glances. You see, I wear the hijab, a scarf that covers my head, neck, and throat. I do this because I am a Muslim woman who believes her body is her own private concern.

Young Muslim women are reclaiming the hijab, reinterpreting it in light of its original purpose — to give back to women ultimate control of their own bodies.

The Qur'an 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 her or his character.

Nonetheless, people have a difficult time relating to me. After all, I'm young, Canadian born and raised, university-educated — why would I do this to myself, they ask.

Strangers speak to me in loud, slow English and often appear to be playing charades. They politely inquire how I like living in Canada and whether or not the cold bothers me. If I'm in the right mood, it can be very amusing.

But, why would I, a woman with all the advantages of a North American upbringing, suddenly, at 21, want to cover myself so that with the hijab and the other clothes I choose to wear, only my face and hands show?

Because it gives me freedom.

WOMEN are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. We feel compelled to pursue abstract notions of beauty, half realizing that such a pursuit is futile.

When women reject this form of oppression, they face ridicule and contempt. Whether it's women who refuse to wear makeup or to shave their legs, or to expose their bodies, society, both men and women, have trouble dealing with them.

In the Western world, the hijab has come to symbolize either forced silence or radical, unconscionable militancy. Actually, it's neither. It is simply a woman's assertion that judgment of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction.

Wearing the hijab has given me freedom from constant attention to my physical self. Because my appearance is not subjected to public scrutiny, my beauty, or perhaps lack of it, has been removed from the realm of what can legitimately be discussed.

No one knows whether my hair looks as if I just stepped out of a salon, whether or not I can pinch an inch, or even if I have unsightly stretch marks. And because no one knows, no one cares.

Feeling that one has to meet the impossible male standards of beauty is tiring and often humiliating. I should know, I spent my entire teen-age years trying to do it. It was a borderline bulimic and spent a lot of money I didn't have on potions and lotions in hopes of becoming the next Cindy Crawford.

The definition of beauty is ever-changing: waifish is good, waifish is bad, athletic is good — sorry, athletic is bad. Narrow hips? Great. Narrow hips? Too bad.

Women are not going to achieve equality with the right to bear their breasts in public, as some people would like to have you believe. That would only make us party to our

own objectification. True equality will be had only when women don't need to display themselves to get attention and won't need to defend their decision to keep their bodies to themselves.

Naheed Mustafa graduated from the University of Toronto in 1992 with an honours degree in political and history. She is currently studying journalism at Ryerson Polytechnic University.

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When I Covered My Head, I Opened My Mind

by Sharrifa Carlo

As a non-Muslim living in Western society, the idea of modesty was not exactly foremost in my mind. Like all other women of my generation and mind-set, I thought such ideas were antiquated and excessive. I felt pity for the poor Muslim woman who had to “wear all that junk,” or “walk around in bed - sheets” as I used to call it

I was a modern woman, educated and liberated. Little did I know the awful truth. I was more oppressed than any Muslim woman in the most culturally oppressive village in the Muslim world. I was oppressed not by an inability to choose my clothing or to choose my life-style, I was oppressed by an inability to see my society for what it really was. I was oppressed by the idea that a woman's beauty was public, and that lustful admiration was equal to respect.

It was when Allah guided me to Islam, and I put on the hijab, that I was finally able to step out of the society in which I lived and see it for what it really is. I could see how the highest paid women were those who exposed themselves to public display, like actresses, models and even strip-tease dancers. I was able to see that the relationship between men and women was unfairly stacked in the man's direction. I knew I used o dress to attract men. I tried to fool myself by saying I did it to please myself, but the painful reality was that what pleased me was when I was admired by a man I considered attractive.

I now know that there is no way for a person to know that he is dirty if he has never been clean. Similarly, I was not able to see that I was oppressed until I stepped out of the darkness of this oppressive society into the light of Islam. With that light shined on the truth, I was finally able to see

“... So their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you, whether male or female. You proceed one from another ...” [3:195]

the shadows that had been so obscured by my Western philosophies. It is not oppression to protect yourself and society; it is oppression to voluntarily throw yourself into the quagmire while denying it is dirty.

I am grateful to Allah that He allowed me to recognize that when I covered my head, I was taking away from people any means for judging me other than my mind, my soul and my heart. When I covered my head, I took away the incentive for exploitation based on beauty. When I covered my head, I made people respect me because they saw that I respected myself, and when I covered my head, I finally opened my mind to the truth.

One of the factors which attracted me to this great deed of ours was the fact that so much of it can be understood based on logic and reason. That is why I feel that many Muslims parents do themselves a great disservice by not explaining more to their children. The old, "Because I say so...", or because you are an Arab, Pakistani, Somali, (fill in your cultural preference)..." never has worked and never will work. Human beings have a natural desire to understand what they do and why they do it, that is why Islam is such a great religion, because it satisfies all of our basic intellectual and emotional needs; it does this simply because it is the truth, and the truth is always easy to understand and defend.

When we teach our children, we should use the same sound reasoning and logic that we use to convince ourselves that a particular deed is beneficial. Thus, as we accept it, so, inshallah, will they because it will be understandable. Of course we preface every instruction with the understanding that we do, what we do to please Allah and Allah only, even if we can not understand it, but alhamdulillah we have a means to understand the majority of what we do and avoid as Muslims.

For instance, we know that we don't eat pork because Allah commands us in the Glorious Quraan to avoid it. Then, we know that our beloved Prophet (Sal Allahu alayhi wa salam) commanded us to avoid it. We need to tell this to our kids, and as they grow and increase in their understanding we need to show it to them. This teaches them some important lessons. It shows them Allah's commands; it shows them the importance of the Prophet's (Sal Allahu alayhi wa salam) commands, and it shows them the basics of researching into the deen. Then, once we set this as our base, we need to explain to them the wisdom of this command. Talk about the diseases associated with eating pork. Discuss the unsanitary living/eating habits of this animal. Essentially, teach them those things which help you to avoid this sin. Teach them to use their faith and their mind in unison as tools towards achieving the ultimate goal of reaching Jannah.



Criterion for Truth

In light of the wisdom of Islam that has just been presented, take some time to consider the following:

- Are the teachings of your belief system rationally tenable?
- Is your belief system universally applicable?
- Does your belief system enhance your progress towards spiritual perfection?
- Who is the creator of your belief system? Is he a creation or is he the Creator?
- Has your belief system been corrupted by superstitions, myths, or man-made philosophies?
- Does your belief system concur with the discoveries of modern science?
- Could a human being have invented your belief system?

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At a Glance



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