

# **BEYOND THE VEIL...**

**Maijabeen Choudhary**

*This is an attempt to lift the veil of misconceptions, that has enveloped the 'Muslim Woman'. The veil of prejudice and sheer ignorance that obscures and hinders the right perception of her being. You will be confronted not with a voiceless and enslaved being but a formidable personality playing the most crucial role in the making of human society.*

## Islam: Unity of Spirit and matter

A cleft lip on a newborn baby's face and a furious mountain puking fire are grave reminders of my helplessness. They gently, almost mockingly, shake me out of my stupor.

No, I'm not in control...I might have walked the moon but I never got to choose the nose of my choice. How much ever I long for peace and tranquility, I find myself thrust on this bloodstained century. My insecurity dutifully gets confirmed with an H1 N1 ambush. Also, the earth whimsically opening up to gulp down man and beast alike does nothing to pep up my confidence...

The bottom line is man essentially is impotent and insecure. Clueless and tiny before a colossal and invincible destiny that consults him on practically nothing. Birth and death being the most prominent ambassadors of its awesome power.

Faced with powers beyond his control, how does man make sense of his existence, of his sufferings, of his existence? Man as Albert Camus<sup>1</sup> writes, *"Is bound to improve everything that can be improved in this world. After that children will still go on dying unjustly even in the most perfect of societies"*. Quagmired in this dilemma, what can be man's best response. – Should he revolt, rebel or should he submit to this all powerful force.

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<sup>1</sup> Camus, L 'bomme revolue.

Wisdom and necessity both plead that man, like the sun in the sky and caterpillar in the earth, surrender himself before the creator (his own and destiny's) who alone can steer the ship of his life from turbulent and unruly waves and harbour it on the port of salvation.

Enter **ISLAM**. Not a religion but the principle of the organization of the universe. It is in fact a principle by which everything, man included, was created.

A compound of mud and divine spirit, man is a bi-dimensional being with dual nature, as opposed to all other beings that are one – dimensional. Man, bearing the burden of such a personality needs a way of life that transcends exclusive orientation to this world or the next and permits him to maintain a state of equilibrium. Human life is complete only if it fulfils both the physical and spiritual aspects. The apparatus capable of striking such a balance is Islam.

Islam does not get its name from its founder, tribe or place of origin. It stands for a principle. The principle of submission to God...*from “a moment of cognition, from the strength of the soul to face the times from the readiness to endure everything that an existence can offer from the truth of submission to God.”*<sup>2</sup>

Islam is the name for the unity of spirit and matter, the highest form of which is man himself. It is the name of unconditional acceptance, submission,

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<sup>2</sup> Aliza Izetbegovic – “Islam Between East And West”

obedience and loyalty of the created towards the creator.

The beauty, strength and viability of Islam come from two things:

- It is based on human nature and instinct (deen-e-fitrat)
- It avoids the extremes and advocates the middle path

The above salient features make Islam practical since all man's failures are because of religious denial of man's biological needs or materialistic denial of man's spiritual desires. Islam therefore coincides with the very essence of life. The domain of life is thus the domain of Islam. It does not confine itself to mosques and prayer mats, but equally encompasses factories and markets, parliament and palaces, homes and bedrooms. Contemplative attitude, monasticism etc that weaken a society find no place in Islam. It in fact prescribes rightful use of nature.

Islam unites religion and social order. It aims to improve the world by enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong. It seeks to canalize and proliferate man's positive energy by moral discipline and training so as to render it conducive to the building up of a pious, progressive human society.

Procreation thus becomes a highly sensitive, responsible, almost sacred issue. It is precisely for this reason that Islam promotes, protects and valorises marriage, the greatest social institution of mankind. Vociferously believing that a community cannot



maintain its bodily health and vigor, if it falls victim to sexual perversions, Islam regards marriage not merely as a union between man and wife for sexual gratification but a social contract with varied duties legal responsibilities and implications.

The success of any civilization stands on the mutual relationship between husband and wife because family is the base of civilization. *“Family is the barometer of the nation. What happens in the family will happen later in the congress, the White House & the Supreme Court. Every country gets the kind of Government it deserves. As we live in the house, so shall the nation live...”*<sup>3</sup> (Fulton Sheen)

Islam therefore strictly prohibits sexual indulgence and licentiousness (even in the name of liberty) because disintegration and moral laxity go hand in hand weakening the institution of marriage. It instead seeks to use the same sex magnetism endowed by nature to secure and fortify permanent companionship between man and women. It protects family to the point of obsession and shields it from all possible dangers.

Since it is the woman who holds the family together, she becomes the first addressee of civilization. She is not merely a plaything, but a spiritual and moral being who joins man in a sacred pledge to make the life of family and consequently humanity meaningful.

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<sup>3</sup> (Communism and Conscience of the west. – Prof. Fulton J Sheen.)

It is ironic, almost absurd that Islam which places the yoke of civilization on woman's shoulders is condemned as chauvinistic and anti-woman. Perhaps St. John Chrysostom, who declared woman "*a necessary evil, a desirable calamity, a deadly fascinator and a painted ill...*" can explain.

Woman who gives birth to man and constitutes half the human race has often been condemned as sub human. Handcuffed by tradition and overpowered by male dominance, her journey has been one of disgrace, denial and humiliation. She was buried alive in the soils of Arabia, was burnt as sati in India and tied to the tails of running horses in Rome. The Greeks considered her to be the greatest source of chaos and disruption in the world. "*Like a dafali tree which outwardly looks very beautiful but if sparrows eat it, they die without fail*" (Socrates).

Romans enjoyed "Flora" a popular sport in which naked women competed in running contests. Chinese scriptures call woman '*waters of Woe*' that wash away all good fortune. Buddhism ruled out Nirvana (salvation) in the company of women while Judaism placed woman under an eternal divine curse – "*of the woman came the beginning of sin and through her we all die.*" Christianity too dubs her as '*unclean thing*'. St. Tertullian opines – "*you are the devil's gateway, you are the unsealer of that tree, you are the first deserter of the divine law... you destroyed so easily God's image in man. On account of your desert even the son of God had to die.*" Soul.

It was Islam that came to a woman's rescue and exonerated her from the charge of committing the original sin alone and holds that both Adam and Eve sinned, both were pardoned and that God addressed them jointly (2:35-36) (7:19, 27) (20:117-123). Amina Wadud<sup>4</sup> makes an interesting observation. She explains that when the Qur'an recounts the event in the Garden, it uses a unique dual form in Arabic grammar showing that both were guilty. The female is never singled out and chastised for being a temptress.

Consequently it does not regard pregnancy and childbirth as punishment for tempting Adam. Regarding pregnancy and childbirth, the Qur'an states:

*And we have enjoined on (every) person (to be good) to his/her parents: in travail upon travail did his/her mother bear him/her and in years twain was his/her weaning: (hear the command) show gratitude to me and to your parents: to Me is (your final) Goal."*

*(Qur'an 31:14)*

Centuries before the feminist movement caught up, Islam acquitted her from accusations of being the devil's agent. It demolished the myths of Pandora and Aphrodite. Islam silenced the likes of Tertullian's and Manu's. Islam gave her a well deserved break from playing alternating roles of the goodness and the devil. She could not be glorified as Saraswati, Durga,

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<sup>4</sup> Amina Wadud – Islamic Studies Professor in the department of philosophy and religious studies at virginia



Laxmi, Aphrodite only to be dismissed as an ill omen. For the first time she was treated as human.

Islam gave woman direct access to the divine. She was granted equal membership in the spiritual realm, her sex being declared a non issue. It sets no limits on her moral progress. In fact the first adherent to Islam was a woman. Unlike other religions that regard woman as being possessed of inherent sin and weakness (Genesis 2:4 – 3:24) as against men who are regarded as an embodiment of nobility and virtue, Islam regards men and women as being of the same essence and equal partners in procreation of human kind. It did not stop at delivering woman from the stigma of ‘impurity’ but acknowledged her individuality at a time when Christian fathers asserted that woman did not possess a soul and would remain sexless being in future life.

*Each human being shall face the consequences of his or her deeds. And their Lord has accepted of them and answered them: “Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he/ she male or female: you are members one of another... (Qur’an 3:1 95)*

*...Every soul will be held in pledge for its deeds (74:38)*

Islam categorically declared that the most honoured person in the sight of Allah is the one who is most pious and righteous. This demolished all claims and criteria for superiority including gender.

*O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nation and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (one who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Qur'an 49:13)*

An unprecedented move it was for never was the slavery of one-half of the human race eliminated so abruptly. The feminist movement of the west emerged centuries later as a result of unceasing frustration and insecurity. However, the rights they managed to secure are in no way comparable to the ones their counterparts in Islam enjoy and unlike Islam were not granted voluntarily or with divine intervention or out of kindness to the female.

The concept of gender equality is stressed by non-superiority of either sex over other. Islam recognizes and fosters the natural difference between man and woman and grants them equal but not identical rights. Equality is desirable, identity isn't for God created man and woman with complimentary natures that have to work not in contradiction but in collaboration.

Based on the equitable principle of division of labour, it allots the more strenuous work to physically and mentally stronger man. Women are spared such duties since they are incompatible with their delicate nature. This does not amount to deprivation but it is a concession. The fact that Islam does not enjoin identical duties shows that it acknowledges her

individual personality. It does not seek to make a “he-woman” or “she-man” of her. Shouldn’t this be hailed as victory for womanhood? If women’s rights take off from this proposition, a lot of ‘feminist frustration’ can be avoided.

Man is duty bound to earn bread while the family and home are made the primary concern of woman. The task of upbringing children, the most crucial element of nation building is allotted to women. Home is the foremost priority. This however does not mean total seclusion of women as this was alien to the prophetic period too. There is sufficient historical evidence to prove the active participation of Muslim women in public issues, in lawmaking, in administrative positions, in education and even in the battlefield without violating Islamic guidelines of modesty and virtue.

A rightful division of labour it is, for it does not burden either with duties incompatible and uncongenial with their inherent nature. Without violating each other’s space, Islam does not stand in the way of those who out of necessity, talent or choice enter the opposite domain, provided basic obligations, for which each will be held accountable, are fulfilled. In a close knit family, even one non-performing element can cause undesirable ripples. Man and woman are both expected to work in co-operation and partnership in the interest of the institution of family and consequently of society and humanity.

With regard to the woman’s right to seek employment, there is no decree in Islam that forbids

women from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature best and in which society needs her most. She should however secure her husband's consent if she wishes to work, unless her right to work was mutually agreed to as a condition at the time of marriage, for in Islam she will first be held accountable for her role as mother, her primary obligation. The professions preferred are: nursing, teaching (especially children), medicine, and social and charitable work. Moreover, as Dr Badawi<sup>5</sup> explains there is no restriction on benefiting from women's talent in any field. Some early jurists, such as Abu Hanifah and Al-Tabari, uphold that a qualified Muslim woman may be appointed to the position of a judge. Omar, the second Caliph after the Prophet (P), appointed a woman (Um Al-Shifaa' bint Abdullah) as the marketplace supervisor. Ayesha the Prophet's wife was the commander-in-chief in 'the battle of the camels'

Also the position of man as head of the family and final authority in its affairs should not be seen as chauvinistic. Nowhere does the Qur'an state that one gender is superior to the other. Some interpreters of the Qur'an mistakenly translate the Arabic word *qiwamah* (responsibility for the family) with the English word "superiority." Ample safeguards are provided for women lest man abuses his power. She reserves the right to have recourse to the law. Her position thus is not servile but she is as the holy

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<sup>5</sup> (Director of the Islamic Information Foundation, Halifax, Canada)

Prophet said “*The queen of her house.*” Says the holy Qur’an.

*‘For women are rights over man similar to those of men over women’ (2: 226)*

Sound administration is not possible with two heads. If unitary policy works in nation, offices, army etc. how is the institution of family different. Can two commanders-in-chief lead an army? What happens to a nation led by more than one President?

After granting woman equal membership in the spiritual realm and establishing her worth in unambiguous terms, Islam proceeds to ensure for her equal membership of human society too. She is placed on an equal footing with man in the enjoyment of civic, legal and economic rights.

### **Civil Rights:**

A Muslim woman has well-defined rights in the capacity of a daughter, wife and mother. The holy Qur’an comes to the rescue of those defenceless females who are eliminated no sooner than they occupy the wombs of their mothers and gives them the right to life with dignity.

*...When the female infant buried alive is questioned for what crimes she was killed.*

*(Qur’an 81: 8-9)*

The Qur’an went further to rebuke the disappointment expressed on the birth of a baby girl:

*When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame he hides himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on (sufferance and) contempt or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on! (Qur'an 16:58-59)*

The holy prophet said *“the person who brings up two daughters until they attain maturity, on the day of reckoning myself and he will be like this”* and saying these words he brought his fingers together. On another occasion he said, *whosoever has a daughter and does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, Allah will enter him into Paradise. (Ahmad)*

Islam also grants her equal rights in pursuit of education and knowledge. The prophet said *“knowledge is incumbent on every male and female”*. In addition to educating free men and nobility, the holy prophet had enjoined the Muslims to educate slave girls too, a revolutionary step. In the early years of Islam, women had a strong intellectual influence. The prophet's wife Ayesha from whom the prophet said we should learn ‘half our religion’ was sought after as an advisor to the early jurists. The impact of women like Ayesha was such that the tradition of education did not die, although it suffered a decline.

The Prophet elevated woman as mother to an enviable and unequalled status. With regard to parents the Qur'an preaches:



*And we have enjoined on every human being (to be good) to his/her parents: in travail upon travail did his/her mother bear him/her and in years twain was his/her weaning: (hear the command) "Show gratitude to Me and to your parents: to Me is (your final) destiny."*

*(Qur'an 31:14)*

Islam is particularly sensitive to the rights of mother. A man came to Prophet Muhammad (P) asking, "*O Messenger of Allah, who among the people is the most worthy of my good companionship?*" The Prophet (P) said, "*Your mother.*" The man said, "*Then, who is next?*" The Prophet (P) said, "*Your mother.*" The man said, "*Than who is next?*" the prophet (P) said, "*your months.*" The man further asked, "*Then who is next?*" Only then did the Prophet (P) say, "*Your father.*" (Al- Bukahari)

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) inculcated respect for women and guaranteed her right to honour and dignity in degree unknown to other religions. The inadequacy of all present modern laws need not be discussed. For merely accusing woman the Qur'an says:

*"And those who launch a charge against chaste women and produce not four witnesses flog them with eighty stripes and reject their evidence even after, for such men, are wicked transgressors"* (Qur'an 24: 4-5)

He who is guilty of raping a woman, as per Islamic law, shall receive hundred cuts of the lash incase he is unmarried, and stoned to death if he is married. Compare this stand to St Gregory

Thaumaturgus' view - *“verily, a person may find one man chaste among a thousand, but among women never”*

This law is dismissed as inhuman and barbaric by societies that tolerate rape every minute. 1.3 women are raped per minute in America. This translates to 78 per hour, 1871 per day, 683000 per year. (Santa Barbara rape crisis centre). In India, the latest crime statistics pertaining to 2006, released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), that every hour, 18 women become victims of rape. The number of rapes day has increased nearly 700% since 1971. It has grown 7 cases a day to 53. These are just cases that have been reported, the number of unreported cases is far higher. In South Africa, a woman is raped every 20 seconds.

Clearly, Islam cannot be expected to toe the line of Bible that say's *“If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl's father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives. (Deuteronomy 22: 28 – 30). Double punishment for the victim!*

A Muslim woman chooses her husband and keeps her name after marriage. Her consent is a prerequisite to the validity of the marital contract.

*Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of Allah, and she reported that her father had forced her to marry without her*

*consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice...(between accepting the marriage or invalidating it) (Ahmad, Hadith No. 2469).*

She enjoys vast legal rights to seek separation from her husband on grounds of cruelty, impotency or dislike. She may stipulate in the marital agreement that she too will have right to divorce or that she will keep the marriage bond only so long as she remains the only wife. Should marital disputes arise, the Qur'an encourages couples to resolve them privately in a spirit of fairness and probity. Under no circumstances does the Qur'an encourage, allow, or condone family violence or physical abuse.

Divorce is a last resort, permissible but not encouraged, for the Qur'an esteems the preservation of family. Widows and divorced women have been granted rights to remarry. She cannot be fettered by her relatives and the choice is exclusively hers.

In discussing the rights of a Muslim wife it is important to understand Islam's injunction on polygamy which is conveniently used as another effective tool of anti-Islam propaganda.

The fact of the matter is Islam does not advocate polygamy as a virtue. Monogamy is the rule while polygamy is an allowance made to meet the exigencies of time and human nature. Unlike other religions Islam did not outlaw polygamy but regulated and restricted it.

Polygamy is not a rule but an exception. Islam that seeks to purge the society of sexual perversions of

every kind has also catered to the hypersexual, husbands whose wives are barren. They can support the physically and mentally challenged who are generally never taken as first wives. Polygamy also tackles the problems of widows and orphans, who would otherwise surely be more vulnerable in the absence of a husband and father figure.

*If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one... (Qur'an 4:3)*

Islam does not choose polygamy over monogamy but prefers polygamy to sexual promiscuity that threatens the entire social fabric.

Besides polygamy becomes a necessity in a world wherein female population exceeds male population, with homosexuality getting rampant too. In the event of war and grave natural calamity, when the sex ratio gets seriously affected, polygamy proves helpful.

Demographic data also proves polygamy to be an exception, not a norm. According to 1961 census (the last census to record such data) polygamy was actually less prevalent among Indian Muslims (5.7%) than among several other religious groups. Incidence was highest among adavasis (15.25%) and Buddhists (7.9%) Hindus by comparison had an incidence of 5.8%.

Islam legalizes polygamy to certain limit on the condition of equal treatment of wives. (Al-nisa 3 and

129). Moreover, every Muslim woman has the right to stipulate in her marital agreement that she will remain the only wife as long as her husband does not take another. A sufficient safeguard it is against being forced to become a co-wife without her will.

What an irony that polygamy is viewed as barbaric but free sex is considered civilized. The concept of multiple wives is deemed outdated and impractical but mistresses by dozens are in vogue. One cannot be so utopic!

Another misconception regarding a Muslim wife perpetrated by the west is that Islam encourages wife-battering. The verse in question is-

*Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part you fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next) do not share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for Allah is Most High, Great (above you all). (4:34)*

The word 'beat' in the light of Qur'anic ethics and the sayings of the prophet have been interpreted as a 'light tap'. As the verse itself shows the option of beating is mentioned as the last resort after repeated

exhortation of mutual respect, kindness and good treatment.

Moreover, hadith clearly warns against striking anyone's face, cause any bodily harm or even be harsh. What the hadith qualified as light striking, was interpreted by early jurists as a (symbolic) use of miswaak (a small natural toothbrush)! They further qualified permissible "striking" as that which leaves no mark on the body. As Jamal Badawi interestingly points out that this latter fourteen-centuries-old qualifier is the criterion used in contemporary American law to separate a light and harmless tap or strike from "abuse" in the legal sense. This measure of 'a light tap' in no way amount to "physical abuse," or "wife battering" even according to 20 century laws.

Islamic teachings are universal in nature. They respond to the needs and circumstances of all times and climes. To comprehend the issues of polygamy, wife beating etc one should understand that Islam seeks to define the extent of permissibility to avoid misinterpretation causing its misuse.

The hue and cry raised over this issue seems to suggest that Islam condones domestic violence, this 'light striking' being treated as the most gruesome form of violence against women. Ironically, according to a recent National Domestic Violence Hotline survey, 4 million American women experience a serious assault by a partner during an average 12 month period. More than three women are killed by their husband and boyfriend every day – that is nearly 5,500 since 9/11. According to a Harvard study – 'The



Global Burden of Disease', 1996, 'globally men's violence against women causes more deaths and disability among females aged 15-44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accident or war'.

To thus single out Islam as chief perpetrator of women's violence indicates deliberate negative propaganda.

### **Legal Rights**

Woman stands on par with man in so far as civil and penal laws are concerned i.e. in the protection of life and property, honour and reputation.

Also, the Qur'an makes no distinction in terms of punishment for crimes such as theft (5:38), fornication (24:2) murder and injury (5:45) and makes her testimony is valid in legal disputes.

A common but erroneous belief is that as a "rule" the worth of women's testimony is one half of men's testimony. Dr Badawi explains through a survey of all passages in the Qur'an relating to testimony that the context of this passage (verse, or ayah) relates to testimony on financial transactions, which are often complex and laden with business jargon. The passage does not make blanket generalization. No reference is made to the inferiority or superiority of one gender's witness or the other's. The only reason given is to corroborate the female's witness and prevent unintended errors in the perception of the business deal.

**Political Rights:**

What America could achieve only in 1920, was provided voluntarily by Islam 14 centuries ago. The holy Qur'an (60:12) directs the Prophet to accept the oath of the believing women when they come to swear allegiance i.e. they were given the right to select their leader and publicly declare so. Being a political member of the society, she enjoys right to criticism and reckoning.

Women not only expressed their opinions freely but also argued and participated in serious discussions with the Prophet himself (Qur'an 58:1-4)

They expressed their views on legislative matters of public interest and stood in opposition to the rulers, as the Holy Qur'an says:

*“The believing men and women are one of another, they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil.” (Qur'an 9:71)*

**Economic Rights:**

Under no other social system is a woman as economically secure as in Islam. Islam is unique in granting her the “right to not earn”. However wealthy she is, it is the duty of the husband to provide for her. The woman is entitled also to full financial support during marriage and during the waiting period (iddah) in case of divorce or widowhood. Some jurists require, in addition, one year's support for divorce and widowhood (or until they remarry, if remarriage takes place before the year is over).

Islam grants women extensive rights of inheritance – a revolutionary provision. Some observers have suggested that the outrage against Islam in the Christian medieval world had much to do with the revolutionary pronouncements about women. What kind of religion would allow women to inherit? Even if the deceased wishes to deprive her, Shariah does not permit it.

*From what is left by parents and those nearest related, there is a share for men and a share for women, whether the property be small or large – a determinate share. (Qur'an 4:7)*

The laws of inheritance, which afford the male, in most cases, twice the inheritance of a female is in no way discrimination against the female gender. Males inherit more simply because they have been made financially responsible for their female relatives: their wives, daughters, mothers and sisters. Females inherit less but retain their share for investment and financial security. Females are exempted from spending any part of it, even for their own sustenance.

It would be an excess for the male gender if their financial responsibility is doubled without a double share in inheritance and become a valid argument for 'male rights'!

The Muslim woman also receives nuptial money from her husband without which marriage cannot be solemnized. She has equal rights to contract, to enterprise, to earn and possess independently and

enjoys full proprietary rights over it. Khadija was not only the wife of the Prophet but also his employer.

The aforementioned rights repudiate the allegation that Islam is regressive vis-à-vis woman. Coming from the west, it is particularly ridiculous. If the hitherto achieved milestones of feminism, after herculean strife are weighed against the rights voluntarily granted by Islam 1500 years ago, the scales unmistakably tilt in favour of Islam. There is no denying the fact the Muslim women are suppressed because Islam's notion of Gender justice does a complete somersault in Muslim societies. The status Islam grants to a woman has been conveniently veiled by the antagonism of anti-Islamic forces, by the obstinacy of the Muslim patriarchs and by the unpardonable ignorance of Muslim women themselves. Unfortunately Muslims have, themselves by violating the guidelines of the Qur'an reinforced the erroneous perception of Islam vis-à-vis woman.

As for 'catching up' with the modern woman is concerned, I as a Muslim woman beg to differ. Emancipating women from 'domestic servitude' only to hoist her in factories or even boardrooms is not liberation enough. Doesn't it violate the principle of equitable division of labour? The biological functions of bearing and rearing; of pregnancy and lactation are the exclusive functions of a woman, a responsibility she cannot escape. To earn bread as compulsion is thus an additional burden.

A 'career woman' is often doubly burdened. The mass of women work force have been deftly evolved

to provide low-cost and charming labour to serve the imperialistic machinery. Insensitive to her delicate sensibilities, she is expected to “look like a woman, behave like a lady, think like a man and work like a dog” (Times of India 2-8-1993)

Women joining the workforce had harsh effects particularly on the family. Juggling heavy responsibilities at home and workplace simultaneously have made women vulnerable to psychopathology. Research shows working women have less control over their environment and less flexibility in their roles as workers. The pay available to women as industrial workers is at least 30% short of what their male counterparts get. And then the Glass Ceiling Effect leads to discrimination against women in promotions.

The work pressure is taking its own toll on a woman's body and psyche. According to the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India, 68% women working in corporate companies are victims of lifestyle related diseases and more than 75% are victims of depression.<sup>6</sup>

Besides, she is a victim of sexual anarchy rampant in workplaces like multinational companies, call centres, B.P.O etc. She has become more vulnerable. For instance, ‘wild parties’ (which involves random exchange of sexual partners) is the new trend and getting popular by the day. A survey conducted amongst employees from Mumbai reveals that 89%

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<sup>6</sup> (Nusrat Ahmed study on “Preventive Health Care and Corporate Female Workforce”. ASSOCHAM Research Bureau, New Delhi, 2009)

employees admitted to have attended such ‘wild parties’. Rape cases in such in set-ups are also on the increase. In a study conducted 2006 in a call centre in Noida, 11% women admitted to have had more than five partners.<sup>7</sup>

The glamorous exploitation of her body isn’t liberating either. She is being commercialized to promote commodities. The presence of semi-nude size zero figure models at the launch of new cars is hilarious. Pornography, prostitution (as a legal industry especially) etc all contribute to the commoditisation of the female body. In 1999, the revenue from pornography and live sex shows on the net was US\$1 billion and comprised 69% of internet content sales. By year 2003, these sales tripled.<sup>8</sup>

Female body itself is a marketable commodity. The global sex industry is estimated to make US\$ 52 billion dollars a year. The value of global trade in women as commodities for sex industries is estimated to be between 7 and 12 billion dollars annually.

The emphasis is clearly on her appearance and sex appeal. Fashion and cosmetic industry thrive on it garnering a profit of almost 19B dollars. ‘Psychology Today’ a journal has hinted on a psychological disorder – ‘body mania’. Increasing demand for breast implants, bariatric surgery and to top it all, vaginoplasty are all its indicators. ‘Anorexia Nervosa’ caused due to starving in an attempt to control weight is also on the increase.

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<sup>7</sup> (www.theviewspaper.net)

<sup>8</sup> (Donna Hughes, University of Rhode Island.)



Given the above scenario, I wonder why a harmless piece of cloth-the scarf is always mired in controversy.

Hijab is generally misconstrued as forced silence or even radical militancy. To stereotype a hijab clad woman as voiceless and enslaved is an incorrect, infact prejudiced construct. Surprisingly a society that accommodates nudists in the name of liberty has problems assimilating hijab clad women. It would help if the ‘liberating forces’ shunned their double standards and spared the hijab to concentrate on other pressing matters of rape and violence, of equal pay and inheritance. If turbans, saffron dhotis, habits, cassocks, yarmulkes etc do not raise eyebrows, hijab too should not be seen as sticking out as a sore thumb. Yvonne ridley (journalist, convert to Islam) writes *“My dress tells you that I am a Muslim and that I expect to be treated respectfully, much as a Wall Street banker would say that a business suit defines him as an executive to be taken seriously.”*

Hijab is a Muslim woman’s badge of honour. I do it proudly. A simple, innocent wish of being recognized not for my beauty or lack of it, but for my mind, my personality should not be treated as crime. Why should my appearance have a role in determining my social interaction?

Hijab is liberation from male scrutiny and standards of beauty around which has come to revolve the life of modern woman.

I can't care less if I am an eyesore or if my hijab hinders communication. I choose to not be an eye candy for I am not on a mission to please and impress. Hijab has never obstructed my growth and I fail to comprehend why this piece of cloth generates so much sympathy and revulsion.

I, as a Muslim woman seek emancipation too (not from womanhood though!) Why should my liberation, my worth be judged by the degree of success in dewomanising myself, in becoming like a man? When I differ from men even in the protein molecules of my tissue cells, I don't seek identity in any other sphere too. If the divine granted me concession in lieu of my nature, my personality and assigned duties thus, I should be envied not pitied. Tenderness, care, delicacy are my virtues not my weakness, not my shame.

The most encouraging fact is that I don't need to launch my struggle in a vacuum. My fight is against all those forces, within and outside the community, that have denied me the rights already sanctioned by my maker. As Amina Wadud writes, we need to remove the fetters imposed by centuries of patriarchal interpretation and practice. Enforcement and not procurement is the real issue at hand.

In identifying what is Islamic it is necessary to differentiate between the primary sources-Qur'an and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad which are divinely inspired and therefore transcendental and theological formulation which being man made can contradict or not fully convey intentions of the divine. Theology

must be open to change in order to meet new challenges without disturbing the basic foundation of Islam. The mandate for such a reinterpretation comes from the most trustworthy source of Islam itself, Qur'an.

Like the moon which obeys its axis and the cock that faithfully crows at the break of dawn, I submit to the laws of my maker. The quickest and surest way is reversion to the 'feminism' granted in the Qur'an and enforced by the greatest benefactor of women ever-Muhammad (pubh). Unfortunately the golden period of women's emancipation enforced by him passed before it could establish a pattern sustainable as historical precedent. It is towards this ideal that we need to focus our commitment and energies on.

Muhammad (pbuh) placed paradise under a mother's feet. As a wife he gave her the distinction of being the choicest blessing to man after Islam. As a daughter she is the protector of her parents from hell fire, the ultimate salvation.

*O mankind! Reverence your Guardian – Lord,  
Who created you from a single person (nafs  
– waahidah), created, of like nature, his mate,  
and from them two scattered (like seeds)  
countless men and women; reverence Allah  
through Whom you demand your mutual  
(rights) and (reverence) the wombs (that bore  
you): for Allah ever watches over you...  
(Qur'an 4:1)*

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